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THE
VENGEANCE DUET

LESSONS
IN
REVENGE

NATALIA
LOUROSE

**LESSONS
IN
REVENGE**
THE VENGEANCE DUET | BOOK ONE

NATALIA LOUROSE


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*For all the dark romance girlies and authors -
Thank you for giving me a space where I feel seen and safe.
This is for you.*

Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.

CONFUCIUS

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CONTENT WARNING

This is a story about revenge and all the paths it can take you down. But it's also a story about being young, not knowing who to trust, using your body as a weapon and having it used against you. There are moments in this book that get very dark and emotional.

Some of the things you can expect to read in the following pages include death of a parent, childhood abuse, murder (both on and off page), primal (chase through the woods), spanking used as a punishment, anal and anal plugs, dubious consent (dubcon), vibrator control, oral/rough oral, threesome, and double penetration (anal and vaginal at the same time).

If any of these topics concern you, I encourage you stop here. If you do continue reading, please be sure to take care of yourself.

With that, I hope you enjoy Val's story.

XOXO,

Natalia

PLAYLIST

Killer // Valerie Broussard

Desire // Meg Myers

We Must Be Killers // Mikky Ekko

Feel // Fletcher

She Thinks of Me // Landon Tewers

Used to the Darkness // Des Rocs

Love and War // Fleurie

I'll Make You Love Me // Kat Leon

SHE // Winona Oak

Pray // Xana

Run Baby // Grace Blue

The Devil is a Gentleman // Merci Raines

Same Side // Jessie Reyez

Do You Love Her // Jesse Reyez

Blood / Water // Grandson

Who are you, really? // Mikky Ekko

No One Will Save You // Aviators

The Wolf in Your Darkest Room // Matthew Mayfield

Bells in Santa Fe // Halsey

Do it for Me // Rosenfeld

Kill Me // Landon Tewers

You Asked for This // Halsey

Delicate // Taylor Swift

Wolf // Boy Epic

Art of Survival // Bishop Briggs

Control // Natalie Taylor

Killer // Phoebe Bridgers

The Lighthouse // Halsey

Ivy // Taylor Swift

Easier than Lying // Halsey

How Villains are Made // Madalen Duke

Listen to the full playlist here: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7LyqHxWUNyUZsJcCibrT7D?si=f54077aa4f1f477e>

NOW

PROLOGUE



I was ten years old the first time I saw a woman use her body as a weapon.

Back then, I didn't know what I was seeing. Through the rose-tinted glasses of a ten-year-old, I thought it was love. The beautiful woman who floated through my father's casino had a weightlessness to her, a pure elegance; she might as well have been Cinderella. Immediately, I was attracted to the attention she received, the long glances, the light kisses, the hands pressed to her lower back. I equated that attention with love, assuming the two went hand in hand.

But I'm not that little girl anymore.

Fifteen years and a broken heart have changed me for the better.

And the woman in red, as I've come to remember her, is the reason for my life-changing epiphany. Like a religion, I've begun to use her as my guide.

What would Red do?

She would have never allowed herself to be heartbroken by two men. Red probably knew better than to trust the lies that dripped from their lips like poison.

Instead, she used her body to manipulate, swaying her hips as she walked through the casino. Finding a mark, she'd graze her manicured fingers over his shoulders as she laughed at his objectively not funny joke. He would bring the pair of dice to her lips, and she'd pucker them into a perfect 'O' before she blew a sweet kiss. If he won, he'd call her his lucky charm and

the drinks would flow between them. When she left for the night, she'd have a purse full of money, and if she was doing her job right, she didn't even have to fuck him.

A true goddess.

At twenty-one, when the revelation struck me at a blackjack table, in what used to be my father's casino, I still didn't understand the full power of what I could do with my body. I just wanted a rebound. Something to numb the cold black hole that had taken over my once beating heart. But it kick-started something bigger...something better.

And after my epiphany, the Church of Red was born.

The mission was simple: take men for everything they've got.

And men are simple creatures.

Sweet whispers from ruby-painted lips, or a delicate, seemingly innocent touch, the swell of my ass in a form-fitting dress—all have the capability of bringing a man to his knees. And once he's there, I go in for the kill.

Blood isn't what I seek, at least not anymore. Killing a man is far too easy, as he gets to float off into the abyss instead of suffering the consequences of his actions. And I want him to learn. I want his small brain to run rampant with the realization of what he's done and everything he'll lose because of it.

I take everything he has.

His money.

His pride.

His family.

And I leave him with nothing.

I think of my first teacher often. She didn't know it, but I learned a lot from her by peering over the railing outside my father's office, looking down at the casino floor.

My father called me a looky-loo, the nickname rolling off his tongue in his thick New York accent. The remembrance of

him strikes my heart with a bullet of pain.

All roads lead back to him. To my loss, to my grief.

To my desperate need for revenge.

After all, revenge was what had put me on *their* path. Led me straight to the doorstep of the big bad wolves.

I wanted to see them destroyed, bleeding out in front of me.

And I thought I was so wise.

But they've always been better.

Bigger, badder, smarter.

Coming back to New York after four years wasn't supposed to be in the plans for me. I should have stayed in Vegas, stayed far away from the city that built and broke me.

But it's a lure for my heart, even after so much time away.

Last time, my plan was flawed, I know that now.

I had underestimated them. Assumed them to be like every other man in this world, but they were nothing like other men.

More calculated, more in control of the vices that sat between their legs.

And ultimately, that misstep would be my downfall.

No matter how far away I got, the two men I met as a naïve twenty-year-old would always own a piece of my story...and my heart.

THEN

VAL

I *'m going to kill him.*

Nicolai Colombo is a dead man.

I spot the twenty-seven-year-old mafia capo at the back of the restaurant, lounging in a corner booth. There's a sly smile on his lips as he talks freely with the man next to him, one of his long legs crossed over the other and his muscled body taking up too much space. He looks too big for the seat, too powerful to be sitting so casually in Little Italy.

Smoke wafts from his table as he waves a fat cigar, his arms flinging throughout his conversation. He has a head of thick, dark hair that's fixed back with styling product. It matches the scruff covering his jaw, his hand lifting to run over the stubble as he smirks. He looks like something out of a magazine, his fitted suit screaming of money.

It must be nice to have endless wealth while the rest of us are just trying to stay alive.

He's not the man I want to kill, not really. I don't mind killing Nic, but I don't give a fuck about him. Not nearly as much as I care about his father. But I learned from personal experience that killing someone doesn't really hurt them. Death just brings you relief, a reprieve from this brutal existence.

No, the best way to hurt someone is to go after someone they love.

And Paulie Colombo loves his son.

I don't expect to live after I complete my mission. As soon as my bullet lodges itself in Nic's head and the blood begins to flow, his enforcers will shoot me. It's a fate I'm happy to endure.

An appropriate end to my miserable existence.

Anger bubbles up in my chest, filling the empty cavity that's been there since I was ten years old, and Aunt Kitty sat me down to explain the concept of death. Telling me in a few words with a pained expression marking her face that I would never see my father again.

There was a bit about heaven, about the afterlife. She believed we would see each other in another lifetime, somewhere beyond the pearly white gates. But I don't know if I agree with her, unsure if my death will end with a bright light and fluffy clouds. I don't think I'm angelic enough for that.

The red pumps I bought for \$4.50 from Goodwill click loudly against the tiled floors as I move through the restaurant. The purchase sparked a memory within me. Being ten years old and watching the casino floor from the balcony next to my father's office. From there, I could see everything, including her, the woman in red. The beautiful temptress who moved through my father's casino with ease, wrapping every man around her finger and getting what she wanted. I wear a red dress in her honor. The tight-fitting material clings to my body, leaving little to the imagination.

I wanted the words *femme fatale* to be whispered on the streets for years after this moment. The description of the girl who killed the Don's son imprinted on everyone's minds.

Not an angel at all, but pure sin.

Nic's eyes find me now, roaming over my body in a way that I once mistook for love. Now I know it's only lust, the longing of the male gaze, a need to conquer and take. And Nic has been fed from a silver spoon, believing everything in this world belongs to him. He seems to appreciate the red dress, his tongue darting over his lips. *Famished.*

I'm ten steps away, measuring my movements by the clicking sound of my heels against the floor.

I even got a mani/pedi for the event, my first one ever. Twenty years on this earth and I've never even had a spa day. I had to remedy that before the end. Spending the few dollars left in my bank account on the lavish treatment. It felt nice to be selfish for once.

Eight steps.

I'm ready. I've fought off death for as long as I can remember. Mourning my loved ones and hating the word that described their departure. Death was my enemy, my arch nemesis, but now I welcome it. My arms wide open, my broken heart has given way and my silly brain has stopped trying to talk me out of my mission.

Six steps.

I feel lighter, tension having dripped away from my shoulders. Happiness flows over me, a feeling I haven't experienced in a long time.

Four steps.

He doesn't suspect a thing as I get closer, my fingers brushing against the silver metal sitting in my purse. The corner of his lip lifts in a lopsided smirk and his eyes assess my body once more as I approach. He's not even noticing that my hand is in my purse, fingers gripped onto cold steel, ready to pull the weapon from my bag at a moment's notice.

Two steps.

I practiced the move in the mirror repeatedly. Step up to the table, pull the gun, aim, and shoot. The whole motion has to be done quickly; there's no room for error here.

I've arrived.

Anger has been my friend for far too long. My only companion, the roommate that sat up late at night with me, keeping me company as I devised my final plan.

My revenge.

“Do I know you?” Nic asks, leaning forward and pressing his elbows on to the white-clothed table, ignoring the other man who sits beside him.

If he wasn't the devil, Nic Colombo would be a handsome man. Dark eyes find me, and, for a moment, I think that's what Judas's eyes would look like. So dark, almost black. *Sinful*.

My thigh brushes the edge of his table. I'm close enough that I could reach out and touch him.

“No.” I smile again. “But you'll never forget me.” Whipping the Beretta from the bag, I point the cold steel contraption at my enemy. This is the moment I've planned for. When my finger presses against the trigger, I'm not as prepared for the kickback as I should be, but it doesn't matter. It's all going to be over soon.

The sound reverberates through me, buzzing over my entire body and shaking me to my core.

I've been dreaming of this moment, the day I get revenge.

It tastes even better than I thought it would.

I inhale the coppery scent of blood right before I feel pain so sharp and fiery, my body collapses to the floor.

This is it.

It's all over now.



NIC

She's sleeping soundlessly now, the little minx in the red dress who tried to kill me. Rocco gave her a good hit, sending her to the ground so quickly, she smacked her head off the tiled floors.

I was shocked by her. Normally, when someone tries to kill me, I see it coming from a mile away. But this little thing? Practically a girl dressed in a woman's clothing, she snuck right in and even got close to me. If her aim wasn't so horrible, she might have even succeeded in her mission.

"Ran her prints," Rocco says, coming up behind me in the basement where I'm keeping her. It's secured here, even in the middle of the city. No one will bother her unless I tell them to.

"So?" I don't bother to turn around to face my man. "Who is she?"

"Valerie Soressi."

"Valerie Soressi..." I try her name on my tongue. It sounds familiar, but I can't quite place it.

"Remember Money? Nasty fella who ran the casino in Vegas."

That piques my memory. Money was already running the casino for my father when I was initiated. "Dead now," I say, finally looking at Rocco, who nods in confirmation. "What does he have to do with her?" I nod in the direction of the sleeping girl on the other side of the chain-link wall.

"That's his daughter."

That surprises me. My head snaps to the side to look at her again, knocked out cold, her head resting on the dirty mattress that lies on the floor. She looks too skinny, too innocent and small to be a killer. But I saw the gun as she whipped it from her purse, the look on her face as she pulled the trigger. She wanted blood. Craved it even.

Something about her bloodlust calls to me, and for some reason, I want to know more about her. Everything.

“What are you going to do?” Rocco asks.

“Figure her out.”

“And then?”

A million possibilities run through my head. All of the things I could do with that sweet face and pretty mouth.

“To be determined, Rocco.” I grin, clapping him on the shoulder.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Rocco is the only man I have who’s not afraid to tell me the truth. Anyone else, I’d kill for questioning me.

“No. But it’s a fun one, that’s for sure.”



“**Y**ou’re a dumb bitch.”

I can’t place the voice ringing through my head. Everything hurts, my entire body aching with stiffness and pain shooting down my spine. It’s ruthless, gripping me in its fury. Sickness swarms through my stomach, threatening to expel my last meal, distracting me from my surroundings. My eyelids open and close repeatedly before I’m finally able to see the exposed ceiling above me, all beams and black wires, a sea of darkness hovering over my head. The wood looks rough, old, like it’s been here for years.

I look for the voice, turning my head to find where, who, it’s coming from. Searing pain slices through my sides with the motion, causing a whimper to leave my lips. Gruff laughter echoes through the space, a room I can barely see, as a red-hot pang blinds my vision.

I should be dead.

I wanted to be dead.

So why the fuck am I *alive*?

Nic Colombo stares down at me from the orange Home Depot bucket he sits on like a throne. More pain surges through me as I push myself into a sitting position. I muster up all the strength I have, willing it to give me a minute. A minute to breathe, to fucking *think*.

What happened? Where did I go wrong?

I'm in a basement, I realize. Sitting on a small, bare, stained mattress with a threadbare blanket covering my legs. The place looks filthy, dark red and black splotches decorating the walls. A shudder rolls over me at the sight.

This is a fucking torture chamber. *A dungeon.*

But really, what did I expect?

Surrounded by a chain-link barrier, inside a row of cells, I'm not sure if I want to scream or cry. Vastly different from yesterday, when rage filled my body as I slid on my dress and applied my makeup. I wanted revenge and then I wanted death.

Turns out, I got neither.

"Tell me," Nic's voice rings out again, penetrating my aching skull. "What's going on in your head?" The question doesn't sound cruel, not in the way I would have expected, coming from the man who's my sworn enemy. His voice is soft, curious even.

My eyes lift to find his dark, nearly black orbs staring at me with interest. Why hasn't he killed me already? Why take me captive?

"Questions," I croak out, my throat raw and dry.

With a snap of his fingers, another man steps forward from the shadows, handing him a bottle of water. Nic extends it, offering the liquid to me, which I take greedily. Tugging the cap free, I bring the bottle to my lips, tilting my head back and chugging it down.

"Easy there." His hand reaches for the plastic, but I move out of his grasp. "You'll get sick."

I can't get enough of the water, as it soothes my throat and fills my belly. But as quick as it goes down, it comes back up. I spew the liquid mess onto the mattress and blanket, watching as it drips down onto the cement floor.

Nic only shakes his head, yanking the bottle from my hands and giving it back to the man retreating into the shadows.

I'm still wearing the red dress I left my apartment in, only now it's torn, the sides shredded, displaying my legs covered in goosebumps. I'm suddenly cold in the basement, realizing how exposed I am.

"Get her a new blanket," Nic commands.

Why is he helping me?

"W-why?"

"I don't want you to freeze before you can answer my questions," he snaps.

Those dark eyes watch me with a kind of attentiveness I haven't experienced since I was ten years old and my life fell to pieces.

"I'll admit"—he flashes me a smile, his teeth shining in the dark basement—"you got balls."

This is wrong. This is all wrong. I'm not supposed to be alive. *He's* definitely not supposed to be alive. I shouldn't be sitting in front of a man I hate, listening while he slings backhanded compliments at me.

Instinctively, my hand darts to my stomach, and I heave, feeling like I'm going to be sick again. Nothing comes up, though; there's probably little left in my stomach to vomit. How long have I been out? I try to squeeze my eyes shut, try to remember exactly what happened.

I pointed my gun at Nic and pulled the trigger. And then... darkness.

"You got tackled." Nic fills in the blank for me.

My gaze lifts to see him, to really look at him. He looks just as perfect up close, and I hate myself for thinking that. I should be able to find a flaw in his appearance, but I don't. His face is all sharp lines from his jaw to his cheekbones. Thick brows frame his dark eyes that stare down at me.

"Why?"

He doesn't answer, just looks at me with an amused expression coating his features. I want to slap the look off him,

want to kick and scream.

I want to kill him.

“Did I at least hit you?” I don’t know why I ask the question. It’s a stupid one, but Nic doesn’t seem bothered.

“Missed,” he says, another cocky smile rising on his lips, “by a lot.”

I groan. Anger heats my body, mixing with shame at my inability to do one thing. The one thing I’ve been dreaming of. I should have tried harder, should have put in more time at the shooting range. But I was eager. I couldn’t wait any longer to have my revenge.

“Why’d you do it?” He leans in, his elbows resting on his knees as he looks at me, eyebrows raised.

I can’t help the laughter that bubbles up. The look of surprise on his face only has it escalating, leaving me shaking in a fit of hysteria. My life is ruined, and he doesn’t even know who I am.

Last night, I was ready to die. Ready to float off to heaven or probably hell, all because of this man, because he and his family ruined my life.

And he doesn’t even know who I am. Or why I tried to kill him.

Am I just another person in his sea of enemies?

Actions have consequences, but at some point, maybe with enough money, you don’t even know what your consequences are. Or maybe it’s the butterfly effect, the constant staggering of dominoes, one action leading to another, and so on. At what point do you just lose track?

But I never lost track. I can pinpoint the exact moment that everything in my life changed. It was the second his father made a decision, the decision to kill my father. And the dominoes began to fall, stacking up one on top of another as my life continued to get worse. When the safety of my home was ripped from my arms and my only family was buried six feet under.

He can't see the consequences of his family's actions, but I can.

During my mental spiral, he stands up from the bucket, running a hand through his dark hair, loosening the locks from their gelled style and causing stray strands to fall onto his forehead. "It *is* funny," he muses. "Normally, I know who's trying to kill me."

It's my turn to give him a smile, only mine lacks his amusement. "Your family ruined my life, ruined everything." I push down the tears that threaten to fill my eyes. "And it means nothing to you. *Just another day in the life.*"

He laughs coldly. "Who'd I kill, baby?" He asks the question as if it truly means nothing to him. Just another name on the long list of people whose lives he's ended.

"My father," I tell him.

He doesn't even flinch.

"Gonna have to be more specific."

The unaffected attitude only serves to boil my blood further. "Anthony Soressi."

It's a moment before he recognizes the name. I can see him thinking, sorting through the list in his head.

"Vegas," he muses.

"Bingo."

A soft chuckle escapes his lips. To him, I'm just a little girl slinging veiled threats. He's right not to be threatened. I couldn't even kill him properly, and I stood only a few feet from him with a gun. *Pathetic.*

His knees bend as he squats lower, coming face to face with me, those dark eyes staring me down. "I didn't pull the trigger, baby girl."

"Doesn't matter. Your father ordered the hit."

"And what? You wanted to try to hurt him the way he hurt you?"

I glare back at him, a war raging between our locked eyes.

“Your plan has a flaw...” He smiles, the curve of lip downright sinful. The spawn of the devil is toying with me, like I’m made for his entertainment.

“And why is that?” I ask, playing into his hand.

“My father doesn’t give a fuck if I live or die.”

I scoff. “Doubt that.”

He stands again, stepping back from me and running a hand over his stubble. “Did you want to die?” he asks, only genuine curiosity lingering in his words this time.

I don’t know if I want to tell him. Unsure if I want him to know what sort of broken girl sits before him.

“My life was over the day my father died.”

With a nudge of his foot, he brings the orange bucket back to its place in front of me. His gaze roams me, my face, my body. He’s assessing, searching for some sort of insight. “How old were you?”

“What is this, a therapy session?” I push myself back, leaning against the chain-link. My body is still too sore. I know I should be on high alert, ready to fight him, but I can barely straighten my spine.

A gruff chuckle echoes through the empty space. He leans forward, touching his elbows to his knees, letting his hands hang loose while he stares at me, contemplating.

I want to tell him to just kill me, get it over with quickly, but the words die in my throat as I return his stare. Yesterday, I was ready to die. Today, I should be even more prepared to float off into that sweet, dark abyss. Arguably, I’m in a worse position than I was twenty-four hours ago, and yet, I’m sitting before Nic Colombo with a lump in my throat, hoping he spares my life. I won’t beg, though. I refuse to be that kind of weak.

“I’m trying to decide what to do with you,” he says, his deep tenor filling the space between our bodies with a tension I can feel.

“And what are my options?” I ask, my voice cracking.

“I should kill you.” My stomach bottoms out as he puts my worst fear into words. “That’s what I would do to any man who entered my property with the intent to put a bullet in me.”

“And won’t you?” I hold his gaze like a child determined to win a staring contest.

“I might.” He smiles, pressing up to stand, his tall body hovering over me. “Sleep tight, Valerie Soressi.” Giving me a wink, he exits, locking my chain-link cage behind him.

As my back falls onto the springy mattress, shooting pain through my spine, I realize I never told him my first name.

Bastard.

This is all a game.

VAL

I'm not sure how many days have passed before Nic visits me again. Enough time for the cuts that line my arms to scab over and the bruises on my thighs and stomach to turn an ugly shade of yellow.

I had watched his men black out all of the windows with construction paper and thick black curtains. They pair their unique window decor with keeping the lights on twenty-four/seven.

It doesn't take a genius to guess why—they want me disoriented. They'll feed me wet scrambled eggs for three meals in a row and then not again for the next five. Sometimes the food feels like it comes an hour apart and other times I'm starving before they set the metal tray down in front of me.

Bathroom breaks require relentless pleas, screaming through the chain-link fencing that keeps me contained before they open the door and drag me down a narrow hallway to a small bathroom with no opportunity to escape.

They're successful in their attempts to throw me off, because I have no idea what time or day it is.

“Did you know...” Nic says, his signature smirk marking his lips when he finally returns to visit me. “No one has filed a missing person's report for you.” He tells me this news the same way a parent would spring a trip to Disney on a child. He's grinning widely as he drags his orange bucket into my cell and sits before me.

I don't give him the reward of a response as I force my weak body up into a sitting position. I feel like a sack of bones in the red dress, and I'm sure I smell like rot and death. He watches me intently, waiting for me to give something away.

Honestly, I'm not surprised no one has reported me missing. In order for someone to be concerned, there would need to be a person who cared about me. And Nic's family took care of almost everyone who did.

The only person I have left is Dom, my cousin whose parents took me in after my father's death. "*Took me in*" is too kind, since my aunt only raised me out of guilt. There was no one else, and the only other option was foster care. So, Kitty D'Amelio spared me the New Jersey system and instead let me sleep on the floor of Dom's room, a fact that pissed off her husband for the next eight years. I would say my presence was the downfall of their marriage, but I think it was on the rocks way before I got there.

Ricky and Kitty kicked me out as soon as I turned eighteen; they didn't even give me a chance to finish high school before I was on the streets with only what I could fit in my backpack. Two years later, they kicked Dom to the curb with me. There was no chance that either of them would be looking for me.

Dom would care, if she could pull her nose up from the white powder for long enough to realize I'm missing. But even if she did get clear-headed enough to miss me, no police officer would listen to a junkie.

So I'm not surprised there was no missing person's report filed for me.

I'm more surprised that he was waiting for one.

Nic lifts an eyebrow as he leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Val, baby girl, why does no one know you're missing? Why does no one care?" he questions, his mockingly sympathetic tone pissing me off.

"Why do *you* care?" I bite out.

That earns me a rough laugh. “You’re feisty today.” He brings his hand forward, grazing my cheek with a soft touch before his fingers grip onto my chin, squeezing roughly. “You look feral, Valerie.” His dark eyes are scolding. “Like a wild animal... Shall I call you my little wolf?” he asks with a smile, and I have to swallow down a fitting growl. “You should know, no matter what games you play, what strategies you try”—he leans in closer, his eyes level with mine—“I *always* win.” He gives my chin one last squeeze before he drops it.

“No one cares that I’m missing,” I mutter, lifting my fingers to run over my reddened flesh, “because there’s no one to care.”

“Why?”

He leans back, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I thought you knew my story, thought you had me all figured out. What? The prince of New York can’t put two and two together?” I scoff. “It’s an easy puzzle, really. You killed the only family I had.”

I expect him to lash out, expect his hand to slap me, or his foot to kick me. But Nic doesn’t react out of anger, no. Instead, he laughs, the sound echoing through the open basement.

“You’re funny, little wolf,” he muses. “Tell me, what was your goal here? You want to get revenge on anyone who wronged you? You thought killing me would make you feel better?”

“Something like that,” I mutter, my eyes lowering from his condescension.

“You did a terrible job.”

“You don’t think I know that?” I hiss, wishing I had the strength to stand and take a swing at him, but I barely have enough for this conversation.

“Are you going to let yourself die down here?” he asks, switching tactics.

I let my gaze rise to meet his. He doesn't look that concerned, but the question still nags at me. "You could speed that up,"

He chuckles again. "Nu-uh, little wolf." He squats down, looking at me head on again, only inches from my face. "When I finally kill you, you'll be begging me for death."

His words reverberate through my skull, the truth ringing out in them. A few more days in this hellhole, and I might be doing exactly as he says. I watch as he leaves, locking the cell door behind him. It suddenly feels like I can't breathe.

That night is the first time I dream about him. My captor's voice taunting me as I beg him to finally end this.

But as I wake, I promise myself to stay alive. To see this through.

I won't be the one left begging.



THERE'S a small black spider that walks across the dirty cement floor. I've named her Charlotte, decidedly, as I'm the pig and she's the one sent to teach me a valuable life lesson. Only my tiny-legged Charlotte doesn't talk back to me, just leaves me murmuring in the dark to myself.

Hours pass, days even, as I waste away in my basement cell. The sour stench of my stomach acid still lingers on the raggedy old blanket beside me, but I've since grown accustomed to it.

The basement has become my new home. I've taken to imaging the space as my cramped studio apartment, the first place that I could call my own. A single bed, dresser on the far wall, dingy carpet, yellowed walls. The space itself is about the same size, but this location elicits fear and hopelessness in the pit of my stomach instead of comfort and independence.

By the time I hear the click of the door unlocking and the rhythmic steps of someone coming toward me, I'm certain I've already died.

This must be the purgatory they taught me about in Sunday school. After my father's death, I stopped listening to the lectures, stopped believing in anything bigger than myself. How could I? *Everything happens for a reason*, they had told me, *God has a plan*. And what was his plan for me? What was the reason for leaving ten-year-old me alone, abandoned with the only man I've ever loved buried under six feet of dirt.

I listened to all the stories, all the warnings wrapped in life and death taught to us as children. Taught to teach us right and wrong, good and bad. And yet, my so-called savior had left me deserted. If there was a God, he wasn't looking out for me.

"Good morning, little wolf." Nic's distinct New York accent drifts through my cage.

My body is still sore when I push myself up, pulling my mind from its current existential crisis.

I don't greet him right away, needing a moment to keep my composure intact—the way I've been planning. Over the time I've been left here, I've taken my lessons from Charlotte seriously. Despite my furious stomping around the cell, attempting to rid my body of the soreness that plagued me, Charlotte refused to leave.

So I sat with her, crossing my legs and placing my hands on my knees. I breathed in and out, mimicking the way my middle school guidance counselor had taught me. Anger was my safe space, had been since I was a kid left to fend for myself. Breathing didn't take away the anger, just dulled it enough to allow me to see clearly.

Nic wanted to intimidate me, to leave me in this dark basement as a way to break my spirit. Probably hoping I'd be on my knees begging for forgiveness when he returned.

Wouldn't that be pretty?

But forgiveness isn't in the cards for me.

No, my first plan had failed spectacularly, and now I had to create a new one. Vengeance is still possible, and I'm not going to die a failure. I'll figure this out, find a way to make

my plans work, but first, I have to rid myself of the filth surrounding me.

Slowly, I let a smile rise on my cheeks as I looked up at my captor. If we weren't in this situation, I think I could admire him in his pricey designer suit with his head of dark hair slicked back. He looks down at me on my dirty mattress in a way that makes me feel weak and worthless, but that's fine. This won't last forever.

"Morning." I will my voice to lose its edge, to find some of the sugary sweetness I've used in the past when talking to men like him. They like to witness women submit to them. Women who are strong-willed turning into those who pose no threat. Let him think I've *come to my senses*.

The guard who has only left his spot twice, both times replaced by someone else, slides a key into the padlock that traps me in the metal cage. He pushes the gate open for Nic, who saunters in like he owns the place, which I guess he does.

The tall man in the expensive suit looks out of place in the dirty basement. His shiny shoes step across the cement until he's directly in front, hovering over me.

"Have you thought about what you've done?" he mocks.

I lift my gaze, looking up at him with doe eyes. "Yes, *sir*."

He perks at that, a sinful look coating his features. I'd wager his dick has come to life too. "I like the sound of that."

"I'm sure you do," I whisper, pulling myself up to my knees, still peering up at him. The position is meant to be sexual, and I'm sure it looks downright dirty. My red dress still clings to my body, ripped in places with one broken strap hanging from my shoulder. I'm sure I'm not the gorgeous woman I left the house as, but his eyes tell me he doesn't care how filthy I look. Maybe that's his kink, since he has kept me in a cage for God only knows how long. "So," I breathe, my eyes never leaving his as I will them to look as innocent as ever, "what's my sentence then?"

A throaty laugh escapes his lips. "I want to make you a deal, Valerie." Dark eyes watch for my reaction, and I do my

best to control my features. *A deal.* Well, a deal means I live, at least.

“And what’s that?” I ask.

“A year.” I don’t know what he means at first, and he’s silent for a moment, letting the word wash over me before he continues. “I want a year of your life. And then I’ll set you free.”

“I-I don’t understand?” What would he possibly want a year of my life for? To do what with me? Dying would probably be a better option.

He lowers himself, squatting in front of me, bringing himself to eye level. “You’ll be mine for a year, and in exchange, I’ll help you get your revenge.”

My breath catches in my chest, heart speeding up. He must see the reaction in my eyes, the shock and excitement that fills me, because he smiles. It’s a sinful look.

“My revenge?”

“Yup.” He pops the ‘p’. “You want to avenge your father’s death, right? You did a shitty job of it the first time, but you have balls, I’ll give you that. I’ll help you. If you give me this year, I’ll teach you everything you need to know, and I’ll get you your revenge.”

“And what do I have to do?” It seems too good to be true. There has to be something I’m missing here. We’re talking about killing his father. He can’t possibly be saying that he’ll help me murder his family and then let me go.

“That’s the catch, Val.” His eyes sparkle in the low lighting. “You’ll do whatever I tell you to.”

Alarm bells ring in my head, mimicking the sounds of my father’s casino. Everything in me is shouting *red flag*. I feel like a child in this tattered red dress, a little girl playing dress up. I wanted to be like the woman I saw in my father’s casino all those years ago. I thought I could put on the dress and parade my body to get what I want without actually having to *use* my body. The thought has my stomach churning.

But my surroundings remind me I'm limited in choices. I'm the one caked in dirt and grime, sleeping on a filthy mattress in his basement. I don't have a wealth of options if I want to live. I swallow thickly. "And if I say no..."

The corners of his lips lift. He's enjoying the back and forth; it brings a sick sense of joy to his face, causing those alarm bells to shout at me again. "The other option includes your blood coating my basement floor. Don't get me wrong, I like that option too. You did try to shoot me after all."

His dark eyes sparkle with wickedness as he looks down at me, waiting for an answer, for my agreement or denial. Either option ignites a new fire. Either I submit to him, and he takes me for a year. Or I spit in his face, and he kills me right here.

Revenge only works if I'm allowed to enact it. My death only makes me a failure, a silly girl who was unable to shoot the man in front of her.

So, I nod numbly. It's a shitty plan, one bound to leave me hurt in the end. But it's my only option if I want to live to see Paulie Colombo die.

"Words, Valerie. I want to hear you say it."

"Yes." The answer tastes like poison on my tongue.

Nic's smile only grows wider. "Atta girl." He pushes to his feet. "Robert, get her cleaned up and bring her to the house," he tells my guard, stepping toward the gate. "Good doing business with you." He smirks, giving me one last look before he's gone.

VAL

The cleanup process is worse than I expected. I'm met with a lone shower stall in a door-less bathroom. My internal shame urges me to cover my breasts and hold on to any sort of dignity I have left as my prison guard pushes me toward the grimy tiles. My pride, on the other hand, screams *show no fear*.

There's no hot water as I step under the spray after ridding myself of the scrap of red material. Part of me wants to cry, embarrassment and rage boiling up in my body, competing for first place in the competition of my feelings. But I have to push both down; there's no room for emotions here.

The water burns as it touches my skin, the bite of cold harsh and unforgiving. There's no soap or shampoo, so instead I pick the blood and dirt from under my nails and use my hands to rub the water into my skin in rough circles. Dirty water flows from me, running down the drain.

I still don't feel clean when I step out of the spray and a threadbare towel is tossed to me. "Wow, thanks," I snark. It's hard to swallow down the sass. Compliance has never really been my thing. Regardless of the fact I just promised a year of my life to a man I wanted to kill not too long ago.

I don't even know what this year will look like. What he'll expect from me, what kind of submission he'll demand. Dirty thoughts roll through my head at a quick pace. What kind of man wants a girl to live with him but doesn't want to fuck her? I saw that glimmer when I said "sir," on my knees at his feet,

agreeing to his deal. How am I going to get through this? What was I thinking?

A war rages in the recesses of my mind. One side of me arguing how wrong this is. I need to run, get out as fast as I can. Abort ship. Abandon plan.

But the other side convinces me to lean in. Clearly, he wants me, so I should use that to my advantage. Dress up all pretty the way he likes and let him fall for me. Make it easier for me to gut him in the end.

Surely, there are worse men to sleep with than Nic Colombo? But... is there, though? Who's worse than the man I tried to kill? The one whose father ruined my life?

I have to shake the discourse from my head, focus on the task at hand. Right now, I just need to get out of this basement.

I eye up the guard—Robert, I think Nic called him. He watches me intently, following my every move. When I finish drying myself, Robert hands me a pile of clothes. A plain black t-shirt, and jeans that are too loose. I feel disgusting in the clothes, especially not knowing where they came from.

“How long have I been here?” I ask once the safety of the fabric is covering my body.

Robert doesn't answer, just points me forward toward a door at the end of the room. He uses his fingerprint to open the exit, before shoving me through the frame. There's another guard out there, and this one looks at me from head to toe before holding up a black sack. “Boss wants her blind.” He looks at Robert when he speaks, completely disregarding me.

“Why—” I don't have a chance to finish my question before Robert is pushing me toward the man who shoves a sack over my head. My gasp turns into a growl as one of them pulls my wrists together behind my back, wrapping some sort of rope around them.

“You motherfucker!” I shout, wriggling my arms in an attempt to escape the binds. My movements don't spare me, though, and my words don't stop them. Instead, they push me forward, forcing me to move.

I try to breathe through the sack, attempting to trick my mind into believing I'm not being suffocated, a difficult task as they shove me outside. I can hear the racing streets of New York, smell the city through the fabric covering my face. I can taste freedom, but it sits outside of my grasp.

The car ride makes my stomach flip, and I'm seconds away from begging them to pull over so I can vomit, when I finally feel the car jerk to a stop. Robert drags me from the back seat, yanking the bag off my head and letting the sunlight blind me. I have to blink repeatedly before my vision finally returns and my eyes are greeted by the sight of the extravagant house in front of me.

I can't tell exactly where we are, but we must be outside of the city. Somewhere in Long Island, maybe? The property looks far larger than anything you'd find within city limits, and it's far nicer than what my aunt and uncle have in Jersey.

Money.

Money is everything, and here it's all about showing off how much you have.

Nic steps out of the front door, standing at the top steps of his estate like a king looking down on his peasants. And I feel like one too after that waste of a shower and used clothing covering my body.

"Welcome home, Val." He curls his finger for me to come forward, a smirk highlighting his depravity. *Home*, he says. Nothing has been home to me since I was a kid. The only place I associate that word with is a two-story house in the suburbs of Las Vegas. One I haven't seen in over half my life.

My hands are still tied behind my back, forcing my tits forward. "Can you tell your goons to untie me?"

He chuckles at my question. "Have you been a good girl?"

I can't stand the way the question sounds on his lips. If my hands were free, I'd lunge at him. My eyes must darken, or my face must twist with disgust, because Nic looks at me with a brightened smile, knowing he's gotten to me. Sick bastard.

“Calm down,” he says in a mocking tone that has me feeling anything but calm. “Robert.” His head dips toward me, and within seconds, Robert is tugging at the ropes that bind me.

My wrists feel sore and raw, but I keep my comments to myself as I rub away the aches.

“Come on, Valerie.” Nic gestures for me to join him. “Time to see your new home.”

My eyes roam the property, looking for anything that stands out, anything to give me a hint at where I am.

“Assessing your escape plan.” He laughs when he catches me, reading my thoughts. “You’re not a prisoner.”

“Sure feels like I am.”

The sound that leaves his lips is low but filled with amusement as it rings through the entryway of his mansion. It bounces off the marble floor and high ceilings. He would have a giant home, living in the lap of luxury, while the rest of us barely get by.

The display of wealth makes me sick.

We head up a double-wide staircase, bypassing the main floor altogether. Lights dance off the crystals that hang from the foyer chandelier, and I can’t help but stare at them as I take in my new life.

It’s a hard pill to swallow, going from hardly enough room for one bed in my efficiency apartment to suddenly having crystals flashing in my face. We had money when I was kid, but it wasn’t *this* kind of money.

The house I lived in with my father was nice. At the time, I thought we must have been rich because I had a bedroom *and* a playroom. I laugh at my naivety, as that was nothing compared to what Nic has. Uncle Johnny lived down the street in his own two-story, surrounded by normal families. Moms, dads, two kids: the American dream. Except for the fact that Dad ran one of the biggest casinos, we were *normal*. At least, that’s what I thought.

Nic leads me to my new prison cell, objectively nicer than the last one he kept me in. I'm greeted by an ivory painted room with a queen-size bed in the center of the space, covered in crisp white linens with a pale pink throw laid across the bottom. There's an obnoxious light fixture in here too, gleaming like the crystal in the foyer. Is this a rich person thing? I was happy the light bulbs worked when I moved into my first place. Lights like these don't exist in apartments in my price range.

Both sides of the bed have their own shiny black nightstand, clear of all clutter, and there's a matching dresser on the other side of the room. My eyes move to the large windows that take up almost the entirety of the far wall, and I take long strides until I can see outside. The room overlooks the backyard, what seems like endless land. Directly below the window, there's a large swimming pool, but beyond the shiny blue water and concrete patio is green, large stretches of manicured lawn.

Vegas was dry and sandy.

Jersey was gray and gloomy.

New York City was a concrete jungle.

But *this*...this looks real. Like what the world is supposed to be.

"You like?" Nic asks, and I realize that he's come up behind me, looking out of the window over my shoulder. His body is so close, I can feel the warmth that radiates from him.

I nod, too afraid to speak. My voice might betray me if I do, and I can't risk Nic knowing I'm grateful for anything. Can't allow him to believe I think I'll like living here.

"Good." His warm breath skates across my neck. "You're on probation here, Valerie." His tone chills my spine, and it snaps me out of my thoughts, bringing the room back into focus and reminding me I'm still in prison, despite how beautiful the view is.

"You're not to leave the house unless you're with me. I'll have someone go to your apartment and grab your things, and

I will take care of ending your lease. Consider yourself cut off from your old life.”

I spin around to face him. “No.” I spit the word out quickly. Dom still sleeps on my couch, unable to find a place of her own, and if he ends my lease, she won’t have anywhere to stay. But I don’t want to tell him that.

“No?” he repeats. The question causes his eyebrow to tick up, and there’s a small smile that lifts the corner of his lips.

“You can’t just take over my life. That’s not what the deal was—” I don’t have a chance to finish my statement before he’s in my face, pressing my back against the cold glass window.

“Finish,” he taunts, his breath coasting over my lips. “Please, tell me about how I can’t take over your life.” His eyes have darkened, and I can’t help but think he’s the predator and I’m the prey. Prey that has willingly put itself in his path.

I swallow thickly, my objections sliding down my throat like molasses.

“That’s what I thought,” he murmured. “Let’s be clear, Valerie. I own you now. So I do control your life. You can whine and cry and make this a miserable year, please do. I think I’d enjoy punishing the brat in you. Or you can shut up and accept what I give you.”

My desire to get what I want fights against the part of me that knows I won’t win against this man.

“You’re an asshole,” I grit out, not letting him intimidate me.

He laughs at that, his neck arching back as a smile grows on his lips.

The chill of the glass bites through my thin black shirt as Nic presses me farther against the window, his head dipping so he can whisper in my ear. “If you’re a *good girl*”—his calloused hand reaches up, running the back of his knuckles over my cheek—“I’ll reward you with more freedom.”

“How?” My voice softens, becoming pathetically feminine like I know he’s hoping for. Getting into his good graces is going to be a guessing game. Trial and error until I figure out where his limits are, what he likes and what pushes his buttons.

“Do as I say, little wolf.”

My stomach growls, betraying my mind by expressing my needs to him. He steps back, his eyes roaming over me one final time. “Change out of that horrible outfit. I had the closet filled for you. Make yourself presentable and meet me downstairs.”

He spins on his heel and leaves the room before I can even respond with agreement. When the door shuts behind him, I let myself fall, my knees slapping against the hardwood floor. For the first time in days, I let the tears stream from my eyes, the internal war finally relenting to my overwhelming emotions.

But I refuse to let him have my tears, to let him win. I won’t be weak in front of him; I’ll save it for small moments of solitude.

Whatever it takes, I will get my revenge.

VAL

The last time I saw my father, I was cruel. Antagonizing, even.

Despite being born in New York, I had no memories of the city. My father had grown up in New Jersey, a fact I learned later on from Aunt Kitty, but New York City was his home for a while.

We moved to Las Vegas when I was only five years old, after my mother died of an overdose. My father wanted a fresh start, but even so, I was raised on stories of him and my Uncle Johnny in NYC. I probably knew things a small child shouldn't have. Like what clubs they frequented and how late they stayed out.

I was desperate to see the place my father spoke about. When one of them did go back to the city they called home, they never took me with them. They promised they would, eventually, and ten-year-old me was tired of hearing *someday*.

When the impromptu trip came up, I wanted to go. Begged my father to take me with him. When he said no, I lashed out, telling him how much I hated him.

"You don't mean that, sweetie," he had said to me, and I didn't, but I didn't want him to have the satisfaction of knowing I was a liar. I stood with my arms crossed over my chest, ignoring him while he tried to say goodbye and dodging his kisses. Eventually, he gave up and left, giving me one last plea at the door before he was gone.

I didn't know that would be the last time I saw him. If I did, I wouldn't have been such a bratty kid.

The organ in my chest beats furiously when I think of those final moments, those final goodbyes that I refused to partake in. If I had a second chance, I would change it all. I would kill to give him that hug, let him kiss my forehead and tell me how much he loved me and would miss me. I would do anything to take back that moment and replace it with a better one.

But I can't.

Memories of my father are all that's kept me going for the last few years, but I try to brush them away as I explore my new cage. There's an attached bathroom with an oversized tub and a standing shower. On the other side is a double vanity. The place is stocked with everything I could need—washes, lotions, powders, makeup. More products than I've probably owned in my entire life.

I decided to take another shower first, stripping the oversized clothes and abandoning them on the marble floors. The steam is heavenly, and I use a lavender-scented wash to finally cleanse the dirt and grime from my body.

When I step out of the shower, I feel clean for the first time in days.

There's a closet full of clothes, organized by style and color, more garments and accessories than anyone would ever need. I'm ashamed of the butterflies that swarm my stomach and the shaking hand that reaches out to touch the material. Just one of these dresses probably costs more than my entire wardrobe back at my apartment.

The red number I had worn to kill Nic wasn't even mine. I stole it from Dom, something she had thrifted from a goodwill on the East Side. My heart pangs in my chest when I think of her. My cousin depends on me more than she would ever let on, and with me here...

I shake the thought. When the time is right, I'll figure it out.

My fingers land on a silky red top, the red section filling more of the closet than any other color. Nic's eyes at the restaurant flash through my mind. Before he realized what I was there for, he looked interested. I knew I was pretty, sure; guys have always hit on me, called after me on the streets. But I had never seen a man look at me the way Nic had. Granted, I had never dressed that way before that night.

A recurring thought rises as I pluck the red top from its hanger. What if I do give him an inch? Dress in the low-cut top, thank him for the overstuffed closet with a sweet smile and softened tone? Make him believe I don't hate what he's doing to me?

It could work. I mean, so far, I think it has.

I slip on the silky material and pair it with black skinny jeans. Despite my hatred for the man, I can't deny he has a good personal shopper. The clothes fit like a glove, and the mirror shows me looking better than I have in a while. The only exception is the bags that sit under my eyes, making my face look pale and malnourished.

The weight of my deal with the devil finally begins to sink in. I can put on an act, play his game, but I'm not sure why Nic did all this. The uncertainty of his end game has any butterflies in my stomach swirling to their death. At what point is he going to ask something of me that I'm not willing to deliver? At what point will I want to back out from our agreement?

The girl looking back at me in the mirror looks nothing like the one who left my apartment, ready to kill mafia royalty.

She looks like the ten-year-old orphan who was forced to grow up on her own. I refuse to be her, not anymore. No, now I need to be the woman in red. The *femme fatale*. Because at the end of this, I plan on winning.

I plan on getting my revenge.

I want to kill the man who took my father away from me.

The man who ruined my life with one order.

Only then will I finally be able to breathe.

And that satisfaction will be worth every sacrifice along the way.

I swipe a bottle of foundation from the collection of makeup, blurring out my imperfections with the liquid and recreating myself to be *better, prettier, more palatable*.

There's a tube of lipstick on the counter, and when I pull off the cap, I find the ruby red color staring back at me. Seems fitting, I think, as I swipe the new color across my lips.

I'm not going to be weak anymore.

I'm going to turn myself into a goddess. Nic thinks he's in charge, but I'm going to come out on top.

There's no other way out.



WHEN I EXIT MY ROOM, there's a new guard waiting for me. A dark-haired man in a sleek black suit. I wonder if it costs as much as Nic's. His eyes roam over my fresh outfit briefly before he gestures for me to walk down the halls.

"Are you my new warden?" I ask, my lips tugging up into a smile. Mr. Grumpypants doesn't respond, only lifts one eyebrow and looks down the hall again, imploring me to move with his eyes.

"Cool," I mutter, padding down the hall on my bare feet. My closet was suspiciously lacking shoes—another stipulation of my probation, I assume.

My mute guard leads me into a stunning, giant kitchen with matte black cabinetry topped with shiny marble. I have the urge to run my fingers along the countertops, feel the expensive stone beneath my skin, but I suppress the desire. I don't want Nic to think I'm enchanted by any of his wealth.

Aunt Kitty had chipped laminate countertops, and cabinets that were just as old, the whole kitchen stained a shade of yellow, deteriorated by age and wear. Updates weren't in the budget for that house.

“Nice of you to join me.” Nic grins from his spot at the eat-in table, as he leans back comfortably, extending his arm over the chair next to him.

This is my life now. Whether I like it or not, this man holds the keys to everything I want, including my freedom.

“I was just admiring my new things.” I try to smile, but it feels fake, and my muscles twitch from forcing it.

His eyes light up, brows lifting, like he’s delighted by my answer. “And what do you think?”

“Very nice,” I say, and even if I wish it was, it’s not a lie. I take a seat at the round table on the opposite side of him, his dark eyes watching my every move as I slide into the leather chair.

Nic leans forward, his elbows now touching the table to bring him closer. I realize at this moment that the guard who walked me down is gone, leaving me to fend for myself with this man. Not that anyone who works for Nic would have helped me anyway.

“And what do you say?” Nic asks, one eyebrow lifting as he waits for my response.

My chest burns with aggravation. It’s a test, and I know what answer he’s looking for. He wants me to swallow my pride and say thank you, knowing how painful that statement will be for me. How can I possibly sit across from him and thank him, when I know he’s to blame for my father’s murder?

“Don’t make me ask again, Val.” His hazel eyes glower at me from across the table.

“Thank you.” The words come out as if they’ve been yanked from my throat, but Nic doesn’t care much. He smiles, victory brightening his features.

“*Good girl.*” Instead of avoiding eye contact as a shiver runs through me, I let his darkened eyes meet my brown ones. I’m sure he can see the venom that lingers in my gaze. I don’t like him, and no deal or agreement will make me *his*.

Laughter booms from his chest. “You have a *bite.*”

“So I’ve been told.” My nails press into my palms, stinging the sensitive flesh, as I try to keep myself from lashing out. He’s just trying to rile me up, get under my skin so I’ll break my agreement. This is all a game for him.

He’s the king and I’m the pawn.

But this pawn plans on winning.

An older Italian woman with graying hair comes into the kitchen, her hands poised on her hips when she sees Nic and I. She brushes down the skirt of her modest dress, and I notice there’s a white apron tied around her waist. “*Ragazzo mio, cos’è questo? Hai portato una ragazza a casa?*”

I don’t understand the words that leave her lips, but it’s obvious she’s questioning him, and the look on his face tells me he’s not amused.

It’s not his mother, I know that. I’ve seen Gloria Colombo, and she looks like she walked right off the set of the Real Housewives, so this must be someone else.

“Rosa,” he breathes, a stern look covering his features as he stands and walks toward the woman. “This is Valerie.” He slings his arm in my direction. “She will be staying here for a while. *Si?*”

Rosa looks at me again, confusion lacing her expression. “*Perché?*”

“Don’t ask questions, Rosa.” His voice is stern, menacing, but it’s not how he talks to me. It’s clear he shows her some sort of compassion, and she doesn’t fear him. Not the way he wants me to. “She needs to eat. Could you make her something?”

Rosa’s eyes drift to me once more before going back to Nic. “*Si, signore.*” She dips her head and spins on her heel, going to the refrigerator.

“Come on.” He gestures to me. “I’ll show you around.”

Nic leads me out into a giant living room with a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows looking out onto the backyard, similar to my room. The swimming pool and jacuzzi take up a

decent amount of space, but still, I can see the endless green lawn and surrounding forest beyond the glimmering water. I move toward the windows, staring out at the forbidden land.

“You want to go out there?” His question makes my stomach drop. The answer is yes, but I don’t believe that he’ll suddenly give me the okay. His game is one of control and he’ll use the things I want as a bargaining chip. My uncle played the same games, the same bargaining of basic needs in exchange for power. Men like him are all the same.

“Yes,” I exhale, giving in. I need to know for certain how his mind works, and this is a good way to start.

His shoes tap against the hardwoods as I feel him walk up behind me, his breath skating across the nape of my neck. “Maybe,” he whispers in my ear. “If you behave.”

It’s like a bucket of ice water.

“What’s the obsession anyway?” he asks. “You can’t take your eyes from the window.”

I don’t like how he sees right through me. I want to ignore him, but I can feel his attention on me, waiting for an answer. “I don’t know.” I shrug. “There’s not that much...green in Jersey.”

“What about in Vegas?”

“Not there either.”

“Do you remember much about your childhood?” His hand comes to my shoulder, a gesture that seems reassuring, but underneath, it’s more than likely manipulative. “How long were you even there for?”

This feels like it’s encroaching on personal territory, and that’s a place I can’t go. Not with him. My mind and body can’t handle recalling those memories.

“Why don’t I have shoes?” I ask, changing the subject.

“Good one.” He huffs a laugh, and then his fingers ghost over my neck, gently pulling my hair over to one side of my shoulder. It’s beyond me why his touch doesn’t send me

flinching or pulling away. “I’ll let that slide, this time. But I will know all of your secrets, Val. Every. Last. One.”

It sounds like a promise, but I have my own to keep. I ignore the goosebumps dotting my arms in warning.

“To answer your question...” he trails off, his hand smoothing down my shoulder as he speaks directly into my ear, “you would run if I gave you shoes.”

“No, I wouldn’t—”

“Don’t lie.” He waves his hand dismissively, stepping back from me. “It’s not cute, and we both know you’re looking for a way out, for some reason not to complete our deal. I’m just making it easier for you to paint me as the villain.”

Our eyes clash as my head whips around to look at him.

The animosity filling the air between us is thick and heavy. We can pretend, toy with each other like cat and mouse, but at the end of the day, our roles are clear. We’ll always be enemies.

He leans in closer, constantly invading my space with his touch, his scent, his body. Everything about him is overwhelming to my senses.

“You’re welcome,” he whispers, thinking he’s doing me a favor by holding me captive.

Even though I don’t trust him, I want what he has to give too much to walk away.

“So is my home up to your standards?” he asks quizzically, watching my expression.

“Do you want my honest answer or the *good girl* answer again?” I sass.

His hand reaches out, his thumb caressing my chin as those dark eyes peer down at me. The softness of the gesture doesn’t match the Nic I’ve seen up to this moment. Warmth permeates my skin from his hand, sending a shock of electricity down to my toes. “I want everything from you, Valerie, especially your honesty.”

My lungs rattle as I suck in my next breath. Nic gives me whiplash. Sweet and sour. Hot and cold. I don't know where I stand with him, and it keeps me on edge. Unsure if he wants to kill me or fuck me.

What's worse, that he may want to fuck me, or that I'm not sure I'd stop him?

His thumb stays on my chin as he lets me think, waiting for me to answer.

"I'd prefer a cabin," I tell him. The little bit of truth leaving my lips surprises me as much as it does him. But I'm grateful for the break in the tension.

"A cabin?" he questions, amused by my answer. But everything I do is amusing to Nic. I'm like a circus freak, out of his normal realm. Eventually, his fascination with me will end, and what will happen then?

"Yeah, like built with logs and in the middle of the woods with a big stone fireplace."

He smiles softly, and it's the first time he's looked...*sweet* and not sinister the way he normally does. "Why? Why a log cabin in the woods?"

Warm breath skates across my cheek, and I inhale his clean scent. He's taking over my space again.

"Lunch is ready," Rosa interrupts us. It's a relief as the electricity in the room fizzles out.

"Wait," I say aloud as Rosa leaves and Nic turns to lead me back to the kitchen.

"She speaks English?"

Laughter roars from Nic. "When she wants to." He winks.

VAL

The first night I spend in Nic's massive home consists of me tossing and turning in the queen bed, tangled up in the soft sheets.

My dreams are cruel. My subconscious is at war with my actions. How can I possibly sleep in this man's house after what he did to me? I feel like a monster, like I've betrayed my only family.

What would my father say if he saw me now?

I toss onto my side, staring out the massive windows up at the moonlight. Despite my hatred for the man, I can't deny that his home, his property, is beautiful.

My mind wanders, thoughts flashing through my brain faster than I can handle. I recall being sent to New Jersey, flying back from Vegas on a plane with a stranger at my side.

The last time I saw Uncle Johnny was before the funeral, before I fully understood I would never see my father again. He had tears in his eyes as he said his goodbyes. "*Be good, kiddo,*" he had told me, and then he walked away, never returning. Leaving me with a stuffy woman dressed in a skirt suit.

It hurt almost as badly as losing my dad. In the matter of a week, my entire life had been turned upside down. New house, new school, no dad, and no Johnny.

Not to mention, Kitty and Ricky were less than thrilled to have me. And their fights over taking me in were not quiet or

subtle. Ricky didn't want me, but Kitty felt a familiar obligation to her estranged brother. So, she took me in.

And Ricky beat the shit out of her for it.

The only one who wasn't bothered by my sudden appearance was Dom.

"*You dress weird,*" she had told me the first time we met, cocking her head to the side. She had a head full of red hair and a face splattered with freckles.

Dom was my only friend. Mostly, I refused to make new ones. And no one pressured me, because no one cared about a poor orphan in New Jersey.

I pull the sheets from my body. My skin is slick with sweat and the new silk nightie and soft sheets feel foreign to me. I find myself at the window again, longing to be outside, feeling the grass between my toes and the crisp night air on my skin.

Before I think too much, I open my bedroom door, checking the hall and wandering downstairs. Nic's house is quiet in the middle of the night. No guard is posted outside my door, and for the first time since I arrived here, I feel calm, the buzzing anxiety slowly fading away.

There's a set of glass French doors at the back of the house, but I don't touch them. I'm certain there's an alarm, and Nic is probably waiting for me to make a move to escape. But I do stop and stare out at the dark night. The trees are barely visible in the distance, but I know they're out there, waiting for me to run beyond them. Even with my new cage being far larger than my last one, I still feel trapped, my fingers itching to open the door.

"What are you doing?"

The voice startles me, and I spin around too quickly, offsetting my balance and slamming back into the doors. My body freezes, certain that something bad is going to happen. I'm probably in trouble now, as I can guess it's someone who works for Nic.

The owner of the voice flicks on the living light, illuminating the large space. I don't know the man who stands

below the archway between the foyer and the great room, but a lump forms in my throat at the sight of him.

The fear fades a little as we take each other in. He doesn't seem scary, or like he may kill me at any moment. But that has nothing to do with his looks, because he's sinfully attractive. With inky black hair and a sharp jawline, he stands in nothing but black joggers that hang low on his hips, showing off the deep V outline leading down...

"Like what you see?" His teasing question forces me out of my thoughts, spoken in a deep tenor with the hint of an accent. My mind spins, trying to place the sound. A smug smile lines his lips and his bright eyes watch me attentively. He knows he's attractive, radiating confidence as he observes me shrinking before him.

Suddenly, my fear is completely replaced with shame. I can feel the heat rising to my cheeks. "Who are you?" My voice is hoarse when I speak. More timid than I was when I was with Nic earlier. I can't place the feeling that's pulsing through me. I shouldn't feel this...*needy*. For a stranger, no less.

"Leo." His name sounds heavenly on his lips, and I decide his accent is Italian as he slowly stalks toward me. "You must be Val." He extends his hand, waiting for me to shake it.

He eyes me, his gaze roaming over my body as my heart pounds faster. My collection of pajamas was more revealing than I would have chosen. Nic's personal shopper had filled my drawers with silk shorts, spaghetti strapped camisoles, and revealing chemises. I feel completely exposed in front of him in my current pale purple set.

"How do you—"

"So my brother hasn't told you about me then?" He chuckles deeply, turning away. Heading to the bar cart at the other side of the living room, he grabs a set of matching crystal tumblers and a bottle of whiskey.

Brother?

“Drink?” he asks, setting the supplies on the coffee table and relaxing into the modern sofa.

“No,” I finally answer, swallowing roughly and gathering myself. “He didn’t tell me about you. I didn’t realize he had a brother...”

I had read a lot about the Colombo family, the structure, and their supposed illegal operations. I had done my research to not stumble into this blindly, but Leo never showed up in anything I read.

He laughs again, a deep and throaty sound. “Yeah, I’m the bastard child.” His dark eyes sparkle with amusement as he hands me a glass with two fingers’ worth of the dark liquid. “Not worth mentioning.” He shrugs, nonchalantly, as if he’s accustomed to being forgotten.

I find myself sitting across from him as if he lured me there. The glass coffee table acts as a boundary between the two of us, one I’m thankful for, something to separate me from this man. My body reacts to him in a way I’ve never experienced. I’ve never been attracted to...*anyone*. I never had time. My whole life was a series of battles, one fight after the next. There was never a moment of peace.

And while this home isn’t *peaceful*, I don’t have anything to do. Food is placed before me, money isn’t needed, and while my head races with the thoughts of what Nic might do to me, I find some solace in not having to worry about how I’ll pay my rent.

“Why are you here then?” I find myself asking, as I reach for the low ball and bring it to my lips. The hard liquor burns its way down my throat, forcing me to cough as I swallow. The hardest drink I’ve had is a glass of red wine stolen from Aunt Kitty’s stash. Dom and I weren’t frequently invited to high school parties, better known as the outcasts no one wanted to be around.

“I live here.” Leo takes a sip of the amber liquid. “I missed your arrival.” He nods to the boxes sitting in the corner. “I was at your apartment, packing up.”

Something about thinking of this large man in my apartment has me bringing the glass of alcohol back to my lips. It immediately burns all over again, and I cough, using one hand to cover my mouth while the other sets the glass back down on the coffee table.

“Never drank before?” He eyes me, quirking a brow.

My throat is still on fire. “A little,” I mutter.

“How old are you?” Leo asks, leaning forward to place each of his elbows on his knees.

“Twenty.”

“*Madonna*,” he hisses. “You’re a baby.” One of his hands comes to his chin, scrubbing over the light stubble as his eyes burn into mine. He seems concerned, as if I’m too young to be in this household.

“I don’t think twenty is equivalent to being an infant.”

Another chuckle rumbles from his chest, the sound intoxicating. I want to make him laugh again, let the noise vibrate through me. “You just look so...*innocent*.” He smiles, shaking his head. “Have you ever even fucked a man?”

My breath catches in my throat. I have. Only once. In the back room at one of the few high school parties I went to. We were drunk and sweaty, fumbling around. It was over as fast as it started. The pain was quick, and then it dulled slowly, but there was nothing pleasurable about my first experience with a man. Scratch that—*a boy*.

“Yes,” I tell him honestly, keeping my eyes on his, despite everything inside me wanting to drop his gaze. “I’m not so innocent. You don’t even know me.”

The light from the moon casts a glow into the dim living space. It sparkles off his eyes as he watches me, looking like he doesn’t believe me. I reach for my glass, chugging the rest of the liquid down in one gulp and ignoring the way it burns as I stand up, feeling the sudden need to get out of here. “Goodnight, Leo.”

“You are innocent, Val,” he breathes, the words a quiet whisper in the night. It’s like he’s secretly telling me something else, but I don’t need his judgements.

“I tried to kill him. Did he tell you that?” I ask, turning my head enough to see his reaction to my words.

He shakes his head, a small smile lifting the corners of his perfect lips. “He did, but you missed, huh?”

“Unfortunately.” I start to move again, holding back a groan as I stride my way back to the stairs.

I hear him laugh softly behind me, and it only makes me stand taller. “I can teach you how to shoot. Next time, you won’t miss.” When I spin around at his words, my eyes narrowing, I catch him winking at me. Then he polishes off his own glass and sinks back into the couch.

I hurry up the stairs and into my bedroom, locking the door behind me.

That night I lie in bed, repeating his words on a loop.

You’re just a baby.

Have you ever even fucked a man?

I can teach you how to shoot. Next time, you won’t miss.

But the sound of his voice floating through my mind finally helps me fall asleep.

VAL

I don't see Nic the next day. But my new guard seems to be in every room adjacent to me, just close enough to keep a watchful eye. No one speaks to me; even Rosa just brings food and then leaves, like there's a fire chasing her away. By the time I'm tucked away in my room later that night, I'm restless, tossing around in the luxurious bed.

I don't mean to seek out Leo, just to move my sleepless body, but I find him anyway. He's laid back in one of the oversized living room chairs, one hand holding a clear glass of what looks like whiskey and the other a worn paperback. Without his shirt, I can see the toned muscles that lead down to the band of his sweats.

Bright eyes meet mine when I cross the threshold, and a smile rises on his lips. So quickly, he changes from being lost in thought to being excited to see me. It makes me feel a way that I shouldn't, because the truth is, I'm excited to see him here too.

He closes the book as he sits up, setting it on the coffee table.

Meditations, I read the title. I have no idea what that is.

"*Tesoro*." He grins, looking up at me with a playful glint in his eyes. "You're still here?"

I'm captivated; there's no other way to put it. The way he speaks, how he looks at me, I wouldn't be so bored if he was around all day. That's for certain.

But without Nic here, I don't know what is allowed and not allowed with Leo. I feel like a child just thinking about it, wondering if my simply being down here with him will get me punished. Is this a fuck up and die situation?

Either way, I'm not so sure I care about punishment. At least not right now.

Running a hand through his dark hair, his gaze stays glued to mine.

"I'm not allowed to leave."

"A rule of my brother's?" he asks. When I nod, he rolls his eyes. "Sit." He gestures to the chair opposite him. Standing up, he moves to the bar cart and pours another glass of the dark liquid he's drinking. I watch from my seat on the opposite chair as he moves across the living room, bringing me the liquor. "Tell me, why is my brother so fascinated by you?"

Why is his brother so fascinated with me? His question doesn't make sense. I'm not a pet, I'm a prisoner. I wonder what Nic told his brother when he announced my presence to him? He clearly knows I tried to kill him, but does he know about our deal?

"I don't know," I answer. "I think he's teaching me a lesson for, ya know, trying to kill him."

"No." Leo shakes his head. "If that was the case, he wouldn't have let you live." He brings his glass to his lips, taking another long sip of the dark liquid.

I watch him under the dim living room light, mulling over his words. He's right. Something I've known since Nic offered me the deal. He wants me for some reason, whether it's just to make me a toy for his amusement or to use me in some scheme. He has a reason for having me here. If he didn't, there's no reason why wouldn't have killed me.

"Why do you say that?"

"My brother would only let a woman in his home if he had a use for her, so you, *tesoro*, have some sort of use. *Bevi*." He raises his glass.

His words strike my core, confirming my fears. I don't know what Nic's use for me is. I didn't think my plan through well enough. When Nic asked me for a year, I was sleep deprived, driven delirious, desperate for my revenge I hold so dear. I said yes too quickly to fully recognize what the consequences would be. I've thought of them, sure, but hearing Leo confirm it is sending a panic through my veins.

I swallow a large sip of the alcohol, wanting to halt my overthinking and numb my feelings. It burns its way down my throat, and I try to swallow the cough that threatens to reveal my lack of sophistication.

Leo leans back in the large chair, kicking one leg over his other. "So why'd you shoot him?" he asks, his accent is even more addicting with the alcohol in my system. Something about the melodic sound of his voice has me hooked.

"Revenge," I whisper, my voice betraying me. My defenses have dropped in Leo's presence. I feel less on guard, more vulnerable.

I take another drink, chasing away the vulnerability.

"What'd he do?" Leo's eyes meet mine with curiosity.

"He killed my father."

Leo pauses, his eyes flicking to the corner of the room while he pulls another sip from the crystal glass. "When?"

"No," I mutter, shaking my head. "I mean, Paulie, your father, ordered the hit on my father. I wanted to kill Nic to make things even." Nic would have been a teenager when my father was killed, and I know he didn't pull the trigger himself. But it eased the hate that had invaded my heart when I thought of him. He was fed from a silver spoon, having been raised in a home with two parents and more money than he could ever spend.

I was an orphan because of the Colombo family.

I blamed them all.

All except the man in front of me.

The bastard child.

I don't know why I'm telling him this, why I'm exposing myself to this man. But something about him isn't like Nic. I'm not sure if I should trust him, but a part of me isn't scared of him. Maybe it's the alcohol in my system.

Or maybe I see someone familiar, someone trapped in a life that isn't meant for them.

"My father has one piece of good advice, and one piece only," Leo says, sitting up in his chair." He used to say, '*son, if you're going to fire a gun, you better make damn sure you kill 'em. If you don't kill 'em, you better hope they kill you.*'" His accent changes when he quotes his father, shifting into more of a New York dialect.

"He didn't kill me," I say, the words barely above a whisper.

"No," Leo confirms. "He didn't."

Nic will surely have me wishing for death before the year's over if I don't find a way out of this mess. I have no doubt.

With the air hanging heavily between us, we finish our drinks in contemplative silence.

And when I climb back into bed after we exchange a soft-spoken "goodnight," I don't fall asleep until the sun rises. Because instead of Leo's soothing voice replaying in my mind, I only hear him mimicking his father.

If you don't kill 'em, you better hope they kill you.



VAL

“**R**ise and shine, sleeping beauty.” Nic’s voice booms through my room as I jolt awake, my head still fuzzy from the whiskey and lack of rest.

I blink my eyes open, looking up to find Nic fully dressed at the end of my bed. He has a smirk lingering on his lips as he hovers over me, dressed impeccably in a full suit again, sleek black with a crisp white shirt.

My father wore suits all the time when I was a kid. I would watch from the balcony as he roamed the casino floor dressed to perfection. He had a certain way about him. He would stop to talk to anyone and everyone, making easy conversation and making people feel welcome. Everyone loved him.

Not me. I was avoided at all costs by my peers, and honestly, it didn’t bother me. I would much prefer to be inside my head, plotting my revenge rather than talking to people in the real world. My mind had become my safe space, and the only person to drag me out of it was Dom.

I slowly bring myself to a sitting position, watching Nic’s eyes as they roam my body in the silk pajama set he bought me.

“Why?” I ask, wiping the sleep from my eyes.

“We have plans today.” The look on his face frightens me now. This is the problem with the deal he offered me; I have no idea what I have to do to uphold it. And it seems like it’s starting today.

“What are they?”

“Get dressed, Val.” He smiles. “You’ll see.”

I come down the steps twenty minutes later, dressed in another pair of skinny jeans with a black top. Nic is waiting at the bottom of the staircase, that smile still plastered to his face, with Leo standing slightly behind him.

My heart stutters at the sight of his brother in the daytime. It’s the first time I’ve seen the two of them together, and I don’t know what I expect, but I’m surprised when Leo turns his head, avoiding my gaze.

He must not want Nic to know about our nightly chats.

“That’s right.” Nic gestures between Leo and me. “I haven’t introduced you to my brother. Little wolf, this is Leo.”

Leo nods at me wordlessly.

“Don’t worry ’bout him.” Nic laughs. “He doesn’t talk much.”

The way Nic portrays his brother is different from the one I met the last two nights. I nod, making a mental note to ask Leo the next time we’re alone. If I have that opportunity again.

I shouldn’t be looking forward to more time with him, but I can’t seem to help it. Even after the mood shift last night, the tension of what’s to come surrounding us, I still felt at ease just being in his presence. I want more of that feeling.

“Do I get shoes for this trip?”

“Have you been a good girl?” he retorts.

I bristle at his words. *Appease him, Val.*

Being sweet is panning out to be more frustrating than I expected.

“I’m not walking outside barefoot.” I try my best not to sound like a child throwing a fit.

“You’ll do whatever I say.” Nic’s eyes glimmer. I think he likes when I don’t listen; it means he gets to push back.

We stand face to face at the bottom of the steps, a staring contest taking place between the two of us. Leo doesn’t say a

word, just stands behind his brother with his hands stuffed in his pockets, as if this whole ordeal is nothing more than an annoyance.

“You get flip-flops.” Nic finally breaks the silence, snatching a rubber pair of sandals from Robert, the guard who drove me here days ago. He extends the black support-less shoes to me.

I sigh, but logically, I know it’s better than nothing. He doesn’t want me to run, that much is clear. I slip my feet into the uncomfortable things. “Why spend so much on clothing for me only to skimp out on the footwear?”

Nic laughs as if I told the funniest joke in the world. “You’d look good in a garbage bag, little wolf.” He chuckles, turning toward the door.

“Is that a compliment?” I gasp, feigning shock to bypass how that comment really made me feel. I don’t need his praise... and I definitely don’t desire more of it. “Did Nic Colombo just compliment his captive?”

He spins around, facing me again as I walk face first into his chest. “I don’t have to compliment you to make you compliant, baby,” he whispers, his minty breath and clean, masculine cologne assaulting my senses and making me dizzy. “I already have you.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to argue that he doesn’t, but how can I? He’s right; I’ve promised a year of my life to him. So I decide to seal my lips shut and nod instead. He seems to like my response, placing a hand on the small of my back and leading me outside to a waiting Mercedes G-wagon. Opening the door, he gestures for me to get in the back seat before he and Leo take the front seats. Robert gets into a black Escalade with one of the other giant goons who follows Nic around and pulls out behind us.

It’s a silent ride, and no one tells me where we’re going, but I’m content just to be able to look out the windows this time and not have a sack over my head.

Everything changes once we arrive at our destination, though. Nic opens my door, meeting me with a look that is downright terrifying.

He seems far too excited for whatever experience he's about to force on me. My stomach is churning, awaiting his next words.

“Are you ready for your first lesson?” he asks.

This is what you wanted. It is. He offered to teach me, and I agreed.

“What is it?”

“You’ll see.”

He leads me from the car into the warehouse, my heart beating faster with every daunting step. I think we’re in the city, but I can’t be sure of where exactly. Tugging on my hand, he takes me into the brick building. The interior is dark, and there’s a stench that has me ready to throw up as soon as we cross the threshold. Luckily, I didn’t eat this morning.

The lights flicker awake once Leo hits the switch, illuminating the source of the pungent smell.

In the center of the warehouse, tied to a chair sitting on the concrete floor, is a naked man. Blood oozes from the many lacerations that cover his body.

I heave, this time bending at the waist and coughing violently. I’ve never seen something so violent outside of a TV screen, and the smell permeates my nose, making it impossible to escape.

“Good thing we skipped breakfast, huh?” Nic laughs.

“What is this?” My voice is rough as I ask the question.

“Your lesson, baby.” His voice oozes a sickening joy, his dark eyes glued to my face. “You’re going to kill him.”

Something twists inside me. It feels like someone reached into my abdomen and squeezed my guts. My lungs constrict, my chest aches.

This is not what I wanted.

“I-I-“

Nic comes over to me, gripping his hands onto my shoulders and straightening me to look at the man in question. “You were ready to kill me two weeks ago,” he sneers, “so kill him.” He pushes me forward, and I stumble, coming too close to the raw and bloody man.

The frail man slowly opens his eyes, shining blue orbs up at me that beg for sympathy. There’s a long cut that takes up most of his right thigh and down to his calf, the leg swollen and looking badly infected. His naked chest is covered in dark red and purple bruises and one of his eyes is swollen shut. His shoulders are dark and discolored, as if they were stretched to the absolute max several times before they tied his hands behind his back.

My surroundings melt away, the warehouse becomes a black orb, and all my focus is on the dying man in front of me and the living one behind me. Somewhere in the back, I know Leo is there, but right now, his brother is the only one in my mind.

“What did you do to him?” Nerves are closing my throat, my question coming out hoarse and strained.

“Just got him ready for you,” Nic tells me simply.

“Why?” I fight the tears that well in my eyes. I don’t know this man. Don’t know his crimes or why he is here. I can’t kill him. It’s different from Nic. I could kill Nic because his family ruined my life. But a stranger?

I’m not a bad person.

Or...at least not that kind of bad.

“It doesn’t matter, Val. You want revenge, so the first thing you need to do is learn how to kill a man. So, kill him.”

A single tear runs down my cheek, causing Nic to hiss when he sees it. “Don’t fucking cry. Don’t tell me you’re this weak. I thought you wanted revenge.” He taunts me, using my failure against me. And maybe he’s right too. I did try to kill him after all, pointed a gun at his face and pulled the trigger. That makes me a killer, right? No better than him.

“I do.” Another tear falls as the shaky declaration leaves my lips.

“Then *kill him*.” Nic pushes me again, grabbing me by the shoulders and forcing me to the man until I can’t get any closer. At this distance, the sight and smell of him has me wanting to die alongside him.

Everything in me is screaming *no*. I can’t do this.

“What did he do?” I ask again.

“It doesn’t matter. Kill him.”

The tears keep coming now, despite the constant thoughts running through my head telling me to stop being so damn weak. But the smell and the pressure are getting to me.

“How?” I whisper.

“Your choice, baby. Do you want a knife or a hammer?”

I heave again at hearing the question. I can’t do it. I can’t do it. Kill a man with my hands? With a knife or a hammer?

“Jesus, Val,” Nic hisses. “I thought you wanted this? I thought you wanted revenge? You said we ruined your life, right? Prove it. Prove to me how much you want this.”

He places a hammer in my hand, the wooden handle rough against my skin.

“Do it,” he repeats.

My heart is pulsing, my head racing.

I can’t.

I can’t.

I can’t.

Suddenly, I lose my grip on the hammer, and it clatters to the floor. The man exhales in relief, but Nic growls, seething with anger.

“Dumb bitch,” he grunts, shoving his hands against me and causing me to fall backward, my ass hitting the hard cement.

He sweeps the hammer up from the ground, swinging his arm back and bringing it down on the man. Again, and again. Blood sprays from his head as the bone caves in. The red liquid hits my face, and I heave again, trying to cover myself from the brutal killing.

“Don’t hide,” Nic yells at me. “Watch, Valerie, fucking watch.”

I peel my eyes open, seeing the dent in the man’s head, his face transformed by gore, as Nic hits him over and over. He can’t possibly be alive, right?

I don’t know I’m wailing until I feel Leo’s arms around me, lifting me into his grasp. His body is warm against mine and he tugs me closer, holding me while he whispers soothing words.

“Shh, it’s okay,” he says as he takes me back into the car. He sits in the back seat with me, rocking me slowly as Nic drives us back to the house.

When we arrive, Nic pulls me from Leo’s arms, subjecting me to a moment of tug of war between the two brothers. With a searing look from his brother, Leo begrudgingly lets me go. Nic drags me up the ornate stairs, my body trembling and nerves running wild. But I don’t dare say a word; not that I even could, as I’m so worked up. He walks through my room and to my attached bathroom, dropping me into the shower stall and turning on a spray of cold water.

His parting insult before leaving me is nothing but the truth. “*Pathetic.*”



Seeing her in a heap at my brother's feet while he bludgeons his prisoner sends a sickening pain through my stomach.

What has she gotten herself into?

He's trying to teach her, train her. But I know as well as anyone how cruel his lessons can be. She was naïve to get herself wrapped up in this life, but I understand it now.

She's Tony Soressi's daughter after all, and he would have never sat by idly if someone close to him was murdered, so why would any of us expect her to do the same? She was just a child back then. An innocent.

She's still innocent.

I just don't know what deal she made that landed her here, but I can't stand to watch her cry anymore.

"Enough," I try to say, but my brother doesn't hear me, or he doesn't listen. He's still hammering the guy's head in—what's left of it, that is.

Valerie sobs as the splashes of blood hit her, and before I know what I'm doing, I'm moving, pulling her into my arms and holding her tight. "Shh," I say. "It's okay." The words flow from my lips like sweet lies.

And they are lies, because nothing is going to be okay for her from this point on.

I don't know what my brother has planned for her, but knowing him, it won't be good.

She curls into me, her tears soaking through my shirt as she clings to the fabric.

When I stand up with her in my arms, Nic is staring at me, his dark eyes shooting daggers. "Careful, brother," he says so low I almost don't hear it. "Don't fall for the prisoner."

It's an ominous warning, one I ignore as I take her to the car, letting her cry while she shakes in my arms and Nic drives us back to the house.

He spews veiled threats and menacing words while I rock her, covering her ears the best I can. She curls into my hold, seemingly trusting me. And even though she shouldn't, she can.

Someone has to protect her.

VAL

Leo finds me fully clothed, curled into a ball under the cold spray of the shower. “Val.” His voice instantly warms me as he reaches into the shower, rubbing his hand over my back. “*Tesoro.*”

I squeeze my eyes shut, refusing to look up at him. It feels like my chest has caved in, my heart sunken into the cavity, the whole thing throbbing in pain. I can feel the weakness in my bones.

My father would be ashamed.

Twice now I have failed.

Twice now I haven’t been able to kill a man.

Femme fatale is no longer a fitting alter ego to embrace; there’s not a thing about me that’s fatal. Air no longer feels substantial. I can’t get enough, can’t soak in the oxygen. And part of me doesn’t care. Part of me wants to crawl into the tub and plug the drain, fill it to the brim before sinking under the clear water and letting my consciousness float away.

“Baby,” he says softly as he twists the shower knob, stopping the spray from its attack on my body. “You’re gonna freeze.”

It’s not until he says those words that I realize how cold I am. I’m shaking as Leo grips under my armpits and pulls me out of the shower. My legs are wobbly as he holds me up. “I need to get you out of these.”

I don't want to know what he sees. Probably a sad shell of a girl in dripping wet clothing. One finger comes forward, swiping across my cheek, and when he pulls back, I see the glimmer of red. It elicits another sob ripping from deep within me as the image of the man's cracked skull flashes through my mind.

There's no judgment in his eyes as he stands in front of me, his body inches from mine. "I'm gonna turn on the tub. Can you stand on your own?" he asks, and I nod. It's the most I can manage at the moment. I try to force some strength into my legs so Leo can turn on the faucet that fills the claw-foot tub.

"Everyone struggles the first time," he says, breaking the growing silence. He grabs a washcloth from the vanity and wets it under the sink. With gentle precision, he wipes the rag over my cheek, cleaning the blood and brains from my skin.

"I'm going to undress you now," he says, searching my eyes, and I give him another shaky nod. But I don't look at him, especially not when his fingers find the hem of my shirt.

Noticing my avoidant gaze, he tries to tilt my head back farther to look at him. "Look at me," he demands, his voice taking on a stern edge.

Slowly, I lift my eyes.

"Do you trust me?" he asks.

I want to trust Leo, far more than I trust Nic. But there's fear radiating throughout my body, making itself at home in my soul. I don't know these two men, and in less than forty-eight hours of being in this house, I'm supposed to hand over my unwavering loyalty?

I'm not there yet.

I open my mouth to speak, but stop myself.

"It's okay," he says, dropping his hold on me. "You have a war happening in here." He taps on my skull. "Tonight was a lesson, and what it means is entirely up to you."

I inhale a sharp breath as Leo's fingers graze across my stomach under the shirt. "I'm gonna take this off, Val. You'll feel better once you're clean," he says, searching my face. "I'm not gonna hurt you."

Nodding again is all the permission I give him, and he doesn't wait for more before he pulls the wet shirt over my head, discarding it on the bathroom tile. Next, he finds the button to my jeans, unlatching it and dragging the denim down my legs. He leaves me in wet panties and a lace bra with goosebumps coating my chest before he lifts me up and sets me gently in the tub.

It feels strange to be half naked in front of this man in a way that's so far from being sexual. He's taking care of me, running a bath for me. The last person who filled a tub with water and added bubbles was my father...since him, no one's cared for me in this way.

It has my heart thrumming with anticipation. I don't even know how to handle the action. For so long now I've looked out for myself, constantly on edge and waiting for the other shoe to drop. It was a protection mechanism, one I desperately needed in order to survive.

And now I'm not sure if I should scold him for babying me or sink back into the large tub and relax for the first time in years.

Leo grabs a fresh washcloth, squeezing a lavender-scented soap onto it. When he comes toward me, he's gentle, wiping the cloth over my shoulder. I feel my muscles loosen in the hot water, my entire body sinking in farther as Leo continues to clean me in silence.

Next, he moves onto my hair, wetting the dark locks before soaping them up with a coconut-scented shampoo. His fingers massage my scalp, and I can't help but to close my eyes and release my breath, melting into his touch.

This is wrong, I think. I shouldn't be enjoying his touch, shouldn't be leaning into him as he continues to take care of me.

He asked me to trust him.

Trust is something I haven't had much of since I was a kid. Why should I trust or believe anyone when all they ever do is abandon me?

But Leo? He's...*different*. Kind. Worthy of my trust. It's something I feel instead of know.

Maybe I can let him in and maybe, just maybe, he won't betray me like every other man in my life.

"What was the deal you made?" he questions after working in silence for so long.

His dark eyes are on me, his hands still as he watches me. He doesn't look disapproving, but something in his eyes seems concerned. As if he's understanding I made a deal with the devil and is worried I got the worst possible terms.

"To kill your father."

"*Cazzo*," Leo hisses, dropping his head. That reaction is all I need to understand he doesn't approve.

"What did he tell you I was here for?"

Leo shakes his head, taking a moment before he finally looks up and answers me. "Not that," he murmurs.

He goes back to washing my hair, not expanding on his answer. I wonder what Nic told him. I wonder what Nic even wants from me, truly.

"Do you..." I start to break the silence, but my question trails off as I think better of it.

"What, *tesoro*? You can ask me?" Leo pauses to look at me, his eyes meeting mine.

The question sits on the tip of my tongue, the one thing I don't actually know. "Do you know who killed my father?" I hate the way my voice sounds when I ask the question. I tug my bottom lip between my teeth in a futile attempt to stop it from quivering.

Leo watches me for a long moment, and I try to avoid his gaze. I've been blaming Paulie for my father's death for as

long as I can remember, and rightfully so, as he is the one who ordered the hit. But I also know it wasn't Paulie who beat him. It wasn't Paulie who dug his shallow grave. Someone else killed my father, and I want to know who.

It feels wrong to ask this question after I already tried to exact revenge. But the internet and old newspapers couldn't answer me.

"I do," he tells me, breaking his eye contact and going back to massaging the conditioner into the ends of my hair.

"Can you—"

"No." He uses his conditioner coated fingers to grab my chin, turning my head to face his. "It won't magically solve your problems."

I shake my head, shaking his fingers loose. "I need to know."

"Why?" he asks, his voice low, filled with something I can't quite place.

How do you explain the need for vengeance to someone who doesn't get it? It's like an ache in my heart, or my entire body, really. Nothing is right. Nothing can be right until I fix it. "I just do," I tell him, my voice louder than I intend. "Someone took him from me, and I need to know. I need to..."

"Kill them?" he fills in for me.

"Yeah." I can already feel the tears welling in my eyes, the memories of earlier flashing through my mind again. I need to kill them, I know that. But the question is, am I strong enough?

"You don't have to, Val. You can end this all right now and just move on with your life."

"No." I shake my head. "I can't."

"Why?" Leo asks. "Because he won't let you?" The way he says *he*, meaning his brother, in a deeper tone, screams his resentment toward Nic. Or at least that's what it sounds like to my ears.

“He won’t. But I don’t want to give up,” I say, not letting my voice crack. “I can do this.”

“*Cazzo*,” Leo groans, dropping the washcloth into the tub. “Fine, *tesoro*.” He grabs my chin, tilting my head until I’m looking into his eyes. “But I’ll teach you. I was serious the other night. I’ll teach you everything he doesn’t. Everything he can’t.”

His eyes are dark as he makes the promise, staring into mine with deep intent. I believe Leo. He wants to help me, and as far as I can tell, his help doesn’t come with strings attached like his brother’s.

I nod, and he drops my chin, leaning back on his heels. “Come on,” he says, standing and going to the linen closet to get a towel.

With Leo’s offer, I feel stronger as I stand from the tub. Today was a blip, a weak moment. But I can do this. I can get my revenge. I can make the man who pulled the trigger, and the man who ordered the hit, bleed. And then, I can dance in their blood.

I can do this.

And the next time Nic asks me to kill someone, I will.

Because I, Valerie Soressi, am not weak.

VAL

There's a set of wooden doors separating me from the man that holds all the cards. I pace the hallway, the nail of my pointer finger tucked between my teeth, chewing it down to the quick.

“He can smell fear, you know.” It's Leo's charming accent that pulls me from my spiraling thoughts.

Leo's dressed in all black—jeans, t-shirt, bomber jacket. He looks too good as he leans against the wall and grins at me. I haven't seen him since yesterday morning when he bathed me and dressed me in clean clothes. After he left, I spent the rest of my day locked in my room, not that the lock was needed. Neither of them came to bother me. I was thankful for the reprieve. If I had to talk to Nic, I might have burst into tears again.

One day, though, that was all I gave myself to mourn whoever I was before I witnessed *that*. Now, I have to move on. Get stronger. I have to face Nic's lessons head on, or I'm never going to make it through a year under his rule.

But I don't want to go into that office either. When I walk through those doors, I know there will only be more vicious insults hurled in my direction. He's going to try to hurt me, belittle me for my inability to kill a man. My stomach still rolls at the thought of it, the images of the screaming man flashing through my mind, the coppery scent of his blood lingering in my nostrils.

I stop myself from heaving in the hallway, my hand clutching my stomach as my breakfast threatens to expel itself.

“Val...” Leo comes closer, pressing a comforting hand to my back. “Talk to me.”

My enemy’s brother looks genuinely concerned when I lift my gaze to meet his. There’s a panic rising in my chest, a feeling I’ve been pushing down since I was a kid. A therapist once told me that anxiety is the mind’s way of trying to protect me. I thought she was telling me that meant it was okay to shift into flight mode and run away from all my problems. But I was my father’s daughter, and he had taught me to stand up for myself. So I did. I took no shit, and in turn, people stayed away from me.

But Nic isn’t a thirteen-year-old girl on the playground. I can’t bruise his cheek to assert my dominance. And unlike the girls from my Jersey school, he has a sick hold over me.

“Distract me,” I whisper through gritted teeth. “What was he like as a kid?” I need to pull myself together.

Leo shrugs, his palm still moving in a circular motion over my back. “I don’t know. I didn’t know him back then.”

“But, he’s your—”

“Brother, yeah, I know,” Leo finishes for me. “Different mamma, remember?”

I don’t understand, so he never met Leo until...

“We were fifteen,” he tells me, probably reading the confusion on my face. “When my mamma died, I moved in with him and Paulie.”

Before I can ask another question, one of the thousand spinning through my mind, the door swings open.

“Are you going to wait out here all day, Valerie?” Nic’s eyes are on his brother as he speaks to me. They share an unnerving look, but Leo doesn’t move. He holds Nic’s gaze for a long moment before I break the silence.

“No,” I say, swallowing the lump in my throat.

He waves his hand in a dramatic gesture, guiding me into his office. I distinctly remember being called into the principal's as a child, a stern look on the man's face as he pulled out my file and added page after page. I was a constant disappointment to the man.

And still, I never felt this kind of fear walking into his office. Nothing compares to the thrumming of my heart as I take a seat, waiting for Nic to sit down across from me.

I give Leo one last look before I enter the lion's den. His eyes are still fixed on his brother, and once I'm through the threshold, Nic closes the door behind me. No words are exchanged between the two, just an intense look I can't quite place.

The room is beautiful, decorated with a modern minimalism that matches the rest of the house. He has a large oak desk in the middle of the room, the wall behind him covered with floor-to-ceiling bookcases housing rows and rows of hardbacks. I have the inch to run my fingers along the spines.

"Do you read?" Nic asks, watching me as I stare at the color coordinated books.

"Yes." My answer comes out meeker than I'd like. Something about this man has me acting like a scared little girl.

"What kinds of books?" he asks with a raised brow.

Anything. I'll devour any book I can get my hands on, anything that breaks me out of the prison of my mind and makes me forget for a moment. "Thrillers," I say. "Fantasy. I'm not picky." What I don't mention is the paperback romance novels I read in the back of the public library, hiding the half-naked men on the covers by sticking them in my textbooks. Romance has always been my favorite to lose myself in, imagining someone loving me the way those men did. Imagining I was worth something, worth being loved.

I squeeze my legs shut, instead focusing on Nic as his eyes roam over me. He's not in a full suit today, his jacket

abandoned. He's wearing gray slacks with a black button-down, the sleeves rolled to his elbows and the top few buttons left undone. It's more attractive than it should be.

"Do you normally work from home?" I ask, changing the subject.

"Sometimes. Today, though, I stayed home to watch over you."

I nod, unsure of what to say. Nic glances away, sliding open one of his drawers before slamming a pair of sneakers and my phone on the surface of his desk. Instantly, I reach for them. My fingers graze over the glass screen of the iPhone, my mind itching to know how Dom's doing. Nic's hand comes down on mine, pinning it in place on the desk.

"Maybe I didn't make myself clear," he says, speaking slowly. "You listen, you get rewarded. Everything you have here is thanks to me. Those clothes"—he gestures to my simple white t-shirt paired with skinny jeans—"your room, the food you eat. Everything you have is because I choose to give it to you. So when I say jump, you say how high. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," I breathe. My father yelled as a child, scolded me, but it wasn't like this. Uncle Ricky screamed relentlessly, but they were veiled threats, backed by nothing. He didn't spark any fear in me.

But Nic? I tried to kill him. There's no reason I should be alive right now. And I failed his first task for me. Fighting doesn't seem like the right move now, and I can't flee, as that would only make him angrier. So I do the thing he wants, I comply.

Nic lets go of my hand, but he brings both of his to the desk, leaning over so he's closer to me, breathing the same air.

"So, Val..." His voice is thick, filled with condescension. "These two items are your next rewards, but I will warn you, earning them just got harder."

"I understand."

His dark eyes scrutinize me as he settles back into his chair. “Tell me why. Tell me why you couldn’t do it.”

The beating in my chest picks up its speed. My thoughts are all I have here, the only things that are mine and no one else’s. He wants more than my loyalty; he wants inside my head, inside my soul. I swallow, trying to ease the tension that fills me.

“Can we make a trade?” This question makes him laugh.

“For what?”

“I’ll answer your questions, and you give me that.” My eyes dart to the phone covered in its black silicone case.

“No,” he says. “But how about I give you the sandals and allow you some time outside this afternoon?”

“Deal,” I respond quickly. The idea of the outdoors is too alluring to pass up. I’m itching to breathe in some fresh air and replace the smell of death that still infiltrates my nostrils. It’s been haunting me since yesterday, inescapable.

“Spill it,” he instructs.

“I was...scared.” The word is hard to admit. I think I would need a therapist to explain why, one who’s not the man I tried to kill. The one who’s now forcing me to kill others and taunting me when I can’t.

He knows I’m not strong enough to kill anyone. It should be evident by the fact that he’s still alive.

“You wanted to kill me not so long ago. Are you saying you weren’t ready, little wolf?”

“It’s not the same,” I spit back. “I had a reason to kill you, something driving me. I didn’t know that man.”

He ponders this, running his finger over his jawline while he thinks. “Would it help if I told you that he was a bad person?”

“What did he do?” I ask.

“Answer me first. Do you need him to be bad in order for you to kill him? Are you a vigilante, Valerie?”

“I don’t know,” I tell him honestly, exhaling heavily. “I’ve never... I’ve never tried to kill anyone but you.”

“That’s obvious.” He laughs, and I narrow my eyes.

“Was he...” I trail off, “a bad person?”

Nic doesn’t answer me at first. Instead, he takes a long sip from his coffee mug while he watches me. “No, Valerie, he was just a man who owed me money.”

A lump forms in my throat, and I can feel my heart racing again. That’s what he does to a man who owes him money? Beats him to death with a hammer?

I feel the sickness rising in my gut again, nausea taking over. “That’s...”

“Business.”

It’s not the word I was going to use, though. I would have said brutal or cruel. But Nic thinks he’s just a businessman.

“Next time,” Nic adds, a smooth yet threatening edge to his tone, “if you don’t kill him, I’ll kill you. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I say as I sit straighter, willing myself to be calm, to not show fear.

“Good girl.” He grins. “Now leave. I’ll take you outside later.”

I find myself standing and retreating from his office like a puppy with its tail tucked between its legs.

VAL

Hour by hour, I search for freedom in Nic’s mansion. The action resurfaces memories from my teenage years, living with Kitty and Ricky. I would sneak down the creaky steps after Kitty cried herself to sleep and Ricky dozed off on the couch in an alcohol-fueled stupor. Finding my aunt’s purse on the kitchen table, I would search the bag for any cash, stealing only a few dollars at a time, nothing too noticeable. It was my squirrel fund, collected over years of petty thievery, and stored in a shoe box on the floor of my closet. Enough to ensure that when I was kicked to the curb at eighteen that I could afford a bed at the hostel and a McDonald’s cheeseburger.

But Nic’s house is more regulated than Kitty’s. He doesn’t keep an unattended purse on the kitchen table. Instead, he has locked doors and clutter-free spaces. I swipe my finger across the grand dining room table, pulling it away to find not a speck of dust. What does a single person even do with this much space anyway?

When I finally settle, it’s in front of the glass doors that look out onto the glimmering pool, sitting cross-legged like a child as I watch the blue water.

“What are you thinking about, little wolf? Not plotting my death again, are you?” Nic releases a deep chuckle as he sneaks up behind me. He plants each of his hands on my shoulders, gripping onto my flesh, kneading the muscles.

If it were Leo, I’d feel it was an intimate gesture, but from Nic, it sends a chill down my spine. I only see it as a sign of

dominance, another way of demonstrating his control over me. But even so, I don't pull away. My body doesn't resist his touches like it should.

"No," I tell him softly. "No plotting tonight, just... watching the water."

"Hmm," he drawls, releasing my shoulders. "Do you want to swim?" His deep tenor radiates through my body as his question strikes me.

"Really?" I don't let the excitement well inside me, refusing to fully believe any act of kindness comes without a price.

Even if he does let me outside, lets me swim in his pool and live in his filthy rich mansion, does that suddenly make him a better person? No, no, it doesn't.

I can feel his presence lowering behind me as he brings his mouth closer to my ear. "Yes," he whispers, making every hair on my body stand at attention. "You should have a swimsuit upstairs. Go change."

When I spin around to face him, he's picking up a pair of rubber flip-flops from the couch, extending them to me. They're the same ones he gave me the other day and then took from my feet before letting me back in the house. Only, the blood they were covered in has been cleaned. "Here," he says. "I believe I promised you these."

I take them tentatively. They're not nice shoes by any means, nothing like the closet of clothing that sits in my new bedroom, but still, the action stirs something inside of me. We're making progress, bringing me closer to something akin to freedom. Just holding the shoes makes me feel less trapped, less caged. I run my hands over the black rubber. "Thank you."

"Go change," he tells me with a curt nod.

I find more than one bathing suit in my new wardrobe; three, to be precise, each one of them small, strappy things that will be entirely too revealing. I pick the most modest of the trio, a black bikini that lifts my tits and covers most of my

butt. In a weak attempt at covering myself more, I grab the loosest-fitting t-shirt from my drawer and tug it over my head, pairing it with my flip-flops.

If I added a pair of ripped cutoffs, it would rival the outfits I wore to the Jersey Shore in high school, with Dom trailing behind me in her own short shorts and t-shirt, twisted with a knot at the bottom to expose her stomach. Summers in Jersey were a free for all. We spent as much time away from Ricky and Kitty as we possibly could, which meant we lived at the beach. We were young and pretty and dumb. If Ricky and Kitty noticed our absence, they didn't care enough to call us on it.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, Nic is waiting for me in a pair of black board shorts. For the first time since meeting him, I see his body outside of a suit. He looks different without the black, tailored armor I'm used to seeing him in. My eyes are immediately drawn to his broad, muscled chest, covered with a light dusting of dark hair. He has a well-defined six-pack, probably developed by hours spent working out, that trails down to a deep V. My eyes lower to where that V leads, before I shake any misguided thoughts from my mind.

"Enjoying the view, little wolf?" My gaze snaps back up, finding an amused grin spread across his cheeks. His body reminds me of his brother's, but his personality confirms they're completely different people. One kind, and one pure asshole. "It's okay," he tells me with a laugh. "If you take off that shirt, I can appreciate *my* view as well." His eyes fall to the swell of my cleavage, covered by the dark material of the shirt.

I swallow thickly before moving toward him. "I think I'll pass," I say, my expression unaffected, even if I'm anything but.

The laugh that leaves him grows in volume, echoing off the high ceiling. "Ahh, there's that fight again." He opens the doors to the backyard, and I waste no time leaving the house, stepping out into the fresh air.

It doesn't smell like New York City out here; the air feels cleaner and there's less noise. A gentle whirr of the occasional car instead of the constant buzzing and honking that fill the city. The sun is just beginning to set, casting an orange glow over the crystal blue water.

I walk toward the pool, appreciating every step. It's true what they say, that you don't appreciate what you have until it's gone. If Nic has taught me any lessons so far, it's that one. I soak in the enjoyment of everything around me; the hum of an air conditioner, the chirping of birds, the swish of the water as the wind whooshes over its surface. I breathe in the smell of the fresh-cut grass that I had spent a full hour at the window watching the landscaper work on earlier.

My feet itch to touch the grass, and I find myself ditching the flip-flops, abandoning them on the cement pathway, letting my toes walk through the lush green. Outside has always been my safe space, free from the trappings that come with living in somebody else's home. Even once I had my own apartment, I preferred to be outside as much as possible.

The air is easier to breathe out here.

I move toward the pool next, wanting to dip my toes into the clear blue water I've been staring at all day.

"It seems you're content in my house, little wolf."

"It's fine," I tell him, not looking his way as I feel the coolness of the water.

He laughs, a deep, throaty rumble. "Just fine? Wow, Val, so fucking kind to the man who's taking care of you." His fingers grip onto my shoulder, pulling with enough force to spin me around to face him.

The feeling of his touch on my skin has me recoiling from him for the first time. This isn't how I want someone to take care of me. All I can think about is Leo and how he treated me yesterday in comparison. My reaction only makes him angrier, his lips twisting into a thin line.

"I didn't ask you to take care of me," I bite out, pushing salt into the open wound. Clearly, my lack of thanks

aggravates him. I know I should appease him, considering what happens to the people who don't. I should make him happy so he doesn't slit my throat while I sleep, but being in Nic Colombo's presence grates on my nerves and tests my limits.

His lip ticks, pulling up into a lopsided grin. "Oh, little wolf, look around. Everything you have is because of *me*. Your happiness, your pain." He pauses, letting his fingers dust over my shoulder, caressing the exposed skin where my t-shirt falls low. His touch is gentle as his fingers dance across my collarbone, making my body lean into him all on its own. "Your *pleasure*," he adds. "Everything you have is mine. I. Own. You."

His statement reverberates through me, causing my entire body to clench with a mix of fear and cruel arousal.

"Do you understand, little wolf?"

His expectant eyes tell me he's not letting me go until he gets a response, one I don't want to give him. When his fingers find my throat, squeezing as his hand wraps around it, it's clear just how serious he is. "Answer me, Val."

When I only nod, he shakes his head with disappointment. "Words, little wolf. I want to hear you say it. Tell me who owns you."

"*You*." I want to spit it out, cleanse myself of the poison that comes in the form of Nic. Instead, it's whispered, barely passing my lips as he hovers above me.

But he just smiles, pleased with himself. "*Good girl*," he breathes.



VAL

I spend another day alone in Nic's giant house. At least now I seem to be able to go outside. Or no one stops me, anyway. There's still always a guard nearby, and I spot multiple right now, surrounding the perimeter of the property. At least three, two on either side of the house and one near the forest. They don't talk to me. Mostly nod in acknowledgment and avoid my gaze.

Nic has been MIA today, and after last night's poolside chat, I'm content to be far away from him.

"What are you thinking about?" Leo's voice startles me.

I sit up in the oversized outdoor chair to get a better look at him as he slides the back door closed.

He's in all black. Again. It seems to be the only color in his wardrobe. Jeans, t-shirt, shoes. But today he ditched his bomber jacket, leaving his arms exposed. Running a hand through his dark hair, he moves to me, looking down at where I sit.

Seeing him sends a spark of relief through my body. I don't think I should feel calmed by his presence; I don't know him well enough. But then again, Leo has been kind to me, unlike his brother. Visions of him washing me while I cried in the bathtub flash through my mind. I was ashamed, only for a moment, of him seeing me like that. But his gentle touch and soothing words brought me back from the dark places of my mind. Gratitude fills my chest when I look at him now.

“Nothing,” I reply. Even though it’s a lie. I’ve been sitting in this chair for hours with nothing to distract me from overthinking. My thoughts have been wild and roaming. Everything from reliving my childhood, visions of blood and caved-in skulls, and then the occasional regret. Regret that I tried and failed to kill Nic and landed myself within his claws.

The worst part is when the thoughts stop. When I get sucked into the beauty I’m surrounded by. When I start to think I could enjoy this life he’s given me.

Those are the moments when I have to remind myself why I’m here.

I’m not a guest and this isn’t a retreat. He’s playing games with me, and if I let myself get distracted by the pretty things he’s given me, I’ll never get out.

“So you’re an expert meditator, then?” Leo questions with a lifted brow, teasing me for my non-answer.

“Something like that,” I smile, unwavering. I’m not about to tell him all the thoughts that just passed through my head. Even if I do trust him.

“You busy tonight?” he asks, a smile lingering at the corners of his mouth.

“Ha-ha.” I roll my eyes. “I’ll have you know, I have a packed calendar.” My heart flutters in my chest, a million butterflies flapping their wings when Leo laughs.

“Oh yeah?” He grins at my response, the back and forth coming naturally between us. “Tell me, what’s on the agenda?”

“Well, I have about an hour of sitting in silence left. And then I’ll go inside and eat dinner in silence. And then later, I’ll probably sit in my bedroom in, you guessed it, more silence.”

I smile cheekily, and Leo chuckles.

“Well, I’m not sure if you have time available in between, but I thought I could teach you something. Only if you can reorganize that busy night of yours.”

“Hmm, let me see...” I pretend to think for a moment, tapping my chin. “Good luck, looks like we just got an opening for...right now.” I pop up from my chair as Leo takes a step toward me, leaving us standing chest to chest, nearly inches apart.

The butterflies act up again, flapping their wings as my heart beats erratically. Leo looks down at me, his eyes warm, his lips parted just slightly. For a brief moment, I think about what it would be like if he leaned in and pressed his lips to mine, but then I shake the thought away. Not here. Not now.

“Lucky indeed,” he murmurs, and then he steps back, breaking the tension. “You should change,” he tells me. “You need athletic clothes. Do you have those?”

“Have you seen the closet your brother bought me?”

Leo looks at me skeptically. “No. He bought you clothes?”

“Yeah...” I trail off, confused by his surprise. What else does he not know? Do he and Nic not communicate at all? I have dozens of questions about his relationship with his brother, but I keep them to myself.

“Well, get changed then and meet me in the foyer.”

I waste no time in my room getting dressed, finding a pair of leggings in one of the dresser drawers and sports bras in another. I cover myself with a t-shirt before heading back downstairs.

“You look good.” Leo smiles when he sees me, until his eyes land on my bare feet with a frown. “Sneakers?”

“No shoes,” I tell him.

He averts his gaze, only for a brief moment, like he’s appalled by something, and then just as quickly, he’s back to neutral. “Well, I guess we’ll go barefoot today.”

Leo leads me through the house and down to the basement, one of the areas I haven’t explored. I’ve been reluctant to go down here after I convinced myself it was probably another dungeon. For all I know, there could have been more prisoners locked away.

I'm relieved when I see there's not. It's actually a finished space with a full gym.

"What are we doing down here?" I ask.

"Training." Leo gives me a lopsided grin. "I told you I would help you. First step, endurance. How's your cardio?"

I audibly groan at the word cardio, the sound making Leo smile. "Come on, *tesoro*." He gestures to a treadmill that faces a wall of mirrors, waiting for me to get on. "Start here."

"Not sure it's safe without shoes."

Leo snorts a laugh. "Probably true, but it doesn't look like you have those."

"Guess we should just skip cardio then." I shrug. I'm more ready to shoot a gun than spend any time running.

Leo moves to me quicker than I expect, bringing his body to mine until there's only an inch of space between us, and my breath catches in my throat. "We could," he says, voice low, leaning down so his breath hits the crook of my neck. "But I promised I would teach you, *tesoro*. I thought this is what you wanted, no?"

My heart starts to speed up, the organ racing like I've already done miles on the treadmill. It responds to Leo's closeness on its own accord, refusing to slow down even as I mentally tell myself to chill.

"I do," I breathe out. "But what does cardio have to do with revenge?"

"You're asking the wrong questions," he tells me, and then he takes a step back and points at the treadmill. "Get started and I'll tell you."

Begrudgingly, I step onto the contraption, watching as Leo turns it on and ups the speed until I'm walking at a brisk pace.

"We'll start here," he says, his eyes focused on mine while I try to walk at the quick pace. "If you want to be a killer, Val, you should know it takes more than being able to pull the trigger."

When I scoff, he gives me a pointed look. “Despite whatever my brother is trying to teach you, you’ve already proven you have the guts, but it takes more than that.”

“And walking on the treadmill is what I need?” I question sarcastically.

“No, but it’s a starting point. You need endurance. You need to be able to get out quickly if things go wrong. Do you think you could outrun him?” By *him*, he means his brother. I tug my bottom lip between my teeth. I want to say yes, but logically, I know I’m in horrible shape.

“No.”

“You need to have a plan.” Leo taps his pointer finger to my head. “And a backup plan. You need to be able to escape.”

I don’t need him to tell me. It was clear as day that I didn’t have a backup plan when I tried to kill Nic. My plan was as simple as could be—point and shoot. But what Leo’s suggesting is deeper than that. More calculated and organized.

“Can I ask you something?” I say, trying to keep my breath regulated so as to not show how out of shape I truly am.

“I can’t promise I’ll answer.”

That kind of response makes me want to prod. But I temper myself, keeping to my original question.

“How many people have you killed?”

Leo hisses out a breath, turning his face so he’s not looking at me. I watch in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors as he scrubs a hand over his jaw.

“You don’t really want to know the answer to that.”

“I really do.”

Leo eyes me skeptically, searching my face for hesitation. There is none. I’m determined to know.

“What? Just give me a ballpark—” I wave my hand, trying to lighten him up, but the look on his face isn’t playful.

“I know the number.”

“Then tell me.”

I watch his eyes darken, something flashing across them, filling them with a sadness I recognize. And then it's gone, and his fingers are hitting the buttons on the treadmill, upping the speed until I'm jogging.

“Leo,” I whine, already tired from being on this thing, and it's barely been ten minutes.

“Focus on your breathing,” he instructs.

I roll my eyes, frustrated with his evasiveness. “Can't you just give me a straight answer for once?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Why are you so insistent?” He narrows his eyes at me, but there's a small smirk playing on his lips.

“I just want to know,” I pant out between my feet hitting the treadmill.

He sighs, looking down briefly before he faces me again. “Sixty-seven.”

Jesus.

“That seems...exact.”

“It is.”

“You keep count?”

Leo hits the stop on the treadmill, pausing the machine and leaning over it so he's close to my face. “Life is precious, Val. I remember every name of every person I've taken it from. If you can't do the same, then you're not ready to kill.”

That pauses me in my tracks. This is the most serious I've seen him. He's the exact opposite of his brother, who was taunting me for not being able to kill a stranger. The two of them are like oil and water. Save for their looks, they have nothing in common.

“I said I would help you, and I will,” he breathes. “But I'm not like him.” *Oh, how I already know.* “If I do this, we do it

my way. And it starts with endurance. No more complaining.” He nods to the treadmill.

“Does he know?” I ask, swallowing hard.

“What do you think, sweet girl?” His eyes hold mine, penetrating my gaze.

“I don’t think he knows you’re helping me. I don’t think he’d like it if he did.”

“Then you’re smarter than he gives you credit for.”

I think about that statement as I finish the workout, his voice repeating on a loop in my head like it always tends to. Am I really smart? I made a deal with a devil that led me here. I’m not sure I’d call that smart, by any means. Smart would have been lodging my bullet in Nic’s chest on the first try, then I wouldn’t be here at all.

“Finished,” Leo announces once I’m coated in sweat and my legs feel like jelly. He grins as I stumble off the treadmill, balancing on my trembling legs. “How do you feel?” he asks.

“Weak,” I mutter, wiping the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand.

“That’s good.” Leo smiles.

“How is that good?” I huff.

“Change happens in your weakest moments. You can’t grow, can’t become something stronger or better if you don’t know where your weaknesses lie. So you feel weak now, your legs hurt, you’re out of breath. That’s perfect. Remember this feeling, because one day you’ll look back and see how far you’ve come.” Something about the way he’s speaking both inspires and terrifies me.

“Why do I feel like you’re not just talking about running...”

Leo’s tongue darts across his lips and he takes a step toward me, my back pressing against the handrail of the treadmill. Something inside my body screams out for him, hoping his hands find my skin, longing for his touch. I swear I can see the same desire in his eyes, feel it in his proximity. But

Leo doesn't touch me, he just looks down at me, his eyes darkening as they flick down to my parted lips and back to my pleading eyes. "Because I am." Suddenly, he moves away, rubbing his hand over his chin and turning from me as he clears his throat. "You should go, shower."

His retreat and strained tone feel like a bucket of ice water was dumped over me. But I nod, awkwardly muttering, "Yeah, sure," then rush up the stairs, putting space between us. I do as he says, stepping into the shower and letting the refreshing spray calm me down.

Whatever this is between us, it can't happen. He's my captor's brother, for Christ's sake. I'm not that stupid.



VAL

A month into my stay with Nic, one of his men knocks on my door to announce the doctor's arrival.

A doctor I didn't ask for, nor did I know I was meeting.

The man who enters my room is older, with a head of salt-and-pepper colored hair. Setting down his oversized medical bag, he observes me like I might be feral, prone to attacking. I guess I can't blame him. What's the expectation for prisoners of the mafia?

"Doctor?" I question.

Nic has done little to build my trust in him, unlike his brother. For all I know, he's sending this man in to kill me so he doesn't have to do it himself.

He points to the left side of his chest, where his name is embroidered onto the white fabric. "Dr. Martin Caparelli," he says. "Nicolai asked me to come check on you." He gestures to the vacant chair at my vanity. "May I?"

With one nod from me, he takes the seat, tilting his head as he unzips the bag and pulls out a stethoscope. He hums softly as he listens to my heart, lungs, and checks my blood pressure. During each step, he asks me questions, and while I know he's a doctor, anxiety thrums through my body when I answer. He's on Nic's payroll, so I have to assume everything I say gets reported back to him.

Why Nic brought in a doctor to check me out is beyond me. Maybe he wants his investment healthy? One glance at the

stuffed closet is enough to remind me he's spending a lot of money keeping me here.

"Everything seems to be normal," he finally says, folding the equipment he used and tucking it back into his bag. He pauses for a moment, his eyes softening as he addresses me. "Nicolai has requested that I administer a birth control implant. It's a simple procedure. It will only take a few minutes, and it will provide you with long-term birth control without the need for daily pills or appointments."

Dread floods my veins.

Birth control?

That means one thing. Nic plans to fuck me.

Deep down, this was expected. What else would he want from me? Still, something bitter lingers in my gut, a heavy block of lead that leaves me nauseous. I have a feeling the brother that will fuck me first isn't the one I'd hope for.

I feel a mix of emotions ranging from frustration to apprehension to acceptance as the doctor removes a few things from his bag; gauze, a needle, the white packet that holds the small device...

The procedure only takes a minute, and when he's done, he gives me nothing more than a sympathetic look before packing up his bag. I run my fingers over the bump on the inside of my arm, feeling the small device beneath my skin. For some reason, this makes me feel like more of a prisoner than I did before.

"Val." Leo's voice is paired with a soft tap on my door. I'm surprised to see him during the daytime again. When I don't respond right away, he twists the knob, opening it up, and coming face to face with Dr. Caparelli. The scowl on Leo's face sends another bolt of foreboding through my nerves.

"Doc?" Leo looks at him for a moment before his eyes find me, confusion drawing his brows together. "What has he done?" His gaze meets mine when he asks the question, and something about the worry that's shining from his eyes makes me feel guilty, even if I know I did nothing wrong.

“I’m afraid that’s between Miss Soressi and Mr. Colombo,” the doctor says, tucking his chin and making his way to pass Leo.

Leo stops him, his hand striking out to prevent the doctor from leaving. It’s a different side of Leo I see now as he stares down the doctor with a cold glare. “What did he have you do?” Leo asks.

“You’ll need to ask your brother that question.”

“I’m asking you.”

Dr. Caparelli shifts uncomfortably on his feet, likely thinking which brother he should listen to. A decision I find myself facing most days.

Finally, he swallows thickly and addresses Leo. “He asked me to administer a birth control implant.”

Leo’s nostrils flare at the answer. “And did you ask her what she wanted?” His eyes flash to me for the briefest moment.

“I-I... she was fine with it!” The doctor stutters over his defense, clearly flustered by Leo’s line of questioning.

“Val?” Leo asks, his eyes glued to the man in front of him. “Did you want birth control?”

No, I think, but I refrain from saying it.

“It’s fine, Leo,” I say instead. It’s the first time I’ve seen him like this. Angry, like he might hurt someone. But for some reason, I still feel safe under that gaze. I don’t think Leo would ever hurt me.

He glances from the doctor, then back to me, a raging heat still evident in his stance. “Fine? That’s not an answer, Valerie. You either wanted it or you didn’t.”

Dr. Caparelli wipes a bead of sweat from his forehead. “Honestly, your brother—”

“I’m not asking you.”

“I want it,” I finally say. And truthfully, I do. I’d rather have it than not have it. I certainly don’t want to walk out of

here next year with a child of Nic's. And fighting Nic on this seems futile.

Leo presses his lips together, his annoyance at the situation still coming off him in waves. Finally, he moves, letting the doctor through, who makes a quick haste of the opportunity.

"You scared him," I say to Leo once he's gone.

Leo scrubs a hand over his face. "Yeah, well..."

"What would you have done if I said no?"

He freezes in that moment, his whole body facing me with dark eyes staring down at me. "Valerie, I swear to God, if you tell me he forced that thing on you, I'll gut him."

Something about his expression tells me he's not joking. I haven't had anyone protect me with such fierceness since I was a kid. It simultaneously washes me in warmth while scaring the shit out of me.

The scariest part, though, is how much I love it. I shouldn't be feeling anything for him, but how can I not when he acts this way?

"Did you need something?" I ask, swallowing thickly.

Leo looks unsure for a moment. I think his head is still thinking about the doctor and what he'd like to do to him.

"You came here? Knocked on my door?"

Leo shakes his head like he's coming out of a haze. "Yeah." He clears his throat, taking a breath. "I wanted to see if you'd be up for a training session. I have some time."

"Sure, let me get changed."

He nods, but doesn't leave, just stands there, his eyes still focused on me.

"Leo?" I ask. "Is there something else?"

"Are you sure he didn't hurt you?"

I take a slow step closer to him, resting my hand on his forearm gently. "Yeah, I'm sure."

Leo's eyes snap to where my skin meets his, and he inhales sharply. Before I know what's happening, he's spinning me around, and pressing my back against the wall, making me gasp. One of his arms rests above my head, and his other hand splays against the wall, close to my hip but not enough to touch me as he cages me in. He looks pained as he closes his eyes, pulling in a long breath like he needs to center himself or his emotions might take full control.

I want to know what it would look like if he let his emotions take the wheel. Would he kiss me? Would his lips be rough, demanding? Or would it be soft, careful, gentle? My body hums beneath him, on edge, waiting for his next move.

"I shouldn't care. And trust me, I've tried. I've tried to shut you out of my mind, forget you exist. But you exist in this house. I see you everywhere, smell your scent as soon as I walk through the front doors. And I. Shouldn't. Care. But I do. If my brother hurts you, I'll kill him, *tesoro*."

Leo pushes off the wall before I have a chance to open my stunned lips. He rubs his hand over his jaw and straightens himself, the emotion slipping away as if he didn't just drop that bomb of truth on me.

"I'll meet you downstairs." And then he's gone.

LEO

“I have a job for you.”

I’m not surprised. Nic always has a job for me. Always something he needs taken care of.

“What is it?” I ask, leaning back in my chair, facing him.

“Contract hit. It will probably take a few days out in Miami. You’ll leave tomorrow.” He watches my face when he tells me. I do my best to keep a neutral expression, keep him from seeing how the news guts me.

I don’t want to go to Miami. Not when Valerie will be left alone here. Well, not alone, but with him. I have a feeling that’s exactly what he wants, though—alone time with his captive. The thought tightens my chest.

“Got it.” I nod anyway. I don’t have a choice. “Send me the info, and I’ll take care of it.” In this life, you don’t say no to your boss, and in my case, my boss is Nic. My father handed him a crew wrapped in a shiny red ribbon, not caring if he was a good leader or not. And me? I was just the icing on the cake. Another soldier to do his bidding.

Nic smiles, his signature grin stretching wide across his cheeks. He likes playing games. Moving his pawns along his chessboard. See what he can get away with. What he can make us do.

But he’s the master of this game, and playing along is what’s kept me alive all these years.

“Will do, brother.” The familiar term on his tongue sounds sour, not quite right. We’ve never been brotherly, never gotten along, and now’s not any different.

I stand from my seat. “Let me know if there’s anything else,” I say cordially, instead of saying, “*Fuck you, you arrogant prick.*”

“One more thing,” he adds as I approach the door to leave.

“Yeah?”

“Leave Valerie alone.”



VAL

Leo and I adopt a new nightly ritual, meeting in the living room at ten p.m. when he's back from doing whatever he does when the sun's up. Nic doesn't bother us. He's either gone or hidden away in his study or bedroom.

I spend an hour every day in the basement gym, running on the treadmill and doing the bodyweight exercises Leo taught me. My new muscles ache and my entire body is sore from the new routine, but I'm slowly growing to enjoy the way it feels. Something about the pain makes me feel stronger.

We haven't talked about what he said in my bedroom the other day, both of us pretending as if it never happened, even if his words are seared into my memory. He said he shouldn't care about me, a notion that would sting if I didn't agree. Nothing good can come out of us growing attached to each other. Not while we're living with a psychopath. But still, my thoughts linger on the fact that he does care. That he can't help but to care. And it's because the feeling is mutual.

My favored brother greets me with two fingers of whiskey or cognac or whatever liquor he pours from a fancy decanter at his brother's bar, and each night I twist the stupidly expensive crystal glass in my hand, resenting the wealth of the material item as the golden liquid it holds burns down my throat. Being poor has ingrained a general anger toward displays of wealth. A therapist would probably have a field day sorting through my feelings about the green paper that controls the human race. Everything always comes back to money.

There are very few memories of my mother that remain in my mind, but I can distinctly remember her talking about money as she stuffed my father's cash into her bra. Mascara clung to her lashes in thick clumps, leaving black streaks under eyes, her face covered in a sheen of sweat.

"Money is everything, Vally girl," she had told me as she increased her cup size with the stacks of cash. *"One day, baby, you'll be drowning in diamonds and rings. Your daddy will find you a rich man to marry, and he'll take care of you."*

At five years old, her promises of money didn't mean much to me. I had everything I needed already, except for maybe a mother who didn't snort white powder in order to tolerate being alive.

It wasn't long after that moment that she left and never returned. Dad had told me that she died with no explanation. Years later, during an argument, I learned the real cause of her death. *"Your junkie whore of a mother died with a needle hanging out of her arm!"* Uncle Ricky had spat at me.

That fit the bill. With my memories of "powdered sugar" crusted under her nose and the constant glassiness of her eyes, paired with the stealing of my father's cash, it all made sense. For months, I cried for my mother, mostly in my sleep, but that phase ended abruptly. Soon after her death, we packed up and moved to Las Vegas, and the city pushed my grief down, filling it with excitement for the new experience.

Leo coughs, a subtle chuckle leaving his lips as he watches me, sipping the amber liquid. "What are you thinking about?" I see the way his dark eyes sparkle as he asks the question, intently watching me.

Before these boys, I had grown accustomed to never being paid much attention. The only awareness I received was from meaningless creepy stares at my tits and catcalls on the city streets.

"Nothing," I mumble, which only causes the grin on Leo's face to widen. He brings the rim of the fancy glass to his lips, letting me have my secrets.

I'm learning to live with the more expensive items, trying to enjoy the fragrant body washes and designer clothing, the soft feeling of my new silk sheets that I curl up with every night, the beautiful view outside my window when I wake up, and days spent by the pool instead of at a job.

And still, this giant house filled with all kinds of things is just...lonely.

Until the evening, after I eat dinner by myself and watch the sun set. That's when I wander to the living room to find Leo, making myself cozy next to my enemy's brother.

He pours the drink and I pick the show or movie. Last night, we finished *Breaking Bad*, and Leo laughed when I cried at the ending.

"You have an affinity for the anti-hero," he told me.

"No," I replied. "I have a hatred of endings."

There was something subtly seductive about Leo and the way he tended to look at me. He had seen me in a vulnerable moment, yet there was no judgment lingering in his dark eyes, only something else neither of us wanted to address.

I know he's not necessarily a good guy, though. Even if I haven't seen him bash anyone's skull in, his connections to the mafia are enough of a red flag to me.

I should be more afraid of the man who admitted to killing sixty-seven people.

But is he really a *bad* guy?

And if he is...does that change the way I'm feeling about him?

Walter White was a bad guy. Hands down. Yet I cried for him, my heart aching. His actions were wrong...but his reasons, those I understood.

I can't merge the Leo I'm beginning to know with the acts the mob commits.

Part of me wants to ask what he does for his brother, but there's still fear coursing through me for what my curiosity

might encourage. One of these days, they're going to drag me back out to a warehouse with another bloody man and a hammer I'll have to swing. It's going to happen again and Nic isn't going to let me get away with not killing anyone, and despite the daily pep talks I've given myself in the bathroom mirror, panic still fills me when I think about the weight of the hammer in my hands and the strange blood on my skin.

"What about Goodfellas?" I ask Leo as I scroll through the show listings on HBO.

"Really?" he snorts. "You want to watch a movie about mobsters? This house isn't enough for you?" He jabs his elbow into my ribs playfully as he looks down at me with a quirked brow.

I'm seated next to him with my knees curled into my chest, leaving space between us. Despite how many nights we've spent on this couch together, Leo hasn't tried to close the gap. I can't shake the idea of him pulling me closer, pressing his body against mine, just holding me...or maybe more. Despite the muscles that define his body, I imagine him being soft and warm, radiating comfort.

Dumb idea. I shake it from my brain.

He's still Nic's brother. Still part of the family that ruined my life.

Getting close to him, touching him...that would only end badly. Even if Nic was miraculously approving of the whole idea, allowing me to be with his brother while living under his roof. I'm still leaving at the end of this year. Not to mention, I'm planning to kill his father.

"I want to understand." The words are spoken low, but he hears them.

Leo turns to me, running a hand through his dark hair. Most mornings, I see him before he leaves. Always dressed in black from head to toe, with his hair slicked back in a neat style. By the time he returns, though, his neatly pressed clothes are wrinkled, and his hair is loose and disheveled. He always

showers and changes into a pair of low-slung joggers and a dark t-shirt before he wanders downstairs to meet me.

His eyes darken, amusement slowly drifting away. “Why?” he asks.

I tug my lower lip between my teeth, thinking about his question. Why do I want to know more?

My knowledge of the mafia only comes from internet forums and speculative articles. Leo is the real deal; he knows stuff I would never find anywhere else. My entire body aches to understand, to have some sort of inkling into what happened to my father, and why he needed to die?

Despite the research I did on the public library computer, the inside of the Colombo *famiglia* is a black box.

“I just... I feel the need to know more. Especially being here, in this situation.” I find his eyes, and as he watches me, the look on his face shifts to one of sympathy.

“Okay.” He shrugs. “I don’t think you’re going to like it,” he tells me as he snatches the remote to find the movie on the streaming app.

Within minutes of meeting Karen, I announce that I love her. It’s the way that she scolds Henry for ditching her at the restaurant. The energy that buzzes from her, screaming that she knows her value and won’t be treated like trash.

Leo laughs like I’ve told the funniest joke he’s ever heard. “Just watch the movie, *tesoro*.” He grins.

Once we reach the middle, his amusement makes more sense. I find myself forgetting that he’s there as I yell at Karen on the screen, begging her to stand up for herself. To leave.

“Told ya you wouldn’t like this movie.” Leo chuckles.

“Why’s that?” I snap, whipping my head to meet his eyes.

In slow motion, he sits up, adjusting himself on the couch so his face is only inches from mine. “Because, Valerie, despite everything you think, you’re not as tough as you want to be. You don’t actually want to know what happens to women in our circles.”

His words burn through my chest. They sting worse than anything his brother has said to me. “Not tough?” I huff a laugh. “Funny, because I pointed a beretta at your brother’s head and pulled the trigger.”

That classic smile on his face only widens at my words, and my stomach burns at the sight, anger boiling in my blood. “Even Karen held a gun to Henry’s head.” He laughs.

“But I pulled the trigger!” My voice comes out harsh and loud, but it doesn’t even make Leo flinch. My annoyance makes him laugh some more, his eyes sparkling as he takes in my flushed cheeks and narrowed eyes.

“But you missed.”

I groan, crossing my arms over my chest as I sit back. I wanted to kill his brother with every fiber of my being. I wanted to see his blood drip onto the floor. There were nights I fell asleep while longing to see the light leave his eyes.

Revenge was my best friend.

“You don’t believe I can do it?”

Leo searches my eyes for a moment, and I wonder if he can see my anger rising from him doubting me. He’s only ever encouraged me since our first conversations, so where is this coming from?

“I think you can do it, *tesoro*,” he says, his eyes staring into mine. “But I don’t think you’ll like the girl you are after.”

I scoff. “It’s all I want. I need to do this, Leo. I need to avenge my father.”

He shrugs, looking away. “Maybe,” he says. “Or maybe your father would be just as happy if you moved on with your life.”

That’s never been an option. I don’t pause to allow myself to ponder his words or let my brain wander down that path. Everything to this point has been to get revenge. To honor his memory by killing the men who killed him. Paulie first, and then I’ll find the man who pulled the trigger.

“No.”

“Why? Give me one good reason.” Leo looks at me expectantly, shifting himself to face me fully.

“I...” I trail off. How do I explain how desperate I am to see the man who ruined my life bleed out in front of me? I can’t find the words to tell him how destroyed my life was after my father died. “Everything was taken from me,” I finally settle on. “And it was his call. His actions.”

“And what do you think your life would be like if your dad was still alive? Do you think you’d be the pretty princess at the ball?”

I flinch, my whole body startling at the venom behind his words. Leo has never spoken to me like that. He’s been the only constant since arriving at this house, the only one who’s shown me any bit of sensitivity and respect. There’s something going on with him tonight, and I don’t like it.

“Don’t make me out to be the asshole,” he says, reading me like a book. “I can see the story you’re creating in your head. I’m not trying to be a dick, Val. I’m trying to be real with you.”

“Why are you being like this?” I ask, accusation dripping from my words. “You said you were going to help me.”

Leo scrubs a hand over his face, resting it there for a moment while he sucks in a breath, as if this conversation is painful for him. “I am helping you, Val,” he breathes, low and strained. “I promise you, I am.”

“Sounds like you’re trying to scare me.”

Dark eyes peer down at me for a long moment, and I can’t place what he’s thinking, what he’s feeling as he stares at me, what he wants to say. But there’s a tension between us right now that isn’t only driven by anger and frustration; it’s the same kind that follows us constantly during our time together, only sharpened now by our strong wills. I know if I were to move any closer to him, something would happen that we wouldn’t be able to take back. The thought has me swallowing roughly, my teeth biting into my bottom lip.

Finally, as if snapped out of his own daze, he stands up abruptly, dusting the invisible lint off his joggers, giving me one last heavy look. “Goodnight, Val.” My stomach sinks.

I don't see him again for days.

**VAL**

It's cold water that startles me awake. The icy wetness hits my face with a smack, and I jump up, gulping in air. Nic stands next to my bed, looking down at me with a smug smile on his face. "Time to get up, little wolf,"

I haven't seen Nic since before the birth control incident a week ago. He likes to avoid me when I'm not convenient, and I can't say I mind. I prefer not to see him, even if I'm starting to go stir crazy.

It's been four days now since Leo last visited me for our nightly ritual, leaving me to wander about the mansion alone. It's funny, before I knew Leo, before he wormed his way into my chest cavity, leaving his footprints across my memory, I wasn't bothered by loneliness. But now that I have a companion, I can't help but long for him, even if I know every second I spend with him is a risk. Worry gnaws at me. If Nic knows how much I enjoy being with his brother, that's just one more thing for him to take away from me. Leo may want to protect me, but ultimately, his brother still has all the control.

"I'm up," I grumble, pushing myself to a sitting position. The cold water sinks into my pillow and sheets, my hair is drenched, and it's coating the thin white t-shirt I slept in. Nic's eyes find the buds of my nipples poking through the fabric. I watch his reaction, his lips thinning and his fists clenching, like he's trying to restrain himself.

"Get dressed," he tells me, finally breaking his staring contest with my chest. "I have something for you in the kitchen."

Ridding myself of the wet clothes, I search my closet for something to wear. I settle on a pair of black skinny jeans and a clean white t-shirt that I tuck in at my waist. Not knowing what his plans for the day are, I decide to apply a light coat of makeup, not wanting to look too out of place. My new sun-kissed glow has me looking healthier than ever, but there's a sense of shame in knowing that I look better as a captive than I did as a free woman.

Nerves surface as I think about the day ahead. I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting for the moment when Nic asks me for something I'm not willing or able to follow through with.

I take a deep breath as I leave my room, heading down to the kitchen. Rosa's not there when I arrive, but there's fresh coffee and a plate of blueberry muffins. And Nic. He waits for me, leaning against the island with a wicked grin.

He's dressed to perfection in a fitted suit, as usual, a chic charcoal gray, with a black shirt and shiny black loafers. "I've decided to give you some extra permissions..." His gaze is glued on me, as he slides something along the counter, and I step closer, wanting to know what my prize is. "I believe this is yours."

My cell phone, in its matte black case, sits at the edge of his fingertips. Over a month without a phone has left me on edge, isolated from the one person I have in the world back home.

I lick my lips, hesitation running through me. I can't help but to think there's a cost to this I haven't paid yet.

"Do you want this?" he asks.

I'm afraid to look too eager, worried he'll make me work harder if he knows how badly I want it, so I try to keep an aloof expression on my face.

"Yes," I tell him, attempting to smile sheepishly and act innocent, like I know he wants me to.

"Have you been a good girl?" There's a haunting lilt to his tone, like he knows something I don't.

But I nod anyway. Except for the secret moments with Leo, ones I'm not sure are allowed, I've been good. Whatever that word means to Nic.

I reach out to take the phone he's handing me, but his grip doesn't loosen, and his eyes stare at me, watching. "Are you sure?" he asks.

Anxiety zips through me. Did I do something? Am I forgetting? My heart starts to race, and I wrack my brain to figure out his angle.

And then he just lets go of the device. I instantly grip it between my fingers, aching to immediately call Dom, but I need to wait until Nic is out of my sight. I can't let him know what's important to me, or who I love, out of fear that anything I say can be used against me. Another lesson I've learned from my captor.

I learned that one the hard way, sitting in the cold basement choosing between death or captivity. Now that Nic knows I want revenge, he'll hold it over my head for the next year. I won't give him anything else. Everything with him is a game, a give and take he's commander of. He gives, and then he'll take what he wants, but I don't know what the repercussions are. Even after more than a month here, I've had it fairly easy compared to what I had imagined. There's got to be a catch, and I have a feeling I won't have to wait much longer to find out what it is.

"Say thank you." He grins, reminding me constantly that everything I have is a gift, provided by his generosity.

It hurts my soul to thank him for something that already belongs to me, but I bite my tongue and flash my gaze up to his and recite the words he wants to hear. "Thank you,"

That only makes his smile brighter, and I can tell that he's proud of himself. Making a girl like me show any sort of compliance is a win in his column, another display of how he owns me, even if it was only two simple words.

"Good girl," he purrs. "Now, I have some work to get done, so you're on your own today."

Like that's anything new, but I can't say I'm not relieved. I smile at Nic, giving him a flash of my pearly whites.

"Sounds good," I tell him in the nicest voice I can muster, even though being around him has me dying inside.

I take my cell phone and my newfound freedom and scurry back to my room. I figure I'll change into my bathing suit as I always do and spend the day at the pool. But first, I power the device to check all my messages. There are about thirty from Dom in the weeks since I've been here. Each one grows more and more frantic.

Where are you? the last one asks. *Why aren't you responding to me?*

I chew on my lip as I debate messaging her back. An idea floats through my head that Nic might be reading my messages. So I settle on calling her instead.

I tap on the circle boasting her picture, a selfie she took on my phone years ago. She has a head of wild red hair and dark charcoal lines her eyes. The phone only rings twice before she answers.

"Valerie Soressi, oh my God, where have you been?!" Her voice carries through the receiver, anger hanging from every word. But I know beneath that, it's fear causing her reaction. All we've ever had was each other, us against the world. So me missing for so long scares the shit out of her. I can picture her biting her nails while she chain smokes, sinking into that bad habit she developed in her teens. "I'm sorry," I tell her. "I got involved in something."

"Involved in what?" she asks, a harsh bite to her tone.

"It's..." I trail off, not knowing what to tell my cousin, my best friend. "It's just a thing I have to deal with. I'm going to be away for a little bit."

"Away for a little bit?" She repeats my words as a question, her voice rising the longer we're on the phone together. "What the hell does that mean?"

"I'm just... not going to be available," I tell her. This is harder than I thought it would be. How do I not tell her every

detail?

“Val, what is going on? You leave without saying goodbye, all your stuff is moved out of your place, the locks are changed, and you’re telling me you’re *not available*! You haven’t answered my texts in a month! No shit, you’re not available!” she shouts at me, and my chest aches for what I’ve put her through.

“I can’t tell you,” I say on a shaky breath. “I’m so sorry. Just trust me on this one. Okay?”

“Okay,” she parrots. “But I want to know, eventually you’re going to tell me everything.”

“Deal,” I tell her, exhaling a relieved sigh. “So how are you?”

“Not great,” she says, her voice heavy. Dom has had it rough, basically for her whole life. “No apartment yet.” She’s been hunting for almost six months and still hasn’t been able to find a place she can afford with her meager waitress salary. With my couch off the table, she has to find other friends to stay with.

“I missed you at Sunday night dinner,” she adds. “You didn’t even give me a warning you weren’t going to be there.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” I tell her. I don’t even want to know the answer to the question leaving my lips. “How were they?”

“Awful, as usual.” I can hear her sigh heavily as her breath rattles against the phone. Her parents, my lovely aunt and uncle, are who she had to suffer through dinner with all alone. “It’s bad,” she says. “Worse than ever.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, even though I know in my heart that bad means bruises and split lips. He beat the shit out of her.

“Her face was a mess,” Dom tells me. I wish she was dealt a better hand.

Even though I don’t like my aunt for many reasons, not protecting us being one of them, I still feel bad. No woman deserves to be treated the way my uncle treats her, and no

daughter deserves to witness it. “Jesus,” I mutter. “It’s never gonna stop.”

“No. It won’t,” Dom agrees.

I’m glad I’m out of there, but life outside their house isn’t any better. “We’re going to get through this,” I assure her. “One day, you and me, we’re going to get out of here for good. Away from it all.”

“I hope you’re right,” she responds, sounding distant.

“Listen, I have to go,” I say regretfully. “But I promise, I’ll tell you everything. Give me time. Okay?”

“You better,” she huffs. “Just...Val?” Her voice is weak when she says my name. “Please stay safe,” she whispers.

“I will.” We hang up. No *I love yous* or *miss yous*. No flowery words to show each other our feelings, just *please stay safe*.

I put the phone on the bed, not wanting to check messages from anybody else. She was the only person I cared about and probably the only messages I have anyway. I lie back on the comforter, taking deep breaths to calm my pounding heart. What am I going to do? How am I supposed to help her?

So far, my time here hasn’t been spent worrying about her. I’ve been trying to keep myself sane, and alive. But now, after hearing her voice again, this all feels too real. Not at all like the game Nic has reeled me into.

Without me, she’s all on her own, and loneliness is a trigger that leads Dom to all the wrong places—into the sticky hold of drugs. *It’s just a year*, I try to tell myself, but it’s no use.

There’s nothing I can do for my cousin at this point but sit and wait. I’m trapped here.

I just have to hope that when I’m set free, this was all worth it.

Getting that revenge will be the only saving grace if I ruin our lives in the process.



There's a note taped to my door, a bright yellow Post-it that greets me when I come back from my afternoon swim.

Dinner at six.

Dress nice.

I can only assume that means Nic wants me to join him for dinner, one of my least favorite tasks since moving in with him. Thankfully, it rarely happens. Most nights, I'm on my own for dinner, sitting at an empty dining table while Rosa serves me a plate of food and promptly ignores me. Regardless, I enter my room, retreating to the bathroom to shower and get ready. I coat my face with makeup, brush and style my hair, making myself look presentable for the man I despise.

I can still see the small mark on the inside of my arm, where the birth control device was implanted. I run my finger over the skin, feeling the curve of the foreign object. Something nags at me, an ache brewing in my stomach that's only gotten worse as the days pass. Is tonight the night?

I'm ashamed of the way my core tingles at the thought. Like my body is okay with the idea, even if my brain is screaming *NO THANK YOU*.

It's a confusing twist of emotions. When I first accepted Nic's deal, I knew this would be more than just living with him. That'd he'd want me in the worst ways. But I still had the woman in red at the forefront of my mind, and the idea of

using my body as a weapon seemed like the best idea. It didn't take long to regret that angle.

And to make things even more complicated, when I think of Leo, my body and mind are on the same page. Warmth takes the place of any unsurety, lighting up all my nerve endings in a way I want more of. It's a dangerous game we're playing. Even if nothing's happened between us for me to feel so strongly, I know once Nic takes what he wants from me, I'll wish it was Leo instead.

Pulling a black silk dress from the closet, I shake Leo from my mind as I cover my body in the fine material, admiring the way it clings to my curves. *He'll like this.*

And then, just to be a bitch, I pair the silky black dress with the rubber flip-flops that I've come to despise.

He's already at the head of the dining table when I find him downstairs. Chin resting gently in the palm of his hand, his fingers tap a steady rhythm against his stubble-coated jaw. His hazel eyes lift when I enter the room, roaming over my body, his lip twitching when he gets to my flip-flop clad feet.

"Two minutes late," he notes.

I scoff at the obnoxious tone of his voice. Who the hell cares about two minutes?

"Sorry," I mutter, taking my seat next to him at the table. "It takes time to look this good."

My comment has his lip twitching again, showing just the hint of a smile.

Point one, Valerie.

"You look nice," he says. Funny how compliments from my captor bring butterflies to my stomach, even though nothing we have here is normal.

I'm still the prey.

He's still the predator.

It's a fucked-up relationship between two fucked-up individuals.

Still, I give him a pleasant smile and say, “*Thank you.*”

Rosa brings in two plates from the kitchen. Grilled chicken paired with spaghetti, covered in a spicy *rosa* sauce.

I’ve come to find that her meals always have some type of pasta paired with a lean protein and then a vegetable that she mixes in. Today there’s spinach, cooked down and blended into the tomato sauce. I assume it’s her way of sneaking greens into Nic’s diet, like a mother trying to get her child to eat his vegetables.

I can’t help but chuckle at the plate in front of me.

“What’s so funny?” Nic asks.

“Nothing,” I try to tell him, but the smile is still spread across my lips.

He shakes his head. “Another secret you’re keeping from me then, huh?”

His accusation startles me. Of course, I’m keeping secrets from him. All I do is try to put on an act to please him, when in reality, I want nothing to do with him. Since walking into that restaurant that night, my entire existence has been about keeping him happy so I can make it through this year.

But the way he says it makes me think there’s something else he believes I’m hiding.

“What do you mean?” I ask, keeping my tone neutral.

“Tell me why you were laughing?” he asks in return, not quite answering my question.

“There’s spinach in the sauce,” I tell him with a shrug.

Nic looks down at his plate, a hint of confusion furrowing his brows. “What about it?”

“It’s just funny,” I muse. “Rosa always puts a vegetable in the sauce...like she’s feeding a child.”

He pushes around the noodles with his fork, stirring the red sauce, just now realizing there are bits of green hidden in his pasta.

“Oh,” he says. I can’t help the laugh that escapes me at his reaction.

“You didn’t notice?”

“No,” he tells me softly.

Point two, Valerie.

If I didn’t hate him so much, I’d think he was kind of adorable right now. I almost laugh again at the thought of calling this man “adorable” in any circumstance. I must be losing my mind.

“But you are keeping secrets.” He shifts the conversation back to me.

“I’m not,” I attempt to lie smoothly.

“Well then...” A sinister smirk rises onto his lips. That’s the signal that tells me we’re playing a game, one I don’t know the rules to. Only Nic does, and he has no intention of letting me in them. I’m on my own. “Who’s Dom?” he asks.

He thinks he’s caught me, and he has, because I don’t want to tell him. I don’t want him to know how much I care for Dom or how far I’ll go to protect her.

Dom was there for me when no one else was. My only companion. The hand I held as we listened to chaos reign on the floor below us.

We pretended that nothing else was happening in the house. That it didn’t exist. That was the foundation of our relationship, protecting each other from all of the nonsense that surrounded us in this world, all of the people who weren’t there for us and the things that tried to hurt us.

In that moment, we had a silent agreement that we would always protect each other. Never throw the other under the bus, never argue. We had fights, sure, but we always made up, hanging on to the promise we made as little girls lying on the hardwoods beneath the moonlight.

“No one,” I say, but the scowl that transforms Nic’s face tells me he doesn’t believe me.

Two points, Val. One point, Nic.

“Why won’t you tell me?” he presses. If I were as naïve as he seems to think I am, I might believe he’s offended by my dishonesty, but beneath his pretty face, I know it’s just a part of his game.

“Why do you want to know?”

Nic responds with a laugh and a sip of his gin. He finds my insolence amusing, probably because it’s always met with some sort of punishment from him.

“Tell me, little wolf.”

He’s calm, and I think that’s the scariest thing about Nic. It’s not always screaming and yelling, sometimes it’s just the chilling silence where your mind concocts worse realities of what could happen. Nic sits across from me with a smile filled with wickedness, watching my mind run laps on the race track he’s created. Psychological torture must turn him on.

“She’s my cousin,” I finally whisper, settling on the truth. But I can already feel the anxiety rising in my stomach as I share my secret. This was the one I wanted to keep.

“Good girl.” He grins, and I hate the fact that he has this hold over me. Even more, I hate what his words do to me, the pleasure that pools between my legs at his ridiculous approval. “But not good enough,” he adds, leaning back in his chair with narrowed eyes locked on me. “Who is she to *you*? Why is she so important?”

“I already told you, she’s my cousin.” I hold back the venom threatening to linger in my words.

“Why wouldn’t you tell me that earlier?” he asks, but as I go to speak, he continues, lifting a hand to silence me. “And why didn’t she file a missing person’s report on you, hmm? I thought you didn’t have any family, Valerie, and now, all of the sudden, a cousin comes out of the woodwork, and you spend thirty minutes talking to her on the phone as soon as I give it back to you. Why?”

And there it is. There’s the ball dropping.

He always has a card to play, and I should have known that his gift wasn't out of pure generosity. There's always something in it for him. I fell right into his trap to think that it was only my messages he'd read and that somehow a phone call would be safe. He must have put some sort of cloning software on my phone, giving him access to listen in on my call. And now he knows about someone I love. Someone he can use against me.

"She's all I have," I whisper, feeling defeated. The backs of my eyes sting at what this knowledge could mean for Dom's safety. But I swallow my emotion, and meet his stare head on.

"Tell me about her."

"Why?" I shake my head.

He brings the crystal glass of gin to his lips, taking another long sip. His dark eyes wash over me, making me shiver. "You know why, little wolf."

It's the grin on his face that has my stomach turning, bile working its way up my throat.

"I lived with her after my dad died. She's my aunt and uncle's daughter, and we shared a room for years." I bring another bite of pasta to my mouth, albeit with a shaky hand, hoping to occupy myself as I consider what else to share.

"She was my only friend for most of my life growing up. No one else wanted to be friends with the orphan girl." I spare a glance as the comment leaves my lips, catching Nic's reaction. I added in the last part just to see. But I don't think my remark hit him the way I hoped it would.

"What did you talk about?" he asks.

"Don't you already know?"

"Tell me, little wolf." His dark eyes give me a scolding look. "Don't make me fight you for this."

My teeth pull on my bottom lip, tugging the skin between them. "She's been staying with me for a while, and I left without a warning. I worried her. Then, to make it worse, I

missed the last few Sunday night dinners with her parents, leaving her without a support system. They aren't easy to deal with, and...she doesn't like to go alone."

"Why?" he asks, and when my eyes flick up to his, I know he won't let me bypass this question.

I've never told anyone about my family, about what goes on behind closed doors. And no one has ever asked. It's easier that way, keeping the D'Amelio family in a separate room in my mind.

Telling someone felt like a cardinal sin.

If child services got involved and didn't take us away, it would have just pissed off Kitty and Ricky. And if they did take us away, then we'd have to learn to fend for ourselves in a new place. At least this way, we knew the game, and we had each other.

"Why doesn't she like to go alone, Val?" he asks again, his voice raising with the repeated question.

"Her parents can be a little...rough."

"Tell me more."

I don't want to tell him more. I don't want to tell him anything at all, but I have to give him something. Keeping him happy keeps me alive. And if I'm alive, I can still get my revenge.

"My uncle, he's not a good man. He didn't treat us right, mostly didn't treat his wife right. It was a bad situation."

"Did he hit you?" Nic asks.

I hate the question, and even more, I hate the look in his eye as he asks it. I hate being vulnerable in front of this man. For a moment, we stare at each other, both knowing the answer and waiting for me to verbalize it. But putting the words out into the universe is difficult; it's letting someone else into the walls of my childhood.

And Nic isn't asking out of love or even care. I'm not delusional enough to believe that. He's asking because he

wants my secrets, my soft spots. He wants to know everything about me.

So then he can successfully break me.

“Yes,” I finally tell him.

“And did you hit him back?” he asks, leaning forward, placing his elbows onto the table next to his nearly empty plate.

“Why would I have hit him back?” I spit the words at him. “I was ten years old. I was a child. I didn’t know how to fight him back then.”

“And now you’re twenty,” he says simply, stating the fact as if that makes a difference. “And you still haven’t fought back.”

The words strike my chest, stilling my heart. What does he expect me to do? How am I supposed to fight back against a man thirty years my senior who never wanted me? Who despises my existence?

“You keep saying you want revenge, little wolf.” He sighs, almost sounding bored. “But you’re not taking action to get it. First, you tried to kill me and failed, and I’m not even the one who killed your father.” He laughs, a deep and insulting sound. “If you want revenge, you have to at least go after the right person. And why wouldn’t you want revenge against a man who beats his wife and children? Hmm? I would have thought you’d start there.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” I tell him, seething now. He’s found a new way to boil my blood, and it’s tinting the edges of my vision red. “How *dare* you tell me what I should or shouldn’t have done.”

“Oh, but that’s where you’re wrong.” He grins, running his finger along the top of his glass. “I do know you, Valerie, and day by day, I’m getting to know every little thing about you, and you’ll continue to tell me all the sordid details of your life the longer you’re here. Like why you haven’t killed your uncle.”

“You act like killing is so easy.”

“It is.”

My heart is pounding rapidly, a thunderstorm raging in my chest, while the red takes over more and more of my vision, to the point where I don't think I can sit still for a moment longer. I don't want to be sitting across from this man I hate while he tells me how I should have killed my family. Without thinking, I stand from my chair.

“Where are you going?” Nic asks, but I don't respond.

I need air. My lungs heave for it, my heart throbbing for me to calm down. I don't acknowledge him; instead, I move toward the living room, heading for the tall glass doors and breaking free.

The patio doesn't seem far enough, so I run. I abandon the rubber flip-flops on the concrete and take off on my bare feet, letting them pound against the grass. I keep going, sucking in oxygen and moving my legs as fast as my body will let me.

Eventually, I hit the tree line, and before I can even blink, I'm surrounded by only green. Trees shoot up all around me, covering me from every angle until I can't make sense of my direction.

I've barely left the house since I've been here and, suddenly, I'm thankful for Leo's lessons in the basement. My endurance isn't as bad as it used to be. I'm running, cherishing the feeling of it. My legs ache, my lungs burn, but the movement feeds my soul.

I feel him coming for me before I hear him. The thuds of his feet begin to increase in the distance, and I can tell he's gaining on me, but I don't stop.

“You can run, little wolf,” he calls out, filling the night air with his deep tenor. “But you can't hide.”

Hiding was never my intention. I just wanted space. Fresh air. A reprieve from the man who's taken over everything. Who wants more of me than I'm willing to give.

My feet slap against the forest floor, sticks and leaves tearing at the skin, but I ignore the pain and focus on moving. I can't stop. There's a part of me that thinks maybe if I can

reach the end of this forest, he'll leave me alone. Maybe, just maybe, I can get away from him and start over.

Maybe I don't need Nic's "help."

But I can hear his footsteps getting closer, and I don't dare look back to see where he is. I can't waste a second of valuable time when I'm running. So I let my feet keep moving forward, even as the burning in my chest increases and I realize I'm not made out for this kind of activity and Nic probably is.

Soreness starts to spread on my feet as the branches cut open more skin.

"Little wolf," I hear him call, too close for comfort.

Keep running, Valerie.

I do. I keep running until something hard hits my back, shoving me forward, and my palms reach out, grasping onto the dirty ground beneath me for some kind of support. His weight falls on top of me, pushing me down into the dirt.

The thin material of my dress isn't enough to protect me, and my body hurts as it crashes against the floor. The weight lifts, just barely, just enough for him to flip me over so my back is against the ground as he hovers above me.

"I told you I would catch you, little wolf." He smiles, and I can see his white teeth glowing through the darkening woods.

This was a bad idea. Letting myself get trapped in the woods with the predator is one thing, but I'm the one who led him here.

He reaches one hand up, brushing the stray hairs off my face so he can see me more clearly. His eyes darken as he looks down at me, a hunger growing on his features.

And it's then I know I'm the meal.

"Nic," I plead, chest still heaving with desperate breaths.

"What?" he asks, his grin ever present.

I don't know what to say, not sure where I was going. Fear has started to weave its way through my body, freezing my

brain. I don't know what he's going to do with me, and if I didn't know the end game before, I surely don't now.

"You've been a very bad girl," he growls. A calloused hand comes up to my face, palming my cheek. "What, oh what, should I do with you?" he whispers, his hot breath skating across my ear.

Through a break in the trees, I can see the golden hour glow shining from above, peeking into the dark forest. When I bring my gaze back in front of me, all I see is him. A stray black hair dangles over his forehead, and his hazel eyes sparkle with amusement.

"What are you going to do?" I ask, which only makes his grin spread.

He calls me his *little wolf*, but he's the Big Bad Wolf and the monster under my bed. He's the kind of villain mothers warn their children of with twisted fairy tales.

And here I am, pinned between him and the ground.

He's straddling me, his legs on either side of my body. Grabbing my hands, he pushes them together before locking them over my head.

And the little wolf was caught by the big bad one.

I can't help the way my body reacts to him, the tingle that runs down my spine. The way my hips buck, searching for friction. He can sense the lust growing within me, my own hunger that's slowly working its way to the top and taking over all rational thinking. I've pushed down my own needs for so long, and my unsatisfied body seeks what it knows he'll give me without judgement.

Maybe I've always been lured in by the darkness, and my own darkness finds some sort of solace with his.

"Don't ever run from me again, little wolf." It sounds like a threat on his lips, but there's amusement dancing behind the words.

I shake my head, my cheeks slapping against the dried leaves that cover the forest floor.

A deep chuckle leaves his mouth. “No?” His free hand finds my chin, gripping onto the sensitive flesh. “Don’t ever say *no* to me.” Each word is spoken with such ferocity as he stares into my eyes.

My body trembles with need, his words hitting me in my core. My mind is screaming to stop this, to not let him have what my body wants him to take from me, but I’m no longer listening.

“Understood?” he asks, his eyebrow lifting.

“Okay,” I whisper, so soft-spoken I don’t even recognize my own voice. I’m not the girl I wanted to be when I walked into his house, but I can’t help these feelings. I should be running, fighting him off, should be keeping my distance from this man, but I don’t know how to stop what I’ve set into motion.

And I don’t think I want to. Not anymore.

He leans forward, his tongue tracing over my cheek, licking a tear from my face. “I’m only going to ask this once, Val, and if you don’t stop me after, I’m not going to. Do you understand?”

I understand exactly. He’s offering me an out. If I don’t stop him now, he’s going to take me right here on the dirty ground, and once I cross this threshold, I can’t go back.

“Yes.”

His eyes narrow slightly as they search mine, and he doesn’t move for a moment, waiting for me to backtrack, to realize what a mistake I’m making.

“Do it,” I tell him. And no sooner do those words leave my lips, his are on me. He kisses me so deeply and roughly that I forget who I am. Forget who we are—that we’re enemies who can’t be together. That I shouldn’t be doing this. But I kiss him back just as thoroughly, letting his tongue into my mouth to invade me.

He keeps kissing me as his free hand roams down my body, grabbing my tits before moving lower and feeling around the material that separates me from him. He finds the

tie, pulling on it and releasing me from the wrap dress. Exposing me, underneath I wear only a lace bra and matching black thong, courtesy of his personal shopper.

Pulling back, he looks over my body in the faint glow of the late sun peeking through the trees. “Fucking beautiful.” His words reverberate through me, down my spine and to my toes, a tingle settling within me. I can feel the praise within every inch of myself, lighting me up for whatever he’s about to do to me. “Do you know that, little wolf? You’re fucking stunning. And now, I’m going to devour you.”

And then his lips are back on me with purpose, crashing against mine and taking everything I have to offer with mind-numbing passion. One hand still pins my wrists above me, and I’m paralyzed by his assault. His mouth moves lower, trailing teasing, gentle kisses down my jaw, then my neck, until he reaches my bra, each one pulling a whimper from my chest. He pulls the material away, exposing my tits, before bringing his mouth to one of my tightened buds. Sucking it between his lips and slowly releasing, then trailing his teeth over it, I gasp at the sensation.

“That’s right, baby girl.” His deep tenor fills my ears. I moan, writhing beneath him, pleading for him to move even lower. Slowly, he does, pressing wet kisses to my nipples, dragging his lips down my waist to where I want him most. When I tilt my hips up, he pushes the thin material of my thong to the side, blowing out a breath over my exposed pussy.

“Patient, baby,” he says as I whimper. “Don’t make me rush my meal.”

My body convulses at his words alone, and before I know it, he’s pushing my legs apart, making room for him to crawl between my thighs.

“I want you to keep your hands above your head.” I whine immediately, and his eyes darken with disapproval. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes.” I nod frantically, my need taking over.

“Good, because I’m starving, little wolf.” His tongue swipes out between my folds, finding my clit with precision and licking slow circles around it. I’m shaking and moaning, wanton beyond control, before he finally brings his free hand to me, swirling his fingers in my wetness. Pushing one inside, and then another, I gasp with relief at him finally filling me. A fire builds in my core as his tongue continues its assault while his fingers thrust into me at a steady rhythm. It only takes a minute for me to fall into euphoria beneath him.

“Come for me,” he says, and then his mouth finds my bundle of nerves again, flicking and sucking and laving until I burst apart at the seams.

My entire body convulses as I scream out, sparks flashing behind my eyelids. My breathing is erratic, and I can’t stop my limbs from trembling. When I finally come down, I open my eyes to find the trees hovering over me and Nic staring down at me with a grin spread across his face.

Checkmate, Nic.



“How’d it go?” I ask my brother as he drops his bag at the door to my office. There are dark circles lingering under his eyes. He’s been gone for a week, as the job I sent him on took longer than expected. A fact that makes me smile.

“It’s done,” he tells me. It’s the same thing he said on the phone before he flew home.

“Good.” I take a long puff of my cigar while Leo waits on me. He needs some sort of direction; that’s the rule. Either to wait for another job, or for me to give him a task to complete now.

I want to send him away again, if only to piss him off and keep him away from Valerie.

The look on his face when I told him to stay away from her was priceless. He thinks he’s secretive. Thinks he can stay up late with her, train her in the basement when I’m not looking, and I’ll never know.

But I know everything.

“What do you want with her?” he asks through gritted teeth, as if he can tell I was thinking about her. I’ll give him some credit to have the nerve to question me.

“Not relevant information for you.” I give him a cheeky grin and watch as his eyes darken, his fingers clenching into fists. He can’t say shit to me. He knows better than that, but the anger shows in other ways.

Some would argue nature over nurture, but the thing with Leo? He had fifteen years outside of my father's grip. Fifteen years when he didn't have to hide his emotions deep, deep down to protect himself. And even though the second half of his life has been spent with my father and I, he still wears his heart on his sleeve. Can't help it, I suppose.

"It doesn't matter," I tell him. "She's mine, *brother*." He flinches at the word. He hates being related to me. "I'll decide what I want from her."



I haven't seen Leo for seven days. In the three months I've lived here, I've grown accustomed to finding him at the bar cart each night when I wander downstairs. Always with a crystal tumbler and soothing words spoken in a deep accent. I wait for him, but for the last seven nights, he hasn't shown.

After the incident in the woods, Nic leaves me alone. As the days passed of isolation, depression crept in, and the silk-covered bed has become my only friend. It's nearly noon by the time I drag myself out from under the linen comforter and make my way downstairs.

Worry wracks my body, leaving my limbs weak with guilt. The last conversation I had with Leo, he was obviously frustrated with me. Shame fills my gut when I think about what I did with his brother while he was MIA. Something was brewing between us before he pushed me away. And now I'm left wondering if I'm the only one still feeling it. Or if I was the only one who felt it at all...

Maybe he doesn't care and doesn't want to spend any more time with me.

Did he leave to get away from me?

Once upon a time, I was fine on my own. People expect things from you; they want and need and ask and take. But silence doesn't request a thing. And life is easier without attachments. No one can hurt you if you don't let them in.

Leo, however, was on a path to work his way into my life, befriending me with his presence, and now I miss him. My chest aches for him. Maybe it's some kind of Stockholm Syndrome. I've been trapped in this house for too long now, and day after day by myself has left me loopy and needy for attention.

I'm surprised when I find Leo in the kitchen, dressed in his usual uniform of black jeans and a dark shirt. The sight of him has my heart beating faster, both excited to see him and anxious about how to act around him now.

He's humming to himself, a bright and sunshiny tune as he fiddles with his fancy Italian coffeemaker. Leo has two vices I've come to realize: strong espresso and dark liquor.

"*Tesoro*," he says with a grin once he finally sees me. He's back to his normal self, it seems. The one who jokes with me, calls me treasure, and gives me that million-watt smile. "Been a while." Leo has an infectious smile, another quality of his that's the opposite of his brother's.

Nic's sends a bolt of fear through my heart, keeping me constantly on edge. His smile gives me a heavy feeling, like a thunderstorm in the middle of a forest, rattling the endless sea of trees.

Leo is light, the sun warming my skin on a bright day, only a few clouds speckling the clear sky. He's the lighthouse that protects me from the storm, shelters me with comfort.

The two brothers couldn't be more different.

I want to be mad at the handsome Italian man for leaving me alone, but his smile breaks down my anger. But not completely. The walls he tore down so easily have started to rebuild over the past week, my trust in him weakening. "Yeah," I say, nodding. "A few days."

"If I say I'm sorry, would you believe me?" He finishes towel drying the silver *Bialetti* he uses to make his daily fix. His gaze finds mine across the kitchen island, the specks of green in his dark eyes sparkling as his beautiful face pleads with me. Light stubble covers his sharp jawline, and his dark

hair is loose today, no gel to restrain it, leaving the inky colored strands to fall from his head freely in soft waves.

I'm naïve to think that Leo is any different from his brother or that he's some sort of rare breed of *mafioso*. That he's not a liar. I'm just the fool who got attached too easily.

"Maybe," I tell him, plucking a grape from the bowl Rosa keeps on the counter and popping the fruit between my lips.

"What if I say I got you something?"

That sparks my interest. No one has gotten me a present since... before my father died. That hurts to think about, so I shake it from my head and tug my lip between my teeth, focusing on Leo.

"Maybe," I finally say, only giving him an inch.

Leo grins, turning around and grabbing a box off the counter behind him. It's a bright orange shoe box with a large white check mark. He sets it in front of me, flipping the lid off to reveal a pair of sleek black Nikes. They fit Leo's black-on-black wardrobe choices, with the matching soles and matte black logo.

"Sneakers?" I whisper in awe, surprised. Nic can't possibly be okay with this gift.

"You need them for training."

I pull one from the box, running my fingers over the nice material. It's stupid. I know. It's a simple gift, a pair of shoes, for God's sake. But something about it tugs at my heart, loosening the walls around it.

"Thank you," I say, the smile on my face forming on its own for him.

"Don't thank me, *tesoro*. Not yet anyway." He watches me as I chew on my lip and run my fingers over the shoes again, choking on the gratitude welling inside me.

"Come on," he says after a moment, his hand clapping my back. "Get changed, put 'em on, and meet me downstairs."



I PAIR the new shoes with leggings and a t-shirt and meet Leo in the basement gym. He's rolling out mats in the open space, his strong shoulders and biceps flexing with the movement and grabbing my attention.

"What's this?" I ask, my eyes dancing from him to the floor he's covered. The bright blue material reminds me of the mats the boys used to wrestle on back in high school.

"Your next lesson." He has a small, playful smile curling his lips when he looks at me. His hair falls on his face, and he brushes back, knowing it won't stay. He looks happy today, happier than he did when he left me. Something about that makes my heart beat a little too fast all over again, the organ swelling with a feeling that's entirely too foreign to me.

"And that is?" I ask, my brow lifting with the question.

"Fighting."

The word is jarring to me. I haven't thrown a punch in years. "Leo, I'm not fighting you." For one, there's no way in hell I would ever win. And for two, I have no desire to participate in that kind of violence with him.

Leo shakes his head, a small little chuckle leaving his lips with the action. "Okay then." He shrugs, but I'm skeptical of the action. No way he's agreeing with me so quickly. "So tell me, what happens when you go to kill Paulie and one of his guards steps in front of you?"

"I'm gonna shoot him." I cross my arms over my chest as Leo comes closer to me, his feet stepping over the cushioned mat until he's right in front of me, toe to toe.

"And when he knocks it out of your hand?"

"I grab the second gun," I answer without hesitation.

That makes Leo bark out a harsh laugh. "Okay. Let's pretend you have two guns on you. I disarm you, sending the first one flying across the room." He mimes the action,

pretending to knock a gun away from me and letting it hit the floor before he kicks it with the side of his foot, sending it like a soccer ball to the other side of the basement. “You pull the second one from...” He nods at me to continue the charade.

I huff, pulling the make-believe gun from the back of my leggings and raising it to Leo. Before I even have my arm fully raised, he’s knocking mine down, twisting it so I’m spinning around. He locks my arm behind my back, and his other one comes in front of me, grabbing that arm and securing me snug against him. My breath whooshes from my chest as I slam into his solid muscle.

“Now what, tesoro?” he whispers gruffly into my ear. “How are you going to kill Paulie when his guard is holding you like this?”

“Leo-” My heart is thrumming, but it’s not from adrenaline. Having his arms around me like this is messing with my head.

“What are you going to do?” His breath tickles the back of my neck as he asks the question. “What do you think will happen next?” he hisses, his words darkening, when I don’t respond. “Do you think Paulie will just let you go? Laugh it off?”

“Leo-” His words are getting mean again, and the anger in his tone is enough to start smothering the lust building under my skin.

“No, Val. He’ll kill you. That’s what he’ll do. And I guarantee you he won’t just keep you captive and spoil you in a mansion like my brother’s doing.”

He lets me go, and I stumble forward, panting out a breath.

“Fuck you,” I bite out.

“There you go.” He’s smiling when I spin around to face him. “That anger you’re feeling right now? Use that. Channel it.”

I lunge at him, channeling all my anger, just like he so kindly suggested, in the hope of knocking him down for being such an asshole. I never hit him, though. At the last second,

Leo steps to the side, extending his arm to catch me and spinning me back into his grasp. “Try harder,” he whispers, making my frustration rise again.

I struggle, trying to elbow him, step on his toes. But it seems useless. Leo manhandles me like I weigh nothing, shoving me down to the mat until I’m on my back and he’s straddling me.

His fists land on either side of my head, his face hovering above mine. “Now what?” he taunts, his face only inches from mine.

Warmth burns in my core, and my face glows red with shame. My body takes control again, lifting my hips to push against his groin. I know he’s right, that I’m a terrible fighter, and if I ever find myself in this position with another man, I’m a dead woman.

But right now? I can feel Leo’s heart racing against my chest, his hard body pressed against mine, both of us shining with a glow of sweat. I want to arch into him, get impossibly closer. To erase the little gap left until there’s not even air between our bodies.

He feels it too. His eyes flare, his breath quickens, and he leans in, his lips ghosting over mine.

I want it. My brain, my body, my heart, they all ache for the feeling of his lips against mine. I’ve dreamt about what it would be like.

They barely touch me, though, just the lightest caress of a kiss, and I’m leaning into it, chasing his lips like an addict.

One of his hands finds my face, cupping my cheek as he *finally* kisses me.

At just a smooth press of our lips, heat floods my body, sparks of electricity run down my spine, and butterflies take flight in my stomach, fluttering lower until my thighs are clenching. I ache for him. I have since the first night I met him, and I’m tired of ignoring it.

And then, he stops.

Breaking the kiss before it can really start, his body rolls off mine, and he jumps to his feet. His fingers raise to his lips as he turns his back to me, putting space between us. Too much space.

“Fuck,” he hisses, and his fist slams into the punching bag. Leo doesn’t even look at me before he leaves. His powerful steps pound up the basement stairs like he can’t get away from me fast enough.

Leaving me lying flat on my back, longing for our connection he refuses to give in to.

Maybe I was right. Maybe he left for a week to stay away from me.

VAL

“Boss wants ya for dinner.” I’m surprised when one of Nic’s silent goons speaks to me. I’m less surprised that it’s an order.

“Tell him to fuck off,” I spit out, rolling onto my stomach and facing the mafia linebacker in my doorway. It’s a stupid thing to say, but anger and sadness are still simmering under my skin from yesterday. I’m not done moping yet, and I would prefer to do it alone.

He looks at me for a long moment before he blinks. “Your funeral.”

I laugh out loud at the comment, shouting “*good one*” after him as he heads down the stairs, likely to relay my message to his boss. I’m just happy that one of them said something. Anything. I was beginning to think Nic only recruited guards from Buckingham Palace.

It’s been a day since Leo left me in the basement, high and dry. I’m starting to notice a theme; every time we get even remotely close to crossing an invisible line we’ve drawn between us, Leo stops it. In some ways, I think I should be grateful he’s the one holding it together for both of us. But why doesn’t he want enough to take the risk? I want to be worth it to him, because now I don’t think I can pretend nothing’s happened.

I roll off the bed and head to my closet, knowing there’s no way out of dinner with my keeper. If I don’t head downstairs, eventually he’ll come up here. When Nic decides it’s time to

play, he expects everyone to jump and make his wishes come true. Including me.

I pull a simple shift dress from the closet, black, with buttons that go straight down the center. After ridding myself of the pajamas I never changed out of this morning, I slip it over my head, forgoing a bra and just keeping on a black thong.

Padding downstairs on my bare feet, I find Nic already waiting at the dining room table. Like a king, his arms are resting on the arms of the chair, his legs spread wide, taking up too much space. He's dressed in a black suit, the jacket hanging over the back of his chair and the top few buttons of his shirt undone.

When he looks up at me, his eyes are darkened and humorless. He sits up in his chair, gaze searing into mine. "Fuck off, huh?"

So the goon did tell him.

I could apologize, I think. It would probably appease him. But something inside me is tired of modifying myself for his pleasure. Maybe it's the frustration from Leo's abandonment. Or maybe I'm a glutton for punishment.

"Yep." I smile sweetly at my captor.

"Bend over," he says, the words clear and calm, his eyes shifting from me to the table between us. My stomach churns at the command.

"Excuse me?"

He stands, slowly running his hands over his thighs. "I said, bend over."

Fuck. Maybe I should have apologized.

I try to ignore him, pulling out a chair on the side of the table and moving to sit. Nic is on me in seconds, the chair flying across the room and hitting the wall with a thud. There's a centerpiece on the table, a vase with freshly cut flowers that Nic sends to the other side of the room when he sweeps his arm across the wood to clear it. I'm startled by the shattering

of glass, and his aggressive moments, heart in my throat when he commands me again.

“Last chance, little wolf, bend over.”

I swallow my pride down harshly. “I’m sorry.” The words are soft-spoken and light compared to the darkness that’s seething from him.

“Too late,” he hisses, his hand coming to the back of my neck, gripping it tightly as he forces me down, bending me at the waist so my top half splays across the dining room table.

I try to pull back, but Nic’s grip is strong. He presses me down so my cheek is flat on the table. When my arms fly out at my sides, searching for purchase against him, he grabs both in one hand, twisting them together until he can hold them down at the small of my back.

“Maybe I’ve done this all wrong,” he growls at my back. “Maybe I’ve given you too much freedom.”

“Nic-”

“What, little wolf?” he basically growls, making me shiver as he leans over me so his body is pressed against mine and his mouth is near my ear. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

My throat constricts. The one sorry is all I had in me. And I know another won’t save me from whatever he has planned.

“Please...” I’m not sure if it’s a plea for him to stop or...to keep going. The heat that seared my flesh the last time he touched me has returned with a vengeance as he holds me down. I just need this to be over so I can get out of here, hide upstairs away from both brothers, and have a serious conversation with my traitor of a body.

“Your pleas won’t help you now,” he taunts. “I’m not the good one, remember? I’m the selfish prick who takes what I want. Including you. If you want soft and sweet, you’re with the wrong brother.”

The reminder of his brother does nothing to cool the fire inside me. He’s right; Leo is the better brother. Softer, sweeter, kinder, but he’s not the one who is pinning me to the table

right now. And with how he acted yesterday, I'm not sure he even wants to.

"You don't seem to learn," Nic spits, his hand tightening around my wrists. "Maybe this will help." He pulls back, holding my arms in place but letting go of my neck so he can lift the bottom of my dress, exposing my bare cheeks uncovered by the skimpy panties. He groans when he sees them.

"Have you ever been spanked before?" he asks, running the palm of his hand over one of my cheeks.

"N-no," I choke out.

"I'll go easy on you tonight, pretty girl, but this is how I teach you. This is how I make sure that next time you won't make the same mistake. You're going to count each one. Understood?"

When I don't answer, he leans back in, his weight on my body as he grabs my neck, bringing my face to his. "Understood?" he repeats harshly.

"Understood."

He pulls back, palming my cheeks for a moment before he lifts his hand and brings it back down. A crack rings out in the air, and I cry out.

"Fuck!"

"Valerie."

"One."

"Good girl." He smooths his palm over the spot he just hit and then he does it again. This time hitting the other cheek with the same power.

"Two." My eyes well up as he soothes the burn for only a moment before inflicting more pain.

By the time we reach five, I'm shaking, and tears are burning my eyes. I'm half tempted to beg him to stop, but I don't, instead chewing my lip until it bleeds. I shout each of

the numbers as his palm rains down on my ass without reprieve.

At ten, I'm a full-blown mess, my cheeks wet with tears I couldn't hold back, and my lip split open from my teeth.

He lets me go, but I stay on the table.

"Valerie," he says softly. Leaning in again, he finds my face and stares deep into my eyes. When he sees the blood on my lip, his eyes darken and he leans in farther, his tongue swiping over the droplet. "Don't worry, little wolf," he purrs. "I'll kiss it better."

I should be pissed when his hands run down my body. I should be livid when he drags the bottom of my dress higher up. I should yell when he spreads my legs apart and settles himself between them.

I should do absolutely anything other than lie here, still and silent as my heart pounds in my chest.

But I don't.

I don't stop my captor from bringing his mouth to my pussy, running his tongue along my slit, finding me wet and wanting.

Even with the tears leaking from my eyes, I can't deny how turned on I am from Nic's punishment.

He hisses out a breath against my thighs. "My, my, what do we have here?"

Heat floods me, coating my entire body crimson with shame.

"You're dripping, little wolf." He chuckles darkly. "You want this as much as I do. Don't you?"

I press my lips into a thin line, determined not to give him anything.

"Answer me," he demands with a slap to my ass.

"Yes," I bite out.

“Tell me,” he orders. “Tell me what you want.” His tongue grazes over my clit, sending shock waves through me. When he pulls away, my hips follow, searching for him.

“Nic,” I whine.

“Tell me what I want to hear, little wolf.” He drags his tongue over my slit again, coming closer to my clit, but pulling his tongue away right before he touches it.

“Please.” The word leaves my lips low and desperate. “I want you to make me come.”

I can practically feel his smile against me at my resistant admission. And then, he dives in, licking and sucking my most sensitive places with abandon. Driving cries and moans from my chest, I might as well be thanking him. He adds two fingers to the mix, bringing them to my entrance and fucking me with them mercilessly.

I’m grinding against his face, desperate for release, when I feel his thumb. He drags it through my wetness first, then brings it higher until it’s circling a place I most definitely don’t want him to explore.

“Nic.” I try to push off the table, but he’s still holding me down with his other hand.

“Calm down,” he says as he circles his thumb over my second hole. “Just breathe through it,”

“No—” My complaint dies on my tongue as he sucks my clit between his lips and his two fingers curl inside me. Liquid heat pools in my belly and sparks ignite in my core.

He has me so close on the brink of ecstasy, I can’t see straight. Everything else melts away as the electricity builds, threatening to consume me. Right as I hit that peak, his thumb presses into my ass.

Fireworks explode behind my eyes, waves of pleasure radiating through my entire body. I scream, I think, unintelligible sounds leaving my lips as Nic fucks me with his fingers, filling me completely, and his tongue runs tantalizing circles over my clit until I’m twitching and whimpering from sensitivity.

“Good girl,” he hums against my skin.

When he lets go of me, I sink to the floor in a puddle of breathless pants. He pulls me back into him, settling me into his lap.

For a brief moment, I see a gentle side of him as he runs his hand through my hair and holds me tightly.

But as soon as he opens his mouth, he ruins it.

“Next time you misbehave, little wolf, know that your punishment will be far worse than a spanking and my thumb in your virgin ass. Understood?”

Lifting my head up to look at him, his dark eyes sear me. Maybe it’s my orgasm high that’s making me weak, but I can only nod. “Understood.”

VAL

I still haven't seen Leo, and it's making me anxious. And after my dinner with Nic ended with me coming on his fingers, shame coils in my gut any time I think of seeing him. Either of them, really, but being with Leo after his brother has gotten me to come undone for him twice now has guilt shrouding over me.

Nic finds me fighting my internal demons while I sit by the pool, hoping the sun will take mercy on me and burn me alive.

"We're going out tonight." His voice is stern, no nonsense.

My will to fight seems to be running on low, so I simply nod and stop myself from turning around to look at him.

"Valerie." I hear his shoes hit the cement, one tap after another, until his shadow is blocking my sun as his body crouches behind me. "Shower. Put on a pretty face and get dressed. We leave in an hour. There's an outfit laid out on the bed. You're to wear *all of it*. Understood?"

When I nod again, his hand launches forward, fingers gripping my jaw and turning my head to face him. "Say you understand, little wolf."

"I understand."

On my bed, I find a red dress that looks eerily similar to the one I wore the night I tried to kill him. There's a pair of black heels with red bottoms, and my stomach clenches at the brand recognition. Louboutins. Beside the shoes are two black boxes, each tied with a bow. I don't open the jewelry, not wanting to see what else he's thrown his money away on just

yet. Instead, I move to the shower. There's probably thousands of dollars' worth of clothing on that bed that he wants me to wear tonight. It makes me as uncomfortable as it does resentful.

After I wash my sins down the drain and scrub my skin clean, I pamper myself with the lotions on my vanity and paint my face with a layer of makeup, sealing the look with red lipstick.

There's no bra with the dress, just a lacy black thong. Once I get the thing on, I realize why. The back dips so low that any bra would be visible. At least the front of the dress has built-in pads that lift my girls. I slide my feet into the expensive shoes and stand up before reaching back to grab the first of the two black boxes off the bed.

Untying the ribbon, I pull off the lid to reveal more diamonds than I've ever seen in one place. It's a choker with rows of the glittering gems. When I clip it at the back of my throat, the thick band of diamonds looks more like a collar, a thought that sends a buzzing energy through me. Is this another symbol of his ownership?

I try to shake off my reaction as I open the second box, expecting a matching pair of earrings. But the shiny bulbous object with a heart-shaped gem on the end is not earrings.

I drop the box on the bed with a gasp.

I'm pretty sure that's a butt plug staring back at me. Quickly, I shut the box and toss it farther up the bed, as if it might bite me and turn around to face the mirror.

The girl who looks back at me isn't me. She looks strange, beautiful, with rosy cheeks and shiny dark hair.

Months ago, I didn't look like this. I was lucky if I washed my hair once a week, tying it back into a ponytail every other day. My skin was a pale olive, looking like it hadn't seen the sun in months. Now it has a healthy glow, the moisturizer I found in my bathroom leaving it soft and smooth.

I wonder what that girl would think of me now?

Would she be filled with shame, knowing that she's living in her enemy's house? Anger, that she failed her one mission?

Or, lust?

My thighs press together instinctively when I think of the two men who exist outside these bedroom walls.

Butterflies swarm my stomach, anxiety rippling through my body.

"Valerie." Nic's voice breaks through my spiraling thoughts. I find him standing in my doorway, dark hair slicked back, clean shaven, wearing a fitted black suit that hugs him perfectly.

My skin heats under his gaze. It feels wrong being attracted to him, and I don't want to admit that my body wants him. *More* of him.

I cross my arms over my chest, a feeble attempt to cover my tits from him. The silky material dips low at my cleavage before clinging to my hips. It's long, reaching the floor but leaving a long slit exposing my right leg.

"You look stunning," he says, walking farther into my room.

"Thank you," I breathe.

"Did you like all your gifts?" The corner of his mouth ticks up as his eyes roam over me before meeting my eyes again.

"Yes, thank you."

"And you're wearing them? *All* of them?" His eyes have a knowing glitter to them.

"Yep," I pop the 'p' and step toward him, hoping he won't ask about the plug that is still in its box.

"Turn around," he instructs, and it's like his voice is connected right to my pulse, because it's racing in the next second.

"Aren't we going out?" I do my best to redirect, but Nic is smarter than me. He reaches forward, tugging me in his grasp and turning me around.

“Valerie, if I bed you over this bed and lift up your dress, will I find a plug in your ass or not?” The question is spoken low and serious, a warning echoing in his tone.

“Nic-”

“Yes or no,” he growls.

“No.”

He pushes me forward, as if he doesn't believe me, lifting my skirt and pulling down my thong in quick succession. When he finds me empty, another rough growl leaves his mouth.

“Bad girl,” he murmurs. “Didn't I tell you to wear everything on the bed?”

“Yes, but-”

He doesn't let me finish, his fingers gripping into my skin harshly as he silences me. “No butts, little wolf.” He spots the box with the plug in it and yanks it open.

“I can't-” I'm wiggling in his grip, trying to get away, but all I end up doing is frustrating myself.

“Can't what?”

I swallow thickly, my cheeks blushing under his scrutiny. “I can't put that in me.”

He laughs, but it's a darkened chuckle that makes me shiver. “If you needed help, all you had to do was ask.”

Sweeping his fingers through my slit, he finds me wet for him, earning me a groan of approval. He works tiny circles over my clit, making me whine breathlessly with nowhere to go but to give in to his touch. My head and body are once again at war. One wanting to relax into the feeling and the other knowing that this is wrong. Bad. Needs to be stopped. But when he adds two fingers into my pussy, working them in and out, my body wins over, and I become breathless and needy.

“Nic-”

“That’s it, now you’re ready.” He withdraws his fingers before he makes me come, leaving me hot and wanting.

I turn a bright shade of red as I hear him pull a bottle from his suit jacket and pop open the lid. He drizzles the cold liquid on my backside, letting it drip down to the hole he intends to fill.

“Stay still and let me help you,” he says, running a hand down my back.

I whimper as I feel the head of the plug enter my ass. Nic takes his time, coating the object in the lube and slowly working it into my virgin hole. With his other hand, he grazes my clit, giving me the slightest bit of pleasure that has me opening up for him. I swallow a moan at how full I feel.

“Good job, baby.” His tone is husky as he praises me before pulling the thong back up my legs and the dress over my ass.

My brain is still hazy as I lay over the bed, needy for my release. I hate that he controls my body so well, that one touch of his fingers has me weak, putty in the palm of his hands.

“Valerie.” Nic rolls me over so his face is hovering over mine. “Listen very closely. That plug doesn’t leave your ass and you don’t touch yourself. If you’re good, I’ll give you exactly what you want when we get home. Understood?”

He eyes me expectantly, always wanting a verbal answer I don’t want to give. Don’t want to admit to.

“Understood,” I repeat.



ONE OF THE goons is waiting outside next to a black Range Rover. When Nic walks me out of the house, the goon opens the door for Nic to shove me into the back seat. Crossing to the other side, he slips in next to me.

“What restaurant are we going to?” I ask once the driver has us out of the estate, racing down the highway.

“It’s not a restaurant,” Nic answers. His attention isn’t on me anymore, instead it’s on his phone.

“I thought you said we were going out?” I question.

“We are.”

The rest of the drive is made in silence. I wiggle on the seat, watching the scenery pass as I try not to focus on the intrusion in my ass. I’m confused when we pull up to the Pierre Hotel. An attendant opens the door, and Nic helps me out of the car, my fingers clutching onto the black sleeve of his suit as I slide off the leather seat.

The white building looks antique but classic, golden hued lights shining from the overhang, and a slim attendant gives Nic a curt nod. There are other people here, making their way into the hotel dressed in tuxedos and elegant dresses.

I tug on Nic’s sleeve harder. “What are we doing here?”

“It’s a charity thing.” He shrugs. There are flashes around us, people with cameras pushed behind a velvet rope while they shout and point their devices toward us.

Us.

“Why are they taking pictures of us?” I ask, but Nic presses his palm to the small of my back and guides me into the building.

“It happens,” he answers coolly. “People take pictures at these kinds of things.”

I feel a panic rise in my chest, my stomach churning. This is one thing I wasn’t expecting. He’s taking me out of the house, and to some fancy charity ball.

This must be another game. Everything with Nic is a mind-fuck, a way to get under my skin. Is this just another display of wealth? Another reminder of everything I didn’t have anymore that was taken away from me?

Nic keeps me close to him as he weaves us through the crowd, leading us to a round table. He pulls back a chair and gestures for me to sit. I think I should be trying to run, trying... something. But I sit instead.

“Good girl.” Nic leans in to whisper the words into my ear, sending a shiver down my spine.

I’m compliant. Just the way he wants me to be. It makes me sick, but I stay still as Nic takes the seat next to me at the filled table. Six other strangers surround us, and when I look around, I realize they’re all staring at me.

“Who’s the girl?”

I wring my fingers together as I slowly meet the gaze of the man who spoke, knowing in my bones exactly who it is. He looks different from the pictures online. Something about googling his name and scrolling through the images made him appear more sinister. Here, he could be any other rich man at the event. His gray, salt and pepper-streaked hair is slicked back, and he wears a dark tux with a silk bow tie. He smiles at me with his round cheeks, and if I didn’t know better, I would be disarmed by its playfulness.

Paulie Colombo looks like he could be any businessman, someone you’d see in a boardroom. I expected him to be more like the gangsters in the movies Leo and I watched, sitting at a card table in the back of a deli. But Paulie isn’t a low-level gangster; no, he’s the King of New York.

And he looks every bit his moniker sitting at a front table at one of NYC’s famous charity events.

“Valerie,” Nic answers his father. “She’s a new friend.”

Paulie smiles as his eyes lower, lingering on my exposed cleavage. It takes every bit of effort not to scowl and cover myself.

“This,” Nic pauses, pointing a finger across the time, “is my father.”

Paulie’s eyes roam over me for a long minute, before he meets my eyes again. “Nice to meet you.” He raises his glass.

I don’t know why I expected him to recognize me. I thought there’d be some flicker of realization in his eyes the first time he saw me. But he holds the crystal tumbler, waiting for me to take a sip of my own champagne. I eye the glass. I didn’t get it myself, and I can’t remember if it was here when I

sat or if a waiter brought it over. I've been too stuck in my mind, focusing on the man across the table.

I wasn't prepared to be sitting so close to him.

Lifting the champagne flute, I tilt it in his direction before I bring the glass to my lips. My mouth is dry even as the sparkling wine hits my tongue. I can't keep my eyes off Paulie as he finishes his drink and sets it back down on the white-clothed table.

"This is my ma," Nic continues, pointing to the woman next to Paulie. Gloria Colombo is every bit the perfect mob wife. She wears a sleek black dress that hangs off her shoulders elegantly, her dyed blonde hair tied back in a low bun. She smiles at me with her mauve-colored lips, flashing a bit of white teeth.

"Nice to meet you," she tells me. "I'm Gloria." She seems nice enough, but I know looks can be deceiving. And if she's spent thirty years married to the mafia boss next to her, she can't be that innocent.

I nod, too afraid to speak. My voice will probably betray me if I open my mouth. I don't know if it's fear or anger that will rush from my lips. It could be the tears of my ten-year-old self, or the anger of a teenager left with nothing. So I seal them up tight, not quite ready to reveal myself.

Nic slides his hand over to my knee under the table, squeezing my flesh. I'm not sure what his endgame is here, but then again, I never know with him.

He introduces me to the others at the table, Silvio and Vera DePaulo, and David and Maria Colletti. I recognize both of the men's names, as I think I've seen them in my research. But nothing I read was concrete, just ideas of what positions these men might hold in *la famiglia*.

I mumble polite greetings and take another gulp of the champagne. My hands feel clammy as I grip my fork and push around the dinner that's served to me. Around me, the men talk, and Gloria and Vera gossip next to each other. Maria,

David's wife, sits on the other side of me. She glances over at me a few times before she attempts conversation.

"How long have you and Nicky been together?" Her accent is thick, reminding me of the way Uncle Johnny sounded.

"Uhm," I stumbled on my words. "We're—"

"A few months," Nic cuts me off, slinging an arm around the back of my chair as he flashes Maria a charming smile.

We're not together, I want to say. The thought of being with Nic makes my stomach clench. But then I realize he's not completely lying. I have lived with him for a few months now, even if part of it was spent in a dirty basement cage.

And I did let him touch me... I let my guard down for him.

This isn't what I wanted. I wanted revenge, not... whatever this is. I don't want to sit with his family. I don't want to look into the eyes of the man I plan to kill.

Anxiety rises inside me, my lungs threatening to explode with rapid breaths as my heart pounds harder.

"Please excuse me." I tug the napkin from my lap, slapping it onto the table.

Nic grabs my arm before I'm able to get away, his dark eyes staring up at me. "Don't go far," he warns, and I wonder if his family knows that I'm a captive, that this isn't a normal relationship. "I'll find you," he adds.

I nod as I pull from his grasp and head to the bathroom, walking as fast as I can without running. Once I'm behind the wooden door, far from the Colombo family, I let my back hit the tiled wall and slide to the floor. My breath leaves me in loud puffs as I struggle to regain control of the fear buzzing through my body.

Pressing my hand to my chest, I will my heart to slow its frantic beating, to push the anxiety back down to its void. My chest tightens as my mouth forgets to suck in oxygen, and I wrap my arms around myself.

This is what I wanted.

I wanted to see the man who ruined my life while I tore him to shreds.

But I don't feel in control of the situation anymore, not even a little bit. A sick feeling lingers in the pit of my stomach, warning me to run, but Nic's words ring through my head. I'll *find you*. I'm stuck in this now, signed a contract with the devil, and he's going to force me to see it through.

I wonder if Leo could convince his brother to let me go if I asked? If I promised to leave their family alone, to never come after his father again? But why would he? I took it too far when I pointed a gun at him, and now he owns me.

Grabbing a cloth napkin from the basket on the sink, I dab at my skin, soaking up all the tears and fixing my smudged makeup. It's not perfect, but it's better. I inhale a deep breath and steel my spine before I open the bathroom door.

"You okay?" It's Paulie's voice that greets me as I step back into the hall.

"Yeah," I choke on the word, startled to have him this close to me.

"You ran off pretty quick." He chuckles. "Wasn't sure if something happened,"

"I'm fine." How I respond in a steady tone, I'm not sure. I feel like I'm going to faint. If he knows I'm here to kill him... he'll try to kill me first. Right? That's how the mafia works, kill or be killed. Paranoia blankets me as I watch Paulie's gaze run the length of my body.

"I'm sure." His lips tick up into a smile, one that matches the sinister smirk I've seen on Nic far too many times now. "You seem like a nice girl, Val." He runs a hand over his jaw. "You Italian?"

"Yes."

"Full blooded?" His question makes me cringe. I feel like a poodle at a dog show, being poked and prodded, asked to prove my purity. It leaves a bitter taste on my tongue.

"Yes," I answer.

Paulie nods, satisfied, before he pushes off the wall.

“Wait,” I call after him. Paulie spins on his heels, his eyebrows lifting, a questioning look on his face. “Do you...” I take a shaky breath, gathering the strength to confront him. “Do you know who I am?”

Paulie chuckles. “And why would I know who you are, doll?”

“Because you killed my father.”

He pauses for a moment, the ring on his finger clicking against the crystal tumbler in his hand. “Who’s your father?” he finally asks, and the question slices through me the same as it did when Nic asked. His life continued. He woke up every morning, took a shower, and drank some coffee. He got to live, to experience his sons’ lives, to breathe in fresh air.

All while my father was dead.

“Soressi,” I answer, my voice filled with emotion. “Anthony Soressi.”

“Ahh,” he muses. “Vegas, hmm?”

“Yes.” His features don’t change much as he thinks about my father.

“Bad news, kid.” He smiles, taking a long sip of his drink before continuing. “I didn’t kill him, but I wish you the best”—he waves his glass at me—“on whatever this little revenge tour is.” He chuckles. “But are you sure you know what you’re doing, doll?”

His pet name grates on me and my fingers bunch into fists at my sides.

Arrogant prick.

When I don’t answer, he tosses me one last smile and turns away, greeting his friends as he heads back to the table. Something simmers beneath my skin. A heat that burns and sparks, coursing its way through my body.

Anger.

An old friend, tried and true. Only I can't help but to be angry with myself. Angry for getting myself into this situation, for letting Nic use me and degrade me and then bring me here. Angry that Paulie was able to see right through me.

I want to go home, or to Nic's home. I'm about to beg Nic for a reprieve when I get back to the table, but he stands, taking my palm into his and leading me toward the dance floor.

"I don't dance." I tug on his sleeve as I mutter the lie. I just don't dance with him.

"Humor me, little wolf." He smiles as he spins me to face him, taking my hands in his.

There's a band playing a slow song, a pretty singer in a dark dress belting the words into a microphone. The event, whatever it is, is beautiful. People sway on the dance floor, and for a moment, I wish I was one of them. Unfazed by the exchange of wealth in this room, or the presence of one of the biggest mafia figures.

But I'm not.

"So," Nic starts, "how did it feel to talk to the man you plan to kill?"

I close my eyes, breathing in deeply as I follow Nic's lead. That's the aim of his game? Make me face his father?

"Different," I whisper. "Not the same as the man in the..."

"Warehouse," Nic finishes my sentence. "Why?"

I shrug, but his eyes are glued to me, waiting for the answer. "I guess, because I know what your father did. I didn't know what that man did."

"So it's about motive then?" He spins me around before pulling me in closer. "Do you need a reason to kill, pretty girl?" His warm breath hits my ear as he whispers. "A killer with morals?" I can hear the smile in his words as he taunts me.

But why shouldn't I be a killer with morals? What's wrong with knowing *why* someone should die? Death is final. I want

it to mean something.

I know what Paulie Colombo did.

He killed my father.

Ruined my life.

And God knows what else.

If anyone deserves to die, it's him.

VAL

Once, when I was about eight, Johnny's girlfriend took me shopping. There was a child-sized mannequin in Macy's wearing a scarlet red dress with a silky bodice and a fluffy tulle skirt. I think she knew the minute I saw it that I wanted the dress.

I twirled in front of the dressing room mirror on repeat, loving the feeling of the smooth material against my skin, the way the skirt flowed outward as I spun in circles.

She ended up buying the dress for me, despite knowing I had no reason to wear it. But it didn't matter much to me. I didn't need a reason to wear the dress, to love myself. And my father, when he came home to find his little girl dressed up running through the house, smiled widely and told me I was beautiful.

I don't feel beautiful in my current dress as I leap from Nic's car and hurry into the house. My chest still aches from seeing his father, and I want to get away from him, away from his games. A momentary reprieve.

I can see the glow of the fire from the entryway, and it has me pausing in my tracks.

Leo.

It must be after ten, our normal time when we hide away and forget his brother even exists. Has he been waiting for me? My heels tap against the hardwoods as I make my way toward the living room.

I find Leo lounging in one of the oversized armchairs, a glass of whiskey in his hand as he stares at the raging fire. I haven't seen him since he left me in the basement, and seeing him now has butterflies swarming in my chest.

"Hi," I mutter sheepishly.

"Hi," he repeats.

"Oh my God," Nic drawls, coming up behind me. "You two are so boring." He shucks his suit jacket from his body, tossing it onto the leather sofa. "Have you even fucked her yet, Leo?" he asks, making my heart stutter, his voice menacing as he stands in the center of the room, removing his cuff links as he begins to roll his sleeves.

"Nic—" Leo sits up in his chair, something twisting on his face as he says his brother's name.

"So that's a no," Nic cuts in before his brother can even finish his sentence. Shame washes through me when I think about what I did with Nic, what I let him do to me. I can still feel the stab of branches and rocks beneath my body as his tongue worshiped me that first time. My gut churns from the thought. I've let that man touch me three times now...

Nic turns away from Leo, his eyes refocused on me, like a predator hunting its prey.

"What did you say to my father, Val?" he asks, a smile growing on his lips, stretching them wide with a menacing smirk.

"Nothing, I-I... I stammer, my tongue twisting in my mouth as shame flushes my cheeks a rosy pink.

"No." He clicks his tongue, taking a slow step toward me. "You asked him if he recognized you. Didn't you?"

My tongue feels heavy in my mouth, glued to the roof of it. The look on Nic's face has me squeezing my lips shut. I don't know the right answer to his question.

"Nic." Leo stands from his chair, running a hand through his wild black tendrils. "Just leave her alone."

“No.” Nic slices his hand through the air, silencing his brother. “She’s here to learn. She wants to be a killer, she wants revenge, and how will she ever succeed if we don’t teach her? Hmm?”

Leo doesn’t answer. Now it’s his turn to seal his mouth shut.

“You have to learn, little wolf.” He directs his attention back to me. “If you ask someone if they recognize you, you’re giving yourself away. That was stupid,” he scolds, his tone as biting as it is condescending. “Now he can see you coming.”

I swallow down the lump building in my throat. “I didn’t realize-“

“You didn’t *think*,” he interrupts. Then he moves again, two more long steps until he’s right in front of me. “And now you need to learn your lesson. Do you know the best way to ensure you don’t repeat your mistakes? Hmm?”

My heart is hammering in my chest, and a trickle of sweat falls from my forehead. I regret talking to Paulie; it brought me nothing but grief. But I longed to see recognition on his face, for him to see me as the consequence of his action, like a ghost come back to haunt him.

But that’s not what I did, so Nic is right on that one. I just let him know that I exist, and he’s not afraid of me.

No one is afraid of a girl with no power to wield.

Nic’s hand reaches forward, dusting a stray tear from my cheek. “Don’t cry yet, beautiful,” he whispers. “I haven’t even punished you yet.”

“What are you going to do?” My voice is hoarse, and I have to will my body to be still, to not tremble while Nic hovers over me.

“What do you think, Leo? How should we punish our little wolf?” His eyes are glued to me as he asks his brother’s opinion, his thumb still stroking my cheek.

“Nothing,” Leo hisses, coming up behind Nic. “Leave her alone. *Cazzo!*” He runs his hands through his hair again,

pulling at the tendrils as he shouts the Italian curse.

“You’re weak.” Nic smiles. “I knew you were.” He turns from me now to face his brother. “Think of this as a lesson for you as well then.”

Nic grabs my hand, pulling me over to the edge of the sofa. “Bend over,” he instructs, pushing on my back.

“Nic—” My voice is shaky as he forces me into his desired position, bending over the arm of the sofa with my ass in the air.

“Pull up your dress,” he instructs, instead of answering my question.

I swallow down my fear and do as he asks, pinching the red material between my fingers and tugging it up with shaky hands. Nic drags it the rest of the way, letting the silk sit on the small of my back. Slipping a finger under the hem of my panties, he drags them down my legs, letting them rest around my ankles.

“I want you to count. Understood?”

“Nic—”

“You asked for this, little wolf,” he says, leaning over me, pushing me into the couch while his warm breath hits my ear. “When I asked you what you wanted, you said revenge. Remember that, Val? I gave you a choice. You could’ve died, your punishment for shooting at me...” He bucks his hips with the words, his clothed body pushing against my bare ass, nudging at the plug I forgot was there. “Or, you could live with me and I would teach you how to get your revenge. This is part of the lesson, Val.”

I nod, blinking away the tears that are building in my eyes.

You asked for this. The words echo through my head. I did, didn’t I? The second I walked into that restaurant, the second I planted that seed of revenge, I asked for this. All of this.

The weight of Nic’s body leaves me as he stands up. “You have to learn,” he tells me, his hand rubbing over the swell of my ass before he pulls back. His hand slams back down,

slapping against my bare flesh, and I scream out, my hips moving, trying to wiggle away from him, but he grabs me, straightening them before he spanks me again.

His palm finds my ass over and over, the slaps raining down as pain settles in my sensitive skin. My heart is still racing and tears stream from my eyes, but I don't ask him to stop.

When he finally slows, I suck in a breath, filling my lungs with oxygen as I will myself to calm down. *Breathe in. Breathe out.*

"Your turn," Nic says, reminding me that Leo didn't leave. My head drops, crimson coating my cheeks and marking my embarrassment. Embarrassment at being punished, spanked like a disobedient child. Leo witnessing it only adds to the humiliation that coats my skin. The worst part of it all is that I know if either of them would touch me down there, they'd find me soaking wet.

"No, *cazzo*, no," Leo spits out. "I'm not *spanking* her. *Sei pazzo!*"

"Do it." Nic's voice darkens, his tone low and commanding. I don't move, don't insert myself into their argument. If I've learned one thing, it's that Nic always gets what he wants.

I hear Leo huff, then the tapping of his feet as he steps toward me. His palm lightly rubs over my red and raw flesh. "*Spiacente, tesoro mio,*" he murmurs softly.

I can sense the exact moment Leo sees the bejeweled plug in my ass. His hand stalls and silence sits heavily between the three of us.

"Oh, yeah." Nic laughs, breaking the silence. "I bought her some new jewels, brother. Do you like them?"

I hold my breath, waiting to see what happens, what Leo will do. I'm surprised when I feel him moving closer behind me, then his fingers graze the plug, sending shock waves through my body. He wiggles it a bit, and a moan escapes me. I've dreamt of Leo touching me, just not like this. Even so,

instead of dreading more punishment, with him, now I'm eager for it.

"I think she likes it." I can hear the smile in Nic's voice as he taunts. "I bet if you spank her, brother, she'll like that too."

Leo smooths his hand over my ass, and the feeling silences his brother for a moment. "Are you ready, tesoro?" he questions, and I nod. Leo's voice calms the storm raging inside me. When his hand comes down on my ass, it's different from Nic's. I'm surprised by the strength behind it, and when he stops in the middle to tug on the plug again, I feel myself pushing up my ass for him. "She does like it," he murmurs softly, and then rains down a series of smacks to my ass cheeks that leave me panting.

When he's done, when Nic is satisfied with his punishment, he steps back from me.

"You did so good, little wolf," Nic tells me, running his hands over my ass to soothe the ache that's settled there. "I'm so proud of you,"

I'm ashamed of the pride that wells up inside of me at his words.

"Good girl," he whispers, and when his foot comes between mine, widening my stance, I allow him access. His fingers slip through my folds easily, spreading my wetness up to my clit, where he gives it a light pinch. The action makes my lips part. "Well, look at this." He chuckles. "She's wet for us, brother."

I'm immediately ready for him, my pussy aching even though I know I shouldn't want him. I should be appalled by him touching me. And even more, I should be ashamed to let him do it in front of Leo.

But I'm not.

"How about I kiss it better, hmm?" His breath blows onto my sex, and I clench in anticipation. "Do you want that, Val?"

"Yes," I hiss, desperation taking over hesitation.

I'm happy when Nic doesn't talk again, instead diving in. His fingers grip onto my hips and he pulls me back, giving himself better access to my cunt. I cry out as he continues, his tongue pushing into my hole, fucking me with abandon.

I've never been touched like this, never been worshiped in this sort of way. Nic is like a wrecking ball, coming into my life and tearing apart everything I thought I knew about myself. I crave his touch, even when I know it's wrong, when I know I should hate him.

When I think about the punishment he just inflicted on me, I should want to run, get away from the psychopath who's kidnapped me. But I don't run.

Instead, I lean into it, letting him corrupt me.

Nic's tongue finds my clit, lapping over the swollen bundle of nerves, and I fall apart, my body convulsing as I scream out my release.

When he finishes, I slink down to the floor, my knees hitting the hardwood while I right myself.

Nic licks my juices from his lips before swiping at his mouth with the back of his hand. He looks hungry, feral even. Like he just had a taste of something he's not quite finished with yet.

"What do you say, Val?" he asks, an amused look transforming his features.

"Thank you," I breathe. I feel messy in the wake of my orgasm, my thighs sticking together, black tears trailing down my cheeks. I can only imagine what sort of a rat's nest my hair must be.

"Good girl," he praises. His eyes roam over to his brother, who stands to the right of us, his eyes glued to me.

My gaze trails down, finding his cock straining beneath the fabric of his sweatpants.

"I know you want to fuck my girl," Nic says to his brother. "You've been having your secret meetings with her, playing the good guy." He laughs, and if I wasn't so turned on, I'd be

worried about what this means. That he knows of the time we've been spending together... "If you ask nicely, brother, maybe Val here will take care of you."



There's a tingling sensation covering my entire body, but it stems from my core. An unrelenting ache has settled there, and my body pleads for something, anything. I need to feel. My eyes dance between the two brothers, both of them standing above me, and it feels natural for them to be there.

Nic's hand comes down, palming his cock beneath his dress slacks. Leo's eyes are still on me, the deep chocolate brown flecked with sparks of warm caramel that shine as watches me.

"What do you want, Val?" Nic asks, and I'm certain he knows, that he can tell by the way my chest heaves and my eyes alternate between the two.

"You," I breathe, admitting my desire. "Leo. I-I want you both." If this is the only way to have Leo's hands on me, I'm embracing it. Even if the words falling from my tongue so easily have my whole body heating with amplified shame.

A smile draws up on Nic's cheeks at hearing my words. I don't think he's surprised by my answer, but it sparks something in him, some sort of primal lust that has him moving towards me again. He squats, bringing himself down to my level. "Are you sure that's what you want, little wolf?" he asks. "If you don't say no now, we might not be able to stop."

"We're not doing this," Leo practically heaves his denial. It's clear that it pains him to stop this, whatever this is. Nic

waves a hand, silencing him.

“It’s her choice,” he says, his dark eyes still watching me. “So, what do you say, pretty girl?”

It’s funny, the back and forth of lust and fear that Nic ignites within me. I don’t want to know what a therapist would have to say about this.

“Yes,” I whisper. “I want this.”

His sparkle with excitement, tongue peeking out to wet his lips.

“Then crawl,” Nic demands. “Crawl to my brother and show him that you want this.”

Mortification burns in my belly, but my desire overpowers it. I press my hands to the rich wood and move my knees, my dress trailing behind me as I crawl toward Leo. He watches me the entire time, his eyes drilling into my body as I sway my hips.

If I could hear his thoughts, I think they would be echoing mine. *This is wrong, wrong, wrong, but I want it.*

I want to tell him to push those warnings away and just be in the moment. Take what he wants, what I’m willing to give.

Nic doesn’t have the same reservations as his brother, clearly, and I can feel his gaze on me from behind as I kneel before Leo.

With hesitant hands, I reach for his waistband, tugging on the elastic material. “*Tesoro*,” he says, stopping me. His palm comes to my cheek, and he tilts my head up to meet his gaze. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I want to,” I whisper, my voice raspy with need. “Don’t you want me to?” I’m desperate to finish what we started in the gym, even if it means Nic is watching. Nothing else matters to me right now.

His head dips back as he swallows his groan. “Of course I want you to.” A strangled sound of frustration leaves his lips, and his eyes bounce between me and Nic. His thumb strokes across my cheek. “Are you sure?”

The question tosses the power back to me, and I soak it in.

Despite my prisoner status, I could say no, and these men would stop. Maybe thinking that makes me naïve, but I believe it.

“I’m sure,” I tell him, my tongue darting across my lips. He groans in response and allows me to tug down his sweatpants, pulling the boxers along with them and freeing his cock. My thighs clench at the sight of him.

I touch him tentatively, my fingers wrapping around his thick length that takes my breath away, his skin smooth beneath my fingers. I start with his balls, licking a circle over the sensitive area that makes him moan immediately. His fingers come to the back of my head, tangling in my hair and massaging my scalp as I run my tongue along his cock from the base to the tip.

When I suck him between my lips, hollowing out my cheeks and taking him into my mouth, his fingers tighten in my hair. I start to find a rhythm, taking him down to the back of my throat and licking my way back up. His hand moves with me, just barely pushing my head along.

I think he’ll come this way. I think he’ll lose himself down the back of my throat, and I want him too, badly, but Nic stops us, grabbing the back of my head and yanking me off his brother.

“Not yet,” he scolds.

Leo groans, and when I look up, he’s rubbing a hand down his stubble, his engorged cock bobbing below.

“Do you want to fuck her mouth, brother?” Nic asks. His fingers are still entwined with my hair, holding roughly, tilting my head up so I’m looking at Leo.

The blow job has softened the edges of his uncertainty. I can see the longing that lingers on his features. I want him to say yes. I want him to fuck me. I want the softness he brings in contrast to Nic’s harsh words. Heat rushes through my body, gathering in my lower stomach.

I want everything he has to give.

“Well?” Nic prods.

“Yes,” Leo says, his eyes focused on mine.

“And what about me?” Nic’s smile is stretched wide as he looks down at me on my knees. “Are you going to let me fuck your sweet cunt while my brother uses your mouth, little wolf?”

The dirty words shoot through me like a bolt of lightning.

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. But still, the single word of agreement slips through my lips faster than I can stop it.

“Yes.”

“Then take off your dress and get on your hands and knees.” Nic tugs on my hair.

My fingers shake as I clasp them around the zipper at the side of my dress and tug it down before I slip the thin straps off my shoulders. The red ensemble slides down my body, and when I look up, both brothers are staring at me with lustful gazes.

I crawl out of the puddle of fabric and get back to kneeling, placing my palms on the floor like he told me to.

Nic’s palm finds my lower back, trailing over my bare hip and ass. Unlike the brutal smacks he gave me earlier, this touch is gentle. When he removes it, I hear the jingle of his belt buckle. I squeeze my thighs together as the anticipation builds within me.

“Are you sure about this, *tesoro*?” Leo asks as he kneels in front of me, his knees hitting the plush area rug.

“Yes.” *No. Maybe? I don’t know.*

But I’m not turning back now. Not when Leo’s naked body is displayed before me, the creases of his abs leading into a V down to his cock.

“If you say stop, that’s it. This is over.” His eyes move from me to his brother.

“She gets it.” I can practically hear Nic rolling his eyes. “But our little wolf doesn’t want it soft and sweet.” His hand

claps against my ass cheek as I feel him press himself up against my backside. Trailing his fingers up my body, he finds my hair again and twirls the locks into his grip. He yanks my head back so I'm looking up to Leo. "She wants it rough, brother. Don't you, Valerie?"

Despite how many times Nic has asked me, my answer has been the same. Leo's eyes are boring into mine, waiting for my answer. He doesn't believe me. Or maybe he thinks his brother is forcing me. But I can tell from the hunger in his eyes that he wants this as much as I do.

"I want this," I repeat, my eyes never leaving his when I say it.

Leo hisses a breath, his hand coming forward until his fingers graze my cheek with such softness, flutters take over arousal. "Open your mouth and stick out your tongue."

My lips part, opening wide enough for him to bring the head of his cock between them. He pushes himself into my mouth, reaching the back of my throat. Behind me, Nic lines his length up with my entrance, pushing into me from another angle that makes me whimper.

I feel so full as they find a rhythm, pushing and pulling in sync so my body moves easily between the two of them. With one hand, Nic plays with the plug in my ass, almost fucking me with it, while his other hand grips onto my hip. He thrusts himself into me so hard, my eyes squeeze shut, and I moan around Leo's cock.

"*Cazzo*," Leo hisses.

"Jesus," Nic says. "Your pussy is squeezing me so tight, little wolf. You love this, don't you? Being fucked by two cocks at once with this plug in your ass. You're such a needy girl; you can't get enough."

"Shh." Leo's palm finds my cheek as my eyes meet his, rubbing his thumb against my skin. "You look beautiful like this, *tesoro*. Watching you take my cock is the prettiest thing I've ever seen."

The mixture of degradation and praise has my skin burning with pleasure. Nic wraps his arm around my waist, giving his fingers access to my aching clit.

“She’s so fucking wet.” Nic chuckles. “So fucking desperate for us, huh, little wolf.”

I moan a strangled answer around Leo’s cock.

“I think that’s a yes.” It’s Leo who laughs now and the teasing words from his lips somehow turn me on even more.

Nic rubs quick circles over my clit, and I can feel my orgasm building. Each slap of skin, with each thrust of his hips, has it gaining momentum.

“That’s it, come for us.” It’s Nic’s husky order that finally pushes me over the edge. My lips release Leo’s length on a scream as fireworks explode behind my eyes. Pleasure rolls through me in what seems like never-ending waves as Nic continues playing with my body until it feels weightless. The whole time, I keep my eyes on Leo’s face, his expression strained by arousal as he watches my release. There’s a mix of hunger and awe swirling in his gaze that I know I’ll be dreaming about tonight.

No sooner do I catch my breath, Nic comes next, his cock seizing inside of me, and when he pulls out, I can feel his orgasm dripping down my thighs.

“Open your mouth, sweet girl,” Leo tells me, mirroring his first demand, his one hand still gently cupping my face. He pumps his cock, and when he finally lets go, ropes of cum land on my tongue and chin. I swallow everything he gives me, licking my lips afterwards while still holding his beautiful eyes. I could come again at the sight of him overtaken by lust. “*Bellissima*,” Leo praises me, warmth flooding my body.

“Good girl,” Nic adds as he places a blanket over my shoulders before pulling me into his chest. It’s the first time he’s hugged me, shown intimacy, but I melt into his grasp. “You did such a good job.”

Leo joins me on the other side, peppering my shoulder and neck with kisses, and in this moment, taken care of by the two

of them, I feel better than I ever have.

Stronger. *Sexier.*

Empowered.



I wake up in Nic's bed.

Completely naked, with a soreness lingering in my core.

There's an ache in my chest when I realize it's just us. Leo's nowhere to be seen, probably in his own bed.

It would be weird if he slept with his brother, right? But he *did*... in a way. My mind is spinning. Did I really sleep with them both? Not to mention, at the same time. Half of me feels ashamed of myself. But the other half? That part of me is turned on at the thought of them using me from both sides, and in such different ways. Leo's tender palm on my cheek, Nic's demanding grip on my ass.

"Good morning, little wolf." My captor is propped up on his elbow, his bare chest on display, showcasing the dark curls that pave the path to the sheet tangled at his waist.

My throat is raw and dry as I go to speak. I'm not sure if it's a symptom of the events of last night or the depraved thoughts circling through my mind.

I fucked them *both*.

Both brothers at one time.

I want to pretend I didn't have a choice. That Nic forced me, the threat of death hanging over my head, but I don't really believe that. And one word from my lips would have stopped Leo. He's not anything like his brother.

“I have a gift for you.” Nic smiles around the words, the corner of his lips wrapping up into a sinister smirk.

I press my lips into a thin smile. “What is it?”

Nic’s grin is scaring me. Fear creeps down my spine, my whole body on edge. I don’t know if I should trust the man in any capacity. Sometimes, he’s kind. He shows it through expensive clothes and gifts, but also the rare softened eyes and caressing kisses. But his mean side is bitter. The push and pull of the way he treats me is volatile.

“You’ll have to wait to find out.”

My stomach churns.

Before I can roll away from him and get out of his room, his hands are on me. His fingers trail from my cheek down the path of my skin to where the hem of the silk sheet barely covers my tits.

I suck in a breath. “Nic...”

“Are you having regrets about last night, little wolf?”

Am I?

The swirling vortex that is my thoughts says yes, but the idea of admitting my regrets to Nic only makes me more nauseous.

“What part of it is making you feel dirty, hmm?” He’s hovering over me now, moving his body so his weight is pinning me to the bed. One of his knees is between mine, keeping my legs apart just enough...

My cheeks heat as he stares down at me, his proximity reigniting my desire.

“Are you more ashamed that you got fucked by two cocks, or...” He leans in, his warm breath skating across my cheek. “*That you liked it?*”

I did like it. Every second of it, from the moment Nic’s hand slammed down on my ass to when Leo finally came between my lips.

That’s the worst part.

If he asked me right now, I'd probably do it again.

I need to talk to Leo first. He was more hesitant to fuck me. Everything with Leo was slower, more tentative. Would he still want me after he saw how easily I dropped to my knees for his brother?

"Answer me," Nic demands.

"I *liked* it."

I can't deny how handsome Nic is, especially in the morning light. His hair is still ruffled from sleeping and there's a coating of stubble covering his cheeks. I fight the urge to reach out and touch him.

He trails his fingers back up, over my collarbone, chin, to my cheek where he rests his palm.

"Such a good girl," he murmurs, and warmth floods my body. I think he's going to lean in, going to take me again, but then he's gone. Lifting himself off me in the next second, his feet on the floor. "Get up, Val," he demands, the only trace of softness the slight curve on his lips. "Don't want to be late for your present."



I TAKE a detour to Leo's room, but it's empty. His bed is neatly made, the corners folded in the fancy way Rosa does. I wonder if he ever even slept here...

There's an ache weighing on my chest as I make my way back to my room. I don't think it will go away until I see Leo again, until I make sure we're okay. He's the only light I have during my time in this house, and I can't shake the feeling that I might have fucked it up.

My fingers dance over the filled closet. The problem with not knowing where we're going is that I have no idea what to wear. Not that I care, but Nic does. The clothes might have been more of a gift for him than for me. I think he likes to see his little doll all dressed up.

I settle on jeans and a silky black tank top. After I shower last night from my body, I cover myself in one of the fancy lotions that sit on my vanity. Once I coat my face in a thin layer of makeup, I tie my hair into a low bun at the nape of my neck rather than trying to tame it.

Seeing Leo would have eased the discomfort settling in my chest, but I'm not about to press my luck with Nic. So instead of searching, I head down the grand steps, hoping I'll be able to see him later tonight. My captor is waiting for me in the foyer, his hip leaning against the post at the bottom of the staircase. When he hears me, his head lifts, his gaze raking over my body from head to toe as I descend. There's a wolfish grin across his lips that sends heat straight to my core. *Dammit.*

My brain may hate the man, but my body sure doesn't.

I desperately want to ask where his brother is, but Nic is a loose cannon. His actions are unpredictable. Right now, he's enamored with me. What will he think if I ask about Leo, though? What if he sees through my act and realizes I don't give a fuck about him past the thrill of his touch, the way his cock and dirty words make my legs shake. But Leo? Leo is quickly becoming more to me. He stimulates my mind, my heart... and now, my body.

But Nic can't know that. He holds his possession over me like a tight noose. If he knows Leo is my escape hatch, how much the time we spend together means to me, he might withhold him from me...or worse.

"You look good, little wolf." He grins.

"Thank you." I push my lips up into a smile and pretend I mean it. Pretend his flattery washes over me with warmth. When I reach the last step, he presses his palm to my lower back and leads me out to the G-wagon.

Anxiety swirls in my stomach as he drives us out of the complex.

"Where are we going?" I ask. The last time we left his house, it didn't go well for me, and I'm not ready for a repeat

of last night quite yet.

“Patience, little wolf,” he tells me, that smug grin ever present. “I have another lesson for you.”

That only amplifies the pain in my stomach. *Not again.* I’ve been psyching myself up in the mirror, mentally preparing myself for the next one of Nic’s lessons, but still, I don’t feel ready.

I wasn’t ready for last night and that didn’t involve murder. I’m not sure what to expect, but none of his “lessons” have been easy, so I can only assume today won’t be either.

We ride in silence, but when we cross over in New Jersey, the anxiety that rages through me only seems to get worse and worse. My hands are shaking as he takes the roads I know well.

“Nic...” I try to calm my voice, to not sound like a petrified child when I say his name. “Where are we going?”

“Don’t you know?” he asks. “Don’t you recognize your hometown?”

I do. I know New Jersey like the back of my hand. I spent half my life here, after all, from the time I was ten years old. I swallow hard. He’s going to my aunt and uncle’s house, I’m sure of it, but with every turn, I keep hoping I’m wrong.

“Nic...” I plead. “Why?”

He doesn’t answer me, but when I turn to face him, I can see the way his lips are twisted up into a smile, like he’s enjoying every second of my torment.

I want to vomit, throw up in his overpriced car, but I hold my hand to my lips instead. *Why?* Why is he taking me home? To somewhere I don’t want to go. A place I’ve only grown to hate and dread visits to.

I can imagine my aunt, probably in the kitchen with bruises coating her skin while Ricky is out in the garage, sitting in a lounge chair with a beer in his hand. A chill runs down my spine and an intrusive thought enters my mind. I

want to beg the man next to me not to do this. To not make me face them, especially not with him at my side.

But begging won't help. If anything, he'll get off on it. I seal my mouth closed, chewing on my bottom lip as we weave through my old neighborhood, going exactly where I thought we were.

When he pulls into my aunt and uncle's driveway, I can't pretend I didn't expect this. But what I don't know is his goal here. Asking won't get me answers, clearly, as I've asked several times along the way.

I just have to wait, see how this game plays out.

Nic turns to me after he puts the car in park, excitement lingering in his eyes. He's in control of the situation and he knows it, thrives off it.

"Little wolf," he purrs. "You want *revenge*, right?" He emphasizes the word "revenge," and it burns in my ears. I'm afraid no matter how I answer his question, it will backfire on me.

"Yes," I practically whisper.

"Against *everyone* who's wronged you?"

There it is. Worry courses through me. But he's not wrong; I do want revenge on everyone who's wronged me. There's a list that runs through my mind daily, but I was content to take the one at the top and let my life end.

I chance a glance at the house in front of me. Any good memories I might have had here are overshadowed by all the bad. This home symbolizes nothing but bruises and sleepless nights. Arguments and anger.

"Yes," I finally answer.

"And after your dad died—"

"Was murdered," I cut in, correcting him.

He only grins at my interruption. "After your dad was *murdered*." Lifting a brow, he repeats the sentence with my

correction. “You were sent to live here.” He gestures to the house in front of us. “Right?”

“Yes,” I say, albeit reluctantly.

“And how was that?”

“You know how it was.” I’m annoyed with this lesson already. I probably shouldn’t show it. I should be more compliant and get this over with, so Nic will leave me alone and I can go find Leo, but I can’t help the way the words leave my lips.

Nic has no reason to pry into my past, to use my worst moments against me. Especially when his family is the reason all of this happened in the first place.

“I know,” he taunts. “But tell me anyway.”

I swallow hard. “It was...*bad*.”

“Use more words, little wolf.”

“My uncle...” The truth is stuck in my throat. For so many years, I refused to say it, hid what happened behind these walls like a bad secret because I knew the alternatives were worse. If I tattled on my aunt and uncle, there was a slim chance I’d even be taken away. It was more likely they would find out what I said and make everything ten times worse. And if I did get taken away, there was no promise that any other home would be better. So I swallowed the truth, came up with creative lies for why my skin was always bruised, my clothes dirty, my hair unbrushed.

I was the problem child.

And everyone was happy to believe that lie if it meant nothing was wrong with my *parents*, the couple who graciously took me in after my father was killed. Clearly, nothing could be wrong with them. Nic is watching me, waiting for me to spit out what he already knows.

“He beat us,” I finally say.

“Us?”

“Me, Dom, my aunt ... all of us.”

“What else?” Nic pries.

I squeeze my eyes shut. “The yelling, the screaming - he made my life miserable. He didn’t want me there. He hated my dad, and he made sure I knew every day that he hated me too.”

I feel tears burn at the corner of my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall, refuse to shed any more for the people who live in this house.

“Good,” Nic says next to me. “So let’s kill him then.”



I stumble, tripping over my feet when I enter the house. As I take in the scene in front of me, my stomach twists into knots again, a feeling that's ever present with Nic around. He's grinning at me, observing me closely as I suck in a breath and try to steady myself. Nic always seems to enjoy when I'm barely holding myself together. He gets off on my pain, relishes my struggle.

I compose myself, straightening my spine and staring at my uncle, refusing to show any semblance of fear in front of my captor. The house I spent half of my life in looks the same, save for the sheet of plastic now covering the living room floor and my uncle tied to a metal chair in the center of it.

"Your gift." Nic grins, gesturing a hand at Ricky.

Ricky isn't moving. I can only tell he's alive by the subtle rise and fall of his chest. His hands are tied behind his back, making his chest arch forward. Much like the man in the warehouse I refused to kill, his legs are zip-tied to each of the chair legs.

The worst part of the whole ordeal is the washcloth laying over his face. Water drips from it, as if he's recently been waterboarded, which he must have been because his clothes are soaking wet.

There's a flood of emotions raging through my body. I know what I'm looking at is objectively wrong. No one should be waterboarded. But there's a sick satisfaction in seeing my uncle in this vulnerable position. Especially after all the times

he's had me pinned down, his spit flying onto my face while he ranted and screamed about whatever thing I did that deemed me "bad," needing to be "punished."

"So..." Nic comes up behind me, his hands pressing down on my shoulders. I can practically hear the smile in his voice. "What do you think, little wolf?"

Any words I might have spoken are clogged in my throat. I don't want to say thank you, not for this. But I can't say that I don't like it...

"Answer me," he demands, tone harboring an edge of impatience. His mouth straightens into a thin line, letting me know my lack of appreciation is pissing him off.

"What are you gonna do to him?" I ask, my voice hoarse when the words finally leave my lips.

"No, no, no." Nic laughs, the changing in emotions giving me whiplash. "It's what *you're* gonna do to him," he corrects, and my nerves ratchet up another notch.

"Okay." I swallow. "What am *I* going to do to him?" I'm afraid to know the answer, of whatever horrible thing Nic is going to tell me to do.

Do I love my uncle? Not in the slightest.

Does he deserve to die?

That question is harder to answer. He's a horrible man. In general, and for what he did to me. But does that make me God? Do I have any right to play judge, jury, and executioner?

Nic steps toward my uncle and I watch as the man who towered above me for half my life flinches as Nic's fingers lift to his chin, dragging along the exposed skin. "I got him ready for you, little wolf," he says, dismissing my question. "My men got up bright and early so they could grab him after your aunt left for work. I told them to have some fun, but not to kill him." When his eyes lift to mine, a sparkle dances in his pupils. "Do you think they had fun?"

"It looks like they waterboarded him," I say shakily.

“Sounds like fun to me.” Nic chuckles, and I watch as my uncle tugs against his restraints. There’s a muffled sound leaving his lips, but I can hear it over the wet washcloth that covers his face. “What was that?” Nic taunts, slowly pulling off the damp material and exposing his mouth.

It’s only now that I notice there’s a rope around his neck that connects to the zip ties holding his wrists together. The set-up strains his body, pulling his head back to meet the edge of the chair. I can’t imagine how uncomfortable that is. What time did Nic’s goons get here? How long has my uncle been like this?

“Please,” Ricky groans, the plea strangled. It shocks me for a moment. I’ve said that word to him probably thousands of times and not once was it ever met with mercy. The way Nic’s eyes shine at his desperation tells me he won’t be met with mercy either. There’s a sick satisfaction that rolls through me knowing that he’s getting paid back for everything he did to me and Dom, not to mention his own wife.

“Do you hear that?” Nic asks with a smile. “Your uncle said ‘*please*,’ little wolf. What do you think about that?”

Ricky struggles to look at me. It takes him a moment to connect the dots, leaving me wondering if waterboarding fucks with your brain cells. “V-valerie?” he stutters. “Is that you?”

“Yes.” The word leaves my mouth on a low hiss.

“Please,” he says again. “Please help me.”

Nic laughs at that, his hand clutching his stomach like this is the most amusing thing he’s seen all morning. “She’s not here to help you,” Nic tells my uncle, wrath morphing his face as he hovers over him. “She’s here to kill you. Aren’t you, Valerie?”

My uncle turns paler, a sickly color washing over his features. When I don’t immediately respond, Nic snaps his gaze to me. I can see the tiny flecks of anger, the way the emotion pulls at his lips and the corner of his eyes from me not immediately agreeing.

I'm failing his lesson already. How many times can I fail before he puts an end to our deal? Doing what he should have done in the first place. My desire to live has somehow increased in the time I've lived with Nic. I hate him, I think I truly do, but I'm not ready for him to kill me.

So, I have to kill my uncle.

If I don't, I'll never survive Nic's wrath. But there's a difference between having to do something and wanting to do something, and I can't deny the tingle spreading through my body, the tiny flicker of desire to give back to my uncle everything he gave to me.

He's completely helpless, tied up and defenseless.

I'd be a liar if I said I've never thought about killing Ricky D'Amelio.

But it's wrong. Murder is wrong. I know that to be true. So why is my skin itching to move closer and finally put the man out of his misery.

"Little wolf," Nic coos, his hand tugging me closer to him, closer to my uncle. "Answer me. Tell your uncle what you're here to do."

"I'm going to kill you," I breathe out, letting the lingering hesitation leave my body with my declaration.

Nic's lips twist up into a devilish grin. There's a hint of pride there too, like a teacher who finally got through to their student.

I swallow hard, pushing down any guilt that wants to crawl to the surface to stop me. I'm doing this. I've already decided.

My uncle whimpers, and the sound is like music to my ears.

"Please," he begs again, this time weaker, more pathetic.

I take a step toward him, and Nic's grin only grows. I want to see his eyes as he looks up at me and realizes I'm not going to help him. I'm here for all the times he hurt me as a kid, used me as his personal punching bag. I'm here to even the score,

give him a taste of everything he did to me. To seek revenge for the ways I was wronged.

“I was just a kid,” I say, watching his eyes squeeze shut for a moment, realization washing over him.

“Valer—” he tries to say, but I shush him.

“Why? That’s what I want to know, Ricky. Why did you do it? Why did you hurt us?”

Ricky swallows hard before he opens his eyes again. “I don’t know,” he mutters, trying his best to avoid my gaze.

“Look at me,” I demand, slapping his face until his eyes meet mine. “*Why?*”

His eyes close on a long blink, and when they reopen, I can see dampness gathering at the corners. “I’m sorry,” he whines.

“I don’t want your apology,” I spit back. “I want answers. Why did you hit us? Why did you punch and push and *hurt* us?” I ask, my voice growing louder as my heart pounds harder. “The yelling and the threats. Why? I spent my entire childhood living here in fear. Fear that one wrong word, one step too loud and you would scream, hit, kick. You sent me to school with bruises covering my entire body!” I’m shouting now. The trauma leaves my body through my mouth, each sentence feeling like a ton of bricks exiting me and slamming down onto Ricky. He’s fully crying, wet tears sliding down his greasy cheeks as I continue. “Tell me *why*.”

“What do you want me to say?” Ricky chokes out. “That I was a bad father? A bad husband? You should have never been placed with us.” He looks at me then. “But you had nowhere else to go, and Kitty always had a soft spot for her brother. Even after everything he did, she still wanted to take you in —”

“So you beat me?” I interrupt him. “You didn’t want another child, so that was all the reason you needed to make my life miserable? That’s your excuse?”

“It’s not an excuse,” he says, his throat bobbing as he swallows roughly. “I drink too much, I get angry. I’m *sorry*.”

His glassy eyes plead with me. He still doesn't have a good answer, that much I know, because there was no good reason for him to do the things he did.

I look up at Nic. He's taken a step back, watching me interrogate my uncle with amusement brightening his eyes.

"How do I kill him?" I ask, and his grin spreads.

"I brought you a knife." Nic reaches out his hand, and the man who's been standing guard passes the large knife to him. It's long, with a serrated blade and a thick black handle. Nic flips it over in his palm and extends the handle to me.

I take it, weighing the blade in my hand. It feels sturdy, heavy. Stabbing seems personal, but I'm riled up now. All of the pain I had buried deep down has risen to the surface and the man who inflicted so much of it is sitting right in front of me. I want him to hurt. I want him to feel every ounce of pain I did.

I grip the handle of the knife and inhale a breath, and then, jerking my arm back, I thrust it forward. The blade slices through his chest, and Ricky screams, more pleas for forgiveness leaving his lips, but it's too late for that now.

My vision is tinted with red, and I pull the blade back a second time, slamming it down with more force, breaking through my uncle's skin and going deep into his chest. Blood spurts out, and I feel it coat my face and hands, but I don't stop. I pull it back a third time and thrust it into him again. I keep going, my heart pumping faster and faster as I continue to stab the man who haunts most of my nightmares.

I don't stop until I hear Nic's voice break through my maroon-tinted haze.

"Little wolf, that's enough."

I take a step back, panting heavily as I look down at my hand. It's smothered in blood, thick and slimy. I drop the knife, blood splattering as it hits the ground with a thud. When I look at my uncle, I can barely recognize him. He's covered in slashes, blood pouring from the many open wounds. I even

managed to slice up his face. He's not breathing anymore, his lips parted, and his eyes rolled back.

He's dead.

And I'm the one who killed him.



VAL

With lightning speed, Nic has me pinned against the wall, his fingers interlocked with mine, hoisting my hands above my head in one swift motion. My chest heaves with each breath, as if I've been running for miles. Nic's wandering hand explores my body, tracing the curve of my side until it finds my hip, where it grips me possessively.

"Fuck, little wolf," he growls, and for some reason, the way he speaks sends a spark through my body. My nerve endings light up, tingling under his rough touch and hungry gaze. When he presses his body against mine, I can feel his erection straining against his pants.

I'm not sure why that makes me groan, but I lift my hips in an attempt to feel more of him. My head is buzzing with adrenaline, red still tainting my vision, leaving me dizzy with blood lust. Love and hate tangle within me, forming a ball of need in my chest that can't be ignored.

"You did so good," Nic whispers, his lips coming to the crook of my neck, where he plants two soft kisses before tugging my flesh between his teeth in a quick bite.

My blood turns into molten lava, and butterflies swarm my stomach at the praise. Nic trails his lips over my collarbone, and my head tilts back, giving him more access as strangled noises escape my lips. My fingers itch to push his head down, to make him kiss me in the sacred places he should have never had access to, but his grip tightens around my wrists, firmly holding me in place.

“Is my pretty girl aching for a reward?”

“Yes,” I answer quickly, not a single thought in my head leaving room for all the reasons I shouldn’t be nodding my agreement. But Nic functions as a devil on my shoulder, and my angel is nowhere to be seen. So I lean in, giving my devil far too much power over me.

Nic grins before he pulls back, his face twisting into something else briefly as he speaks. “Leave.” The word is harsh and demanding and confuses me for a second before I hear the shuffling behind him. Crimson coats my cheeks as I remember that we were still in the presence of other people, not that Nic’s men care if I fuck him. To them, I’m probably just another one of his *women*, a toy he plays with and will discard when he’s done.

“Take the body too,” Nic demands, and that shocks me back to reality enough for shame to coat my arousal.

Nic keeps me pinned in place, his hand tightened around my wrists, as his men release Ricky from his chair. The only sound in the room is the snapping of duct tape restraints before they lift my uncle’s body and roll him into plastic. The only thing I see other than Nic’s face in front of mine is when the guys briefly pass by us, taking his body out through the garage.

What the fuck am I doing?

“Come back to me, little wolf. Don’t have second thoughts now.”

I blink my eyes open, inhaling a sharp breath as I find Nic’s face highlighted by darkness. Without the windows open or the lights on, my old house is shrouded in eerie shadows, even if it’s the middle of the day.

“You were enjoying your present just a few minutes ago.” Nic smiles, slowly bringing his face closer as he leans in to lick a line along my cheek. The action causes me to shiver, and my back arches, giving him better access as he trails his mouth down, finding my collarbone again. “And I haven’t even gotten to the good part.” His voice vibrates against my skin,

and my eyes squeeze shut as my body involuntarily responds to him.

His hands find the opening of my jeans, his thumb posing open the button. “I bet if I stick my hand in your panties, I’ll find out how much you were enjoying it too.” I can feel his cheeks curve against my chest, and I hold back a whimper. He nips at my skin there, a small bite on the sensitive spot where my shoulder meets my neck.

Nic pushes my legs apart, shoving his thigh between them, the new position giving him better access to slide his hand under my panties, his fingers finding the wetness that’s gathered there. He hisses as soon as he finds me wet, a smile rising on his lips as he pulls his head back so I can see it.

“I told you so,” he tells me, the words sounding sinister coming from his lips.

The noise that leaves me is a mix between a moan and a growl, the crossroads of my hatred and my lust.

Nic laughs at me as he drags a finger through my slit, gathering my wetness and bringing it to my clit. He rubs a quick circle over the bundle of nerves and my legs twitch, nearly giving out. I want more of his touch, so much more, and the smug asshole knows it.

“This is your problem, Val,” he whispers in my ear as his finger moves lazily over my clit, making me tremble. “You refuse to admit the things you want. You want this... you *love* this.” He chuckles darkly. “But you won’t say it.”

My face burns under his scrutiny, but I keep my lips sealed shut. It doesn’t matter; he finds my silence amusing, and my body is giving him all the answers he needs. Despite everything I say, despite everything I do, I can’t stop wanting Nic. Even if he’s been nothing but cruel to me, I can’t deny the fact that I still want to feel him inside me again, that my body heats at the thought of his cock between my thighs, his hands tangled in my hair as I call out his name.

And he thrives on it.

The power, the control—Nic owns all of me. A fact he's probably known since the second I tried to kill him in his restaurant.

“Stop fighting it.” His pace quickens over my clit, sending delicious sparks of pleasure through my body.

“Look at me,” he orders when my eyes drift shut for a moment. They fly open, finding his gaze still burning into me. “Stop fighting me, little wolf,” he repeats, dragging his lips down my neck. “Give in, pretty girl, and I'll make it good for you. It's a reward, after all.”

I should tell him to fuck off. I should fight harder. Escape him and run away. But instead, I say, “Okay.” A soft act of permission that Nic doesn't question. He drops my hands so he can use both of his to rid me of the denim that's covering my legs. There's still blood on my hands, and Nic lifts them as if to show me, smiling as he watches my reaction. He spins me around, forcing me to put my hands out to catch me against the wall, leaving bloody prints in their wake. “Good girl,” Nic whispers against my ear as he takes off my panties next, tossing them aside. “Now hold them there while I give you your reward.”

Sinking to his knees, Nic spreads me open, his head dipping down so he can find my sex. When his tongue slips through my slit, I moan, all my previous hesitation drifting away once his mouth finds me. Nic eats me out like I'm the best meal he's ever had. My thighs quiver, my fingers gripping hard against the wall as my hips grind back for more.

“Tell me.” Nic pauses his mouth's assault, bringing his hand between my thighs and pressing one finger into me. “Tell me how *good* I make you feel, and I'll let you finish on my tongue.”

A breathless moan leaves my lips, and I can't help but to push back onto his finger. “You get nothing until you admit it.” His voice darkens this time, but his finger keeps pumping in and out of me, dragging me closer to the edge. My clit aches in need, desperate for him to resume his torture, but I know he

won't, not until I meet his demands, admitting how much I want this.

“What happened to this being my reward?” I ask through harsh pants.

“Who said rewards don't come with conditions, little wolf?”

I can only imagine his signature smirk, the one that graces his features when he knows he has me.

“Come on, little wolf,” he urges, his fingers curling perfectly to hit my G-spot. “Just tell me what I want to hear, and I'll let you come.” His teeth graze over the skin between my thighs. “And then after, I'll fuck you. Your tight little cunt will like that, won't she?” Pulling out of me, he smacks my pussy. I scream out, my legs shaking, but Nic palms my back, holding me in place. “Just tell me.”

“*Fuck,*” I hiss as his fingers enter me again, and this time his mouth comes back to my clit, his tongue making gentle circles over the heightened nerve ending.

“I need it,” I finally admit breathlessly.

“More,” Nic demands as I desperately try to grind against his face.

“I need you to fuck me, Nic. I need to come. I need your cock. *Please.*” With that, he sucks my clit into his mouth as his fingers curl, sending me spiraling over the edge of my orgasm as I cry out. Fireworks spark behind my eyes and liquid heat fills my body. I'm panting loudly, my eyes squeezed shut as my hands drag down the walls, leaving red streaks in their wake.

I don't even notice Nic standing, nor do I see as he drops his jeans and fits himself behind me. His mouth comes to my neck again, his kisses sweet and soft as he whispers praise onto my skin. One arm snakes around me while the other hand helps him notch his length between my legs. His cock slides through my folds, coating his head with my release before he slips inside me with ease.

My vision is still clouded, my legs shaky and moans breathless, as his thrusts stretch me wide. “So fucking good,” he murmurs against my neck, and I soak it in, the words making my body swim in warmth. He tugs me tighter against him as his cock pumps in and out, angling himself just right to have my body tingling for another high. “Your pussy grips me like a vice, little wolf. You get so fucking wet for me,” he tells me as his hand slips between my legs, his finger circling my aching clit again. “So damn responsive for me.”

“I hate you,” I say, my childish words meaning nothing as I whimper around them. I have to attempt a futile rebellion, a small semblance of maintaining any bit of pride I have left.

But Nic sees through my act, his smile growing against my neck.

“That’s okay, little wolf,” he says with a pinch to my clit. “You can hate me if it makes you feel better, paint me as the villain in your story. Just remember, it’s my cock you’re coming all over.”

His taunt does nothing to deter my orgasm as his fingers and cock wring another effortlessly from my body. He fucks me harder as the waves of pleasure take over, the molten lava burning through my center and ripping a scream from my chest. It’s only a few more thrusts before Nic comes too, filling me up.

When he pulls out, I sink to my knees, and suddenly the rest of the world comes back into focus as his cum drips down my thighs. Bloody hand prints are smeared down the white painted walls and bile fills my stomach.

What the fuck did I just do?



“WHAT DID YOU *DO*?” Leo’s voice echoes in the grand foyer. “Why is there blood on her?” He’s shouting now, the questions aimed at his brother.

Shame flares through me immediately, coating my face in red. I never had the chance to find him before Nic and I left this morning, and I expected he wouldn't be here when we returned. Normally, Nic and Leo run on opposite schedules. When Nic is here to torture me, Leo's gone. And when Leo's here to keep me company, Nic is missing.

I thought I would have more time to pull myself together, to wash the blood off my skin and process everything that's happened in the last twenty-four hours before I would have to face him.

Nic only smiles. He's happy, proud even. He spent the entire car ride home praising me while I stared at the bloodstains coating my skin. Nic had tried to wash them back at my uncle's house, and I watched the water run red as it circled the drain. But then afterward, Nic redressed me in my blood-soaked clothing. When I looked in the rear-view mirror, I could see a streak of the red liquid across my face and clumped in my hair.

Knowing that I was covered in my uncle's blood while Nic fucked me makes my stomach roll again. His cum still drips between my legs, a constant reminder of what I let him do.

I feel dirty, used, like an object.

And Nic is smiling.

"What, brother? Don't you think she looks good in red?"

"Nic," Leo growls. "What the fuck did you *do*?"

"I taught her to kill," Nic hisses, the jovial tone gone as he sends his brother an angry glare.

It's like witnessing an angel and a devil at war. I've heard their whispered tension, seen the shared resentful glances, but this is the first time they've openly fought in front of me. Even last night, when Leo tried to stop Nic's punishment, it didn't end in a fight. But now Nic is looking at his brother with a scowl, his words hanging in the air like daggers.

Leo, my sweet one, the angel to my devil, looks red with rage. "She's not ready," he says, his fists clenched into two tight balls at his sides. "Why would you do that?" He's

tempering his tone, trying not to shout, but I can feel the irritation radiating from him.

My two boys are arguing over *me*. Unease rolls through me at the realization. *My* boys. I see them both as mine. And clearly, they both seem to think they own me. Nic is vocal about his ownership, making sure I'm reminded at every chance. But Leo's been more subtle, working his way into my heart.

"I decide when she's ready," Nic says, the words menacing on his lips. He's standing taller, marching to his brother until they are face to face. Leo keeps his fists down, but I feel like at any moment they might swing. The thrumming in my chest picks up its pace as I watch on. "I decide when it's time for her to kill. I decide everything that has to do with her."

Something unspoken lingers between the two brothers as they continue their stare off, neither of them flinching.

I'm trying to control my breathing, but suddenly the blood coating my skin feels suffocating. It's everywhere, soaked through my clothes, in my hair. I can't wipe it off. Can't get it to go away.

I can't freak out. Not until I'm out of Nic's sight. Not until I'm tucked away in my gilded cage of a bedroom, where he can't see me break down.

I just killed someone.

I suck in a breath, but it doesn't feel right, like the air's not filling my lungs. I can't get enough oxygen.

Not just someone.

I killed my uncle.

What would my father say if he knew what I'd just done? He was a bad man, but I *killed* him. How does that make me any better? Who am I to decide his fate?

I'm thankful we didn't have breakfast before our outing this morning, otherwise it'd be on the floor in front of me.

"You should have asked me," Leo sneers, breaking the silence.

“I don’t have to ask you shit,” Nic spits. “I don’t owe you anything. But you, brother? You owe me *everything*.” Nic jabs a finger into Leo’s chest as he finishes his tirade. “Your loyalty, your faith, and your goddamn life.”

Leo turns, a deep frown marking his lips, but he doesn’t respond. His eyes flick to me, a hint of sadness lingering there.

He said he would help me, teach me how to get revenge, but the way he’s looking at me covered in blood makes my chest ache with regret. He looks disappointed.

“Well, little wolf,” Nic says. “Tell my brother here how much you liked your first kill.” He’s goading me, wanting me to answer in front of Leo to give him the upper hand.

I can’t speak. The adrenaline has worn off, and I’m afraid if I open my mouth, nothing but cries will come out. I nod, but that only makes Nic laugh.

“Say it.” The laughter fades and his voice becomes more stern. He strides to me in quick steps, his thumb coming under my chin so he can lift my face. “Tell my brother how much you loved it.” His eyes are shining as they watch me. There’s excitement there, and probably lust too. He’s always turned on when he makes me do things I hate, like making me miserable is an aphrodisiac.

“I liked it.” The words are spoken low, a hushed whisper echoing in the foyer.

Nic shakes his head. He’s not satisfied.

“Tell him,” he demands, and before I know what’s happening, he’s behind me, pushing me at his brother. I stumble, nearly falling into Leo, who catches me effortlessly. He straightens me, his hands pressing down on my shoulders and anchoring me back to earth. There’s blood on his shirt now, smearing onto the white fabric.

“I’m gonna be sick.” I can barely get the words out, barely get away from his hold, before I vomit on the marble floor.

“Jesus,” Nic hisses. He lowers himself behind me, wrapping my hair into his fist and tugging my head back so he can taunt me. “Fucking pathetic.” Letting go of my hair, he

brings himself back up to standing. “If you care so much, Leo, you can clean her up.” That’s the last thing he says before I hear his loafers tap against the floor, leaving me with his brother in the foyer.

The praise he had coated me with earlier now dissipates, leaving me with an aching heart and a gnawing feeling that I’m worthless. Once he’s gone, I pull myself up, ignoring the way my bones grow heavy as I move to drag my body up the stairs.

“Val,” Leo calls after me.

“I’m okay,” I say, but the words don’t sound right, probably because they’re not true.

I’ve been in this house for months now and I’m nowhere near okay.



VAL

I stand under the hot water of the shower for a long time. Just letting the liquid rush over me, cleansing away all the reminders of what I did this morning.

It felt right in the moment.

But now, anxiety has flooded my head, and I'm not sure how to continue on. What about his body? What about my aunt? What about Dom?

Nic left his men there to clean up my mess, as he called it. But worry lingers still, as I never know exactly what Nic is thinking or what he might do.

"*Tesoro?*" Leo's voice is soft as he pushes open my bathroom door. "You've been in here a while. Are you..." He stops when he meets my gaze behind the glass shower wall. He must see the puffiness, the redness of my face and eyes marking the obvious signs of my crying.

"I don't know," I mutter.

I'm surprised when Leo untucks his white shirt, still colored with the crimson stains from when he caught me earlier. He adds it to the pile of my bloody clothes, and then tugs his black jeans down his legs. When he's completely naked, he pulls open the shower door, stepping into the steam.

He doesn't give me a chance to say or do anything before he's grabbing me, pulling me into his embrace. The tears fall in a consistent stream from his comfort. My body shakes as he holds me tightly against his warm body.

He's hugging me. The sensation shouldn't feel foreign, but it does, and that only seems to make me cry harder, my tears running down my cheeks blending with the shower water that flows down the drain. Leo whispers sweet nothings, soothing words as his hand rubs slow circles along my spine.

Everything about this is sweet and caring, roses compared to the thorns I'm used to.

"I'm sorry he forced you to do that," Leo says, pulling back enough so his kind brown eyes can meet mine.

"He didn't," I mutter, looking down, avoiding his gaze. "I... wanted to."

Leo sighs heavily, tilting his head back. Worry burns a hole in my gut. Does he hate me for what I did? It's not like he's innocent; he told me himself how many people he killed. But Leo treats life like each one's sacred, remembers the name of every person he's ended. I took life and death into my hands, killed because he deserved it. But does that make me a good person? Right and wrong blur in my mind, wind and twist until I can't tell where one ends and the other begins.

"Does that—" I swallow, then continue shakily. "Does that change your opinion of me?" I ask, barely above a whisper. His head darts back down so he can look at me again.

"Of course not," he replies immediately.

"I wasn't sure if you..." I trail off, nervous to say what's really on my mind. Leo sees me as an innocent and after killing my uncle, I'm not sure if I am one anymore.

"I don't care that you killed your uncle, Valerie," Leo says, his hands pressing down on my shoulders while he drills the words into me, making sure I know he means them. "He doesn't mean shit to me. I'm worried about you, how you feel about it."

"I don't know," I breathe. "It felt good in the moment, but now..."

"You feel guilty?" he questions.

"I don't know if it's guilt...it feels...wrong?"

“Ah.” Leo nods his head. “You’re breaking imaginary rules.”

“Imaginary?”

“See...” Leo smiles a bit, rubbing the tension from my shoulders. “We live by the structure society placed on us. *Thou shall not murder*. Laws that say murder is *illegal*. They’re all rules.”

“I mean...I could go to prison...”

“Only if you get caught.”

I shake my head. “I—”

“You won’t get caught,” Leo interrupts. “Nic won’t let that happen. And the rules are different here. That’s what you’re missing.” He taps my head.

“You’re not making sense.” I huff. Imaginary rules? Laws? Not getting caught? He’s all over the place, and I’m not understanding any of it. Is he telling me that murder isn’t wrong? Or that it’s wrong, but it doesn’t matter?

“Society has *levels*,” he stresses. “Think of it this way: the rules change with each level. Right now, you’re on a new level.”

“With you?” I ask, my head tilting as I search his eyes.

“Not quite, but definitely closer. Less rules apply here. And the higher you get—“

“The fewer rules apply?” I finish his sentence with a guess.

“Yep.” He grins. “And then you get to create your own rules.”

His description clicks in my head. There are rules in society, but only for those at the lowest levels. The workers, the ordinary people. Those of us who lack money and resources. And then there are the higher levels. The people who have control. They still live in our society, but they can bend the rules, make their own. Hurt people without being caught. Murder people and walk away as if it’s nothing.

They can do whatever they want. Because they have enough money to make it all go away afterward.

I suck in a breath.

“I’m not sure how I feel about that,” I breathe out.

“Here’s the thing,” Leo says. “*Revenge*”—my eyes shoot back up to him when he says the word—“is only found on the higher levels.”

“I get it,” I say after a moment.

“I wish you didn’t.” There’s a softness in his expression, one I’ve come to appreciate. “If I could undo all this for you, just let you be normal and happy, I would, *tesoro*.”

His words fracture something, a crack in my armor, a break wide enough for him to reach in and wrap himself around my heart.

“But you can’t,” I say. “I would have ended up here regardless, Leo. There’s nothing you could have done to change that.”

“No.” Leo nods in agreement, but there’s a pained furrow deepening between his brows. “You’re right, *tesoro*, but still, I wish you weren’t.”

“You can’t save me,” I tell him, looking up into his deep brown eyes. He’s holding me, arms wrapped around my midsection, while my hands rest on his chest, feeling his pecs beneath my palms. Suddenly, the anxiety and fear begin to melt away, replaced by something else. Desire coils in my stomach, sending sparks of warmth through my body when I look at Leo. It feels different from how it does with Nic. Nic is all fireworks, heat of the moment, caught in the excitement and the rush of emotions.

But Leo? Leo is a slow burn. Approaching the cliff at a leisurely tempo, soaking in the views and the beauty. And when I step off the edge, it’s a choice I make.

“But…” I whisper. “You could make it better.”

Leo pauses for a moment. His tongue darts out to wet his lips, and his eyes stay focused on me. For a moment, I think

he'll deny me, but finally he speaks. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I want you."

"Not like this," he says, his hands dropping from me as I take a step back. "Dry off, *tesoro*," he murmurs. "I'll meet you out there."



WHEN I EXIT the attached bathroom, Leo's waiting, pacing in front of my bed. He stops when he sees me, lifting his gaze so his eyes find mine once more. His hands are pressed together in front of him, almost as if he was praying.

"Leo... He shushes, his finger pressing against my lips, before I can fully say his name.

"Shh, please." His eyes implore me, searing into my gaze with the heat of the sun behind them. "Please, *tesoro*, tell me something." I watch his Adam's apple bob as he swallows thickly. "How many times have you fucked him?"

The question tastes like acid as his hard gaze penetrates mine. I should have pushed Nic off of me, stopped him from touching me. But even if I would have been thinking clearly, I don't know if I could have. Something about my captor makes me delirious. Maybe it's the pleasure he brings me or knowing how much power he has over me. I wish I knew.

"Leo, I—" "I try to talk around his finger, but he silences me again, this time his entire palm fitting over my mouth. The action surprises me, and my eyes stare into his, trying to understand the clouds of emotion that coat them.

"Don't lie to me, sweet girl." The nickname sounds like a plea from his lips. "*Dimmi semplicemente*. Just answer the question. Don't dance around it. Did you fuck my brother without me there?"

When he removes his hand, I nod, not wanting to have to say the truth we both know.

“Say it,” he demands, and I melt under pressure, giving him the answer.

“Yes.”

“*Cazzo!*” Leo hisses, stepping back from me, freeing me from the wall.

Butterflies flurry in my stomach as I watch what seems like jealousy take over his face. The idea of answering any more of his questions has my nerves on fire, and as I watch his anger grow, I get angry too. I want *him*. He’s the one I dream of and can’t have, the one who could barely kiss me properly without pulling away, so why is he so upset?

I tighten my grip on my towel, the lone piece of fabric covering my body. “You weren’t mad last night when—”

“Mad?” Leo cuts me off, whipping around to look at me with his piercing gaze. “Is that what you think? I’m not *mad*, *tesoro*.” He pins me in place with his eyes alone, the heat rolling off him in waves. “I’m *furious*,” he corrects. “But not at you, never at you.” He scrubs a hand over his face, breaking our eye contact. “I don’t *own* you. You can sleep with whoever you want, Valerie.”

He moves closer as his voice softens, and a shiver rolls through me. Any frustration I felt for even a minute toward him is gone.

“Just not with him?” I whisper.

Leo winces, like what he’s saying is causing him pain. “I wish I could ask that of you, *tesoro*. But we’d just be lying to ourselves.”

My head spins as Leo snakes his arm around my waist, pulling me into him. “Then make me forget,” I ask again as my hands press against his chest, desperate for what I know he can give me. The haze of need taking over all rational thoughts in my brain, I want him so badly. “Erase him from my memory.”

“You’re playing with fire,” Leo whispers, but his eyes are sparkling, with a mischievous smile slowly growing on his

lips. “Are you sure this is what you want, Val?” he asks, one eyebrow tilting with the question.

I feel like it’s more than sex I’m agreeing to here. I’m placing myself in the middle of whatever war the two brothers are fighting. In the middle of something I don’t even understand.

And my goal has always been clear. *Survive.*

When this year ends, I’m leaving. Regardless of what happens during the twelve months or what feelings grow between me and Leo. When Nic sets me free, I won’t hesitate to get my revenge and run.

Maybe that’s what Leo means, that the fire I’m playing with is our connection.

Sex is never just sex. Feelings always seem to pop up somewhere along the way, and feelings have no part to play in my journey.

But I don’t want Nic to be the only human contact I have for the next seven months. I can’t stomach the idea that the only connection I’ll have is his mind games and punishments barely balanced by pleasure I shouldn’t crave.

Leo, though? Even his bite is lighter, and his touch feels heavenly enough to sink into, pure light compared to Nic’s dark sins.

“Yes,” I say what my heart wants, and the smile on Leo’s face finally reaches its peak. His hands grip onto my hips, wasting no time as he spins me around, marching me backwards until the back of my thighs hit the bed.

I fall to the bed, and he crawls over me, his body hovering above mine.

“Leo.” His name leaves my lips on a breathless whine. I want him to touch me again, want his hands on my body, making me forget everything else that’s happened. His father, his brother, my uncle—I’m begging for his kiss to erase them all from my memories.

“Tell me something,” Leo starts, speaking between kisses along my jaw, trailing down my throat. “How did my brother touch you?”

His question sends an icy chill down my spine. “You’re supposed to make me *forget*.”

“I’m going to.” He nods, lifting his head enough so he can look into my eyes. “But how am I supposed to erase something when I don’t know what it is?” He presses a soft kiss to my throat and then tugs my skin between his teeth, biting the flesh until it burns, and I whimper. “So, Val, how did my brother touch you?” The question is menacing, but the feeling of Leo’s body on mine makes up for it, and I did tell him I wanted this...

“His mouth,” I say, swallowing thickly, as if the words are clogged in my throat.

“*Brava ragazza*,” Leo praises, his thick accent sending a spark of excitement down my spine. He leans back, straddling my hips as his hands roam my body. “What else?” he asks.

His fingers leave a trail of goosebumps in their wake as he runs them over my arms.

“His fingers,” I tell him, a rush of anticipatory nerves making me tremble as he continues his exploration. “He fucked me with them.”

I can feel a blush rising to my cheeks as wetness gathers between my legs. When Leo reaches down there, he’ll realize just how hot this is making me.

Leo hums a noise of approval as his fingers meet mine at the hem of my towel. One by one, he removes them before laying my arm at my side. He opens the towel, moving painstakingly slowly.

I want him to rip it off and take me, but he’s forcing me to focus on each movement. When he has me comparably bared to him, he sucks in a sharp breath. “*Cristo*,” he murmurs. “*Sei assolutamente perfetto. Il mio tesoro.*”

I don’t know what he’s saying, but I glow under his obvious appreciation. His rough hands caress my curves,

moving up until he cups my breasts, palming them as he leans in and kisses me.

This time there's nothing light about the way our lips collide, and we both share a moan. As his tongue invades my mouth, and his lips move with palpable need, his hips thrust into mine. At the feel of his hard length pushing against me, I grind up into him. My fingers cling to his shoulders, hands reaching to find purchase on his back, anything to pull me closer to him.

“Don't worry, sweet girl,” he says between the kisses he lands on my chin, throat, shoulder, leaving me breathless. He makes his way down my body, humming his praise until his knees land on the floor in front of my bed, leaving him at the perfect height for my pussy. “I'm going to erase his memory from your mind. I'm going to replace everything he's ever done to your perfect body, every touch with my own. By the time I'm done with you, I'll be living in your every waking thought.”

If only he knew he already does.

Hoisting my legs over his shoulders, he brings my sex right to his mouth, inhaling deeply. Embarrassment makes me squirm, and I try to pull away, but Leo stops me with a firm hand on my stomach. “Don't try to hide from me, *tesoro*,” he demands, holding me in place as his tongue takes a languid stroke against my core.

Strangled noises leave my mouth. “*Oh my God.*” What the fuck is with these brothers and their ungodly skills at worshipping my pussy?

My back arches off the bed as he goes in for another taste. “*Dolce, come una caramella.*” He murmurs the words against my sex, and I don't need to speak Italian to assume he thinks I taste like candy.

Heat floods my body and Leo presses my legs farther apart so he can dive back in, licking me like he's never tasted anything better.

When his tongue finds my clit, I know I'm a goner. With just a few swirls and sucks and precise flicks, he wrings two orgasms from me easily, like they were waiting for his touch, making my fingers grip onto the silk sheets as I cry out over and over.

It's not until I'm an absolute mess, sticky and covered in a sheen of sweat, that he pulls himself up to standing and rids himself of his boxers.

When Leo climbs on top of me, I melt beneath him as his lips coated in my flavor devour mine. Dragging his lips down my jaw, he presses kisses onto the crook of my neck, sucking and nipping, and driving me crazy with renewed arousal. I'm still catching my breath, sensitive from what he just did to my body, but I already need more.

When he pulls back, he locks his eyes on mine, his hand lifting to cup my cheek tenderly. Leaning over, I feel his rock-hard length nudge my entrance, sliding inside and making me gasp with relief. He catches my exhaled moan with his lips, moving into me with long, measured thrusts that have my eyes rolling back. As he picks up his pace, I just about lose my mind.

"Yes, God, yes!" I shout, clinging to him eagerly. A fire burns in my core, something brighter and hotter than what I felt earlier. "More," I beg, meeting his thrusts. "Harder."

"Say please, *tesoro*," Leo taunts, his lips grazing my ear.

"Please," I pant. "Please, Leo, I need it. Give me everything."

My words spark something in him, his eyes glowing with an intense need. He pulls me up and rolls me over until I'm on my hands and knees. With his palm on my low back, he pushes me down while keeping my ass high in the air.

Thrusting back into me, he groans, then hisses out an Italian curse. "I've been dying to do this, *tesoro*. To have you completely at my mercy, begging for my cock. I tried to stop it. To push down this feeling and never act on it. And then you let him spank you." A breath rushes from his lips and his hand

grips my hip like a vice. “And I saw that plug in your ass. *Cazzo*. I could barely contain myself. I’m spanking your ass and you’re shaking beneath me, your pussy dripping wet. When you came on his tongue, I thought I would explode. But then you crawled over to me, looked up with those little doe eyes and asked to suck my cock.” He’s panting as he talks to me, all the while never pausing his powerful thrusts. Stars threaten to flash behind my eyes, and with each admission, more wetness drips down my thighs.

“I wanted to make you mine first. I wanted our first time to be different than that, *tesoro*, but I can’t erase the image of you coming while my cock was down your throat.”

He snakes his arm around me until his finger finds my throbbing clit, rubbing quick circles over the bud. “I want you to come all over my cock now, *bella ragazza*,”

“Leo,” I moan as that tell-tale tingle curls my toes.

“That’s it, moan my name, come on my cock, and let me fill you. Let me mark you so you always know who you belong to.”

Heat burns in my belly, threatening to start a fire, one I’m desperate for.

“Come on, *brava ragazza*, come for me.” One more tweak to my clit, and I’m falling over the edge. Tears blur my vision as Leo worships me with his words, fucking me as he tells me how beautiful I am, how tight I feel, how he’s dreamt of this every night since he met me.

“*Cazzo*,” he hisses as his own orgasm takes hold. It’s his name that leaves my lips on strangled cries as he keeps pumping his hips, the feeling of him coming inside me setting me off again. His brother is completely erased from my mind, nothing but a distant memory while all my focus is on the dark-haired man between my legs.

We collapse on the bed, the two of us clinging to each other like a lifeline as we catch our breath. Leo holds me tightly, keeping me pressed against his warm chest as he runs his fingers through my hair.

His earlier words run through my head on repeat. “*You’re playing with fire.*” And I can’t help but think he’s right.

Two brothers at one time.

Two brothers in one day.

And two brothers who have me in a death grip.



VAL

It's the middle of the night when my door swings open, smacking against the wall and jolting me awake. I lurch up, my back slamming against the headboard as I blink my eyes open.

“Calm down.” Nic’s voice is low and strained. “It’s just me.”

My eyes swing to my phone on the nightstand, checking the time. Two a.m.

“What are you doing here?” I rub the sleep from my eyes, confusion disorienting me.

It’s been days since I’ve seen Nic. Since I threw up in the foyer and he told me I was pathetic.

It should make me happy that he’s been avoiding me, as it gives me more time to spend with Leo after all, but for some reason, there’s been an ache in my stomach as I waited for him to return. I’m not sure if it’s anxiety, the anticipation of his next lesson keeping me on edge, or if it’s because I want to see him.

I should be ashamed of myself. Even more after everything Leo admitted to me. There’s a clear choice between the two brothers. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know who I should avoid and who I should cling to.

And still. I can’t help that Nic dances through my mind every chance he gets, regardless of if I want him there. I replay his lessons, imagining the feeling of his touch on my skin. I hate him. But I want him. It’s a twisted feeling.

He moves closer, coming to the side of my bed and pulling the covers off me. The only light in the room is the silver glow of the moon cast over the bed, but it's enough to show me Nic's face as he looks over me.

I'm in another pair of skimpy pajamas, consisting of silk shorts and a matching cami. I don't have a bra on and the chill from the air has my nipples hardening. I can tell the exact moment Nic sees them, his breath catching in his throat as his hand reaches forward, grazing over the peak.

"I need you," he says, the words a shock to my system. Soft and fragile, more emotional than I've ever heard from him before.

Something sharp stabs my chest, and I think of Leo. But Nic doesn't give me the chance to linger on that thought, though, as he climbs on my bed and wraps his arm around me. When he rolls onto his back, he takes me with him, bringing me so I'm on top and straddling him.

His fist grips the back of my hair, and he drags my mouth down to meet his. It's only gentle for a minute, and then he takes charge of the kiss like he does everything else, pulling me tightly against him while he consumes my mouth. He kisses me like he can't get enough. Like I'm the last bit of water, the last breath of oxygen. Like if he doesn't have me now, he might die.

I writhe against his body, feeling his erection straining against his dress pants as I rub myself on him.

"I need to fuck you," he says lowly against my mouth. "Are you wet for me, baby?"

I already know the answer is yes without thinking about it. He doesn't need to hear the words, my blushing face telling him everything he needs to know.

His fingers grip onto the silk sleep shorts and tug, tearing the fabric until there's nothing blocking him from me.

"Nic-"

"Take out my cock," he demands.

I swallow hard, but lift my hips, tugging at his zipper and freeing his cock from his pants. He doesn't even give me a chance to get the pants off his body until his hands are on my hips, guiding me onto him.

"Fuck," he hisses as my pussy glides around his cock. My head dips back on a sharp inhale, jaw slack with pleasure.

Nic slides his hands under the camisole, finding my tits beneath the fabric and palming them roughly.

"That's it, baby, bounce on my cock," he growls.

Pleasure coils tightly at the base of my spine as he whispers dirty words to me while I ride him. My hands reach forward, grasping onto his shoulders and holding on.

Something wet coats my fingers, and Nic hisses out a breath. A coppery scent attacks my senses, and I pause my actions, slowly bringing my hand up so I can see it under the light of the moon.

It's red, dripping with blood. My mind freezes, my breath catching in my lungs. "You're hurt."

"It's just a graze," Nic growls. "Don't stop." His hands come to my hips, lifting and lowering me on his cock when I don't listen.

"You were shot?" I choke out the question.

"I'm fine, little wolf, but I won't be if you don't start bouncing that pussy on my cock again. Move." His hand slaps against my ass.

"Nic, shouldn't we—"

One hand finds my chin, cutting off my sentence and squeezing me roughly. "I said I'm fine. It's a graze. Now fuck me, Valerie."

"We should clean it."

"You will. After you fuck me."

The shock on my face must tell Nic I'm not about to start moving again, because he flips me over and fits himself between my thighs, his good arm reaching out to hold on to

the headboard while the other one comes for my throat, his fingers wrapping around my windpipe. He thrusts into me with a groan, and I don't catch my breath before he's fucking me at his brutal pace.

"Touch your clit," he commands, and I do. I'm just a ship caught in his current, powerless to resist the pull of his tide.

"Fuck," he growls. "Your pussy gets so tight when you play with yourself."

"Shh." I want to tell him to be quiet, some part of my brain wanting to make sure Leo doesn't hear this, but the word doesn't come out. Instead, I follow his instruction and continue to rub my swollen clit. A mewling, desperate sound leaves my lips as his thrusts graze my G-spot in time with my fingers. I'm drenched, absolutely soaked for him, and he knows it.

"You love this, don't you?" he mocks. "You want to pretend you don't have a choice. You want to pretend I force you, don't you? Or do you want Leo to think I force you?" He chuckles darkly. "That's it, huh, baby? Don't want to admit to the nice brother that you love being a dirty little slut for me? That all I have to do is look at you and you'll drop your panties for me. That this pussy is always drenched *for me*." Letting go of the bed frame, he slaps my pussy to enunciate his point.

I yelp, but the slap sends a shock wave of pleasure through me that has me grinding my hips against his and rubbing my clit faster.

"Tell me," he demands.

"What-"

"Tell me." He squeezes my throat as he leans in, bringing his face to mine. "What a dirty girl you are for me. Tell me how much you love this. Give me what I want, and I'll make you come."

The words bubble up my throat and sit on the tip of my tongue, but I bite them back harshly.

“Don’t get shy now,” he murmurs. “Tell me what I want to hear, little wolf.”

My entire body tenses, my muscles contracting as my release dangles within reach. I press my lips thin, refusing to say the words he wants from me. Nic must see what I’m doing, feel my body getting closer and closer to the edge, because he grabs my wrist, yanking it away from my pussy and stalling my orgasm.

Lowering himself, his mouth ghosts my ear, his hot breath making me shiver. “Don’t make me ask again,” he growls deeply.

I writhe beneath him, my pussy shaking from the almost orgasm. My heart is pounding, and my pussy is weeping, so I finally open my mouth, admitting what he already knows. “I like it,” I barely whisper.

A booming laugh leaves Nic’s throat, and he pushes back so he kneels as he thrusts into me again. It’s not enough for me to come, but it’s enough to keep me riding that tortuous edge.

“Not good enough,” he says, a wicked grin tugging at the corner of his lips. “Try again.”

My body burns with humiliation. I can feel the crimson coating my cheeks, traveling down my throat.

“Please,” I beg. “Please make me your dirty little slut. Please fuck me, make me come all over your cock. *Please.*”

“Such a little slut for me,” he purrs, as the hand on my throat leaves me, reaching down to pluck one of my nipples. That spark of pain has me yelping, then his hand reaches down farther, finding my pussy barely above his knee.

When his finger slips between my thighs, his eyes light with amusement. “You’re fucking soaked, baby. You’re making a mess all over your thighs.”

I shouldn’t like him. I should hate the things he’s doing to me, but I grind against his hand, bringing more attention to my clit.

“So needy.” He clicks his tongue. “If I give you what this needy pussy wants, will you be a good girl for me?” My eyes find his as his finger swipes over my clit once, giving me just a glimpse of the pleasure he’s offering.

“What do you want?” I lick my lips, tasting him on my tongue. My mind has shut everything else out. The only thing that exists anymore is Nic and the orgasm he’s yet to give me.

“Your submission.”

He already has me. I was his the second I missed my shot. And all of my kicking and screaming hasn’t freed me. I nod, but the sinister look on his face tells me that’s not enough.

“Tell me, Val,”

“I’m yours.” I loathe that I say it so quickly. I don’t mean it...

A smirk lines his lips and his finger presses against my clit. I can’t help myself, I move my hips, relishing the feeling. His free hand finds my breast, pinching the tight bud of my nipple between his fingers.

The shame hasn’t gone away, just pushed itself deep into the crevices of my mind, sure to pop up later, but right now, my only focus is on euphoria.

“Yell my name when you come, little wolf,” he hisses. “I want the whole house to know who’s making you come right now. Because you’re mine, Valerie, and no matter what you try to tell yourself, your cunt knows who you belong to.”

Fireworks explode behind my vision as his thumb continues to rub over my clit. “That’s it.” His breath drifts over my ear. “That’s my little slut.”

My back arches, my body weak as my orgasm passes over me. Nic doesn’t give me a moment to come down, though. He begins thrusting harder, moving himself in and out of me with primal hunger. Wet noises fill the air with their lewd sound, and Nic grunts as he pushes in as far as he can, eliciting a gasp from me.

He leans in, balancing on his good arm to whisper in my ear as he fucks me. “You say you hate me...” His body pushes against mine, pressing me into the mattress. “And yet, you spread your legs for me, your cunt drips for me, and I fit inside you so damn well, little wolf.”

“I do hate you,” I pant, a second orgasm approaching, despite myself.

Nic laughs, the husky sound vibrating in my chest. “Your words don’t match your actions, little wolf,” he says, and his fingers reach down to pinch my clit, driving a moan from my chest. “You say you hate me, but in ten seconds, you’re going to be coming all over my cock again.”

The way he speaks to me is demeaning and something about it only serves to make me wetter.

“And then,” he adds with a grin, his lips stretching into a wolfish smirk. “I’m going to pump you full of my cum. Tell me you hate me again with my seed dripping out of your cunt.”

My pulse pounds viciously as I explode with another release, moans leaving my lips all on their own. I hear him talking, telling me what a good girl I am, what I slut I am, but the words are muffled as I come undone around him.

Nic follows me over that cliff, coming inside me just as he promised. We’re both panting, sweat dripping from our foreheads when I feel his hand reach down, pushing his come inside me, holding it there while he watches me.

“Go on,” he goads me. “Say it. How much do you hate me again?”



THERE’S BLOOD ON ME. On the sheets, on the headboard, and on Nic.

“Get up, little wolf.” His voice is deep and strained as he leans against my headboard. He ditched the suit jacket

somewhere along the way, but now I can see how much blood is dripping from his wound against the white dress shirt.

“What happened?” I ask, panicked. “You need to go to the hospital.”

“It’s just a graze,” he breathes.

“We should call a doctor.”

“No.” Nic shakes his head. “You’ll patch it up.”

“Nic, I’m not a doctor. I can’t-”

“You can,” he cuts me off, flashing his dark eyes at me. “And you will.”

I suck in a harsh breath. “I don’t know how,” I murmur.

“I’ll walk you through it.” Nic runs a hand through his hair and gives me a small grin. I think it’s meant to be reassuring, but the sight of all his blood makes my stomach churn. “Get the whiskey from the bar and there is a kit under the sink in the bathroom down there.

I pull on a new pair of sleep shorts before I rush down the steps and grab the supplies.

I swallow the lump building in my throat. I’ve never even taken a first aid class. How the fuck am I supposed to stitch up a mobster?

When I flick on the bedroom lights, I finally get a good look at Nic. He’s paler than normal, sitting higher up against the headboard while the wound on his arm oozes a slow stream of blood. He must have taken off the dress shirt while I was gone, leaving him bare from the waist up, the planes of his muscled chest now on display.

“What even happened?” My voice is whiny, weak, as I ask the question.

“I was shot, Valerie, what does it look like?” I think he’s right, that it’s probably just a graze, but there’s a lot of blood coming from the opening on his arm. “You’ll need to stitch it,” he tells me.

“Nic, I can’t do this.”

“Consider this another lesson, little wolf.” His words are harsh when he barks them at me, staring me down. “I’m going to talk you through it, so calm the fuck down and get the alcohol wipe.”

I suck in a breath, but do as he says. Grabbing the wipe and unwrapping it, Nic patiently talks me through the process of cleaning his wound and then how to stitch it. There’s a needle and medical thread in his kit, and I thread the two together before working on Nic’s arm.

“Not too tight,” he tells me. I try my best to stitch him back up. The closest I’ve ever come to giving stitches is learning how to sew, but that was back in 8th grade, and I was never very good at domestic things.

Nic seems unfazed by the needle, instead chugging down some whiskey from the bottle. When I’m done, I cover the wound in gauze and get a wet washcloth to wipe the remnants of blood from Nic.

“Thank you,” Nic says, spoken so low I almost don’t hear him.

He sleeps in my bed that night, on the sheets that still have blood on them, holding me against him. And for the first time since I’ve lived here, I get the feeling Nic might have some sliver of humanity and even if I don’t want to admit it, I don’t think I hate him anymore.

**LEO**

I can hear her moaning on his cock. The sound reverberates in my ears and a fire burns in my chest, anger threatening to explode.

The fucking dick left the meet-up before me. At the time, I figured it was because he was shot. Not that Nic needs an excuse to leave the dirty work to me. I don't think he's disposed of a body in his lifetime, despite how good he is at taking them down. Nic leaves a trail of bodies in his wake, anyone who pisses him off met with a bullet between the eyes. Yet, he'll be the boss and I'll be stuck cleaning up his messes.

I had just walked through the door when I heard something. I ran to her door, worried that something was wrong. That he was hurting her. But the sounds that met me were not ones of pain.

I scrub a hand over my face. I should stop listening to this. And still, I find myself practically pressed to the door, taking in every word he spews. And she doesn't stop him. Doesn't say no.

Not that I expected less; I watched her fuck him in front of my own eyes. But I could write that off, tell myself it's because I was there that she liked it.

But I'm not there now.

And she seems to like it just fine.

“You want to pretend I force you, don't you? Or do you want Leo to think I force you? That's it, huh, baby? Don't want to admit to the nice brother that you love being a dirty little

slut for me? That all I have to do is look at you and you'll drop your panties for me. That this pussy is always drenched for me."

The nice brother. I scoff at the words. She doesn't deny it, though. A dagger would hurt less.

"Tell me what I want to hear, little wolf."

"Please. Please make me your dirty little slut. Please fuck me, make me come all over your cock. Please."

I listen to her come. Listen to her call out his name when it should only be mine.

I'm not going to let him take her from me. What we have is more than carnal urges and skin meeting skin. It's real.

That has to count for something.



The calendar on my phone tells me it's my birthday. I stare at the number, unsure what to do with it.

Birthdays as a child, before my dad's death, were an event. On my last one with him, I woke to balloons crowding my room while my father grinned at me. "*Happy birthday, princess.*" He was cheerful as he tossed one of the balloons in my direction. Downstairs, Uncle Johnny was at the stove, wearing an apron that showcased my painted handprints from when I was five. He flipped over a pancake speckled with rainbow sprinkles, my favorite.

"*Happy birthday, kiddo,*" he told me as he loaded up a plate of the colorful pancakes for me, topped with butter and maple syrup.

I think that was the last time I truly felt loved.

Wanted.

There are no balloons in my room this morning as I throw off the covers, stepping onto the cold hardwoods. It's 10:00 a.m., late enough that Leo and Nic will most likely both be gone.

I get out of bed, making my way to the en suite bathroom, when I see the piece of white paper on my floor, folded up perfectly into a square. I reach down, lifting the sheet and unfolding all the creases.

Tesoro,

Happy birthday.

I'll see you tonight.

Leo

The words written in his slanted handwriting bring a smile to my lips. It's not the first note he's written to me, as slipping them under the door has become his new trademark. They're not long or about anything important, really, like today; just a simple gesture to tell me he'll see me later. I fold it back up and tuck it away before I start getting ready.

I take my time showering and rubbing lotions on my skin before I let my hair down and assess myself in the mirror.

The black hair cascading from my scalp is longer now. It was past my shoulders months ago when I first arrived at Nic's estate, but now it hits the middle of my back. A previous version of me would have chopped it off, as I had no time to deal with taking care of my hair. But this version has nothing better to do.

I pump some shiny serum from the overpriced gold packaged bottle and rub it into the ends of my hair, working up, a method I learned from a YouTube video now that I have access to the internet again. Another freedom I earned by not pissing off my captor.

When the two of them are gone, there's more boredom here than I've ever been accustomed to, something I've grown to hate. My inactive mind likes to replay the past, a place I don't want to live any longer.

It drifts with memories of my childhood, my father and Johnny in Vegas. And then on worse days, it moves on to my time spent with Kitty and Ricky. I've watched the news for hours on end, waiting for something to be said about my uncle, but it never came.

Dom texted me. I wasn't sure how she'd react to her father's death, but when I scanned the message, all she told me was that her father left them. Kitty found a note on the dining room table, saying he was leaving, and he never came back. Agony welled up in my chest. That was a bold-faced lie, one planted by Nic or his men. I wanted to know what the house

looked like after they cleaned it up. Were my handprints still smeared on the wall? Any traces of the man I killed in the living room?

That was all Dom said, and we haven't talked about her missing father since. Every time I see her name light up on my phone, I think about it. About the knife slamming down into his chest while I relived all the cursed memories he inflicted on me. I wasn't sad about killing him. Most days, I don't even feel bad about it anymore. But I feel guilty that Dom doesn't know. I'm not sure she'd miss her father any more than I do, but still. The idea of her not knowing where he is or what I did plagues me.

"Little wolf." It's Nic's voice that breaks me out of my spiraling thoughts. I finger brush the last of the serum through my hair and give myself one last glance in the mirror. My face is done up nicely, the winged eyeliner I practiced, with pink cheeks and red lips. It doesn't match the casualness of my clothing, a white fitted tank top and black leggings, but I don't have time to change for Nic's arrival, so I step out of my bathroom as is.

Dark eyes trail over my body, and I watch as his tongue darts out to wet his lips. He's still devilishly handsome, wearing a black button-down tucked into black slacks. The clothes are probably one of the expensive name brands that also line my closet. Tags from brands I've heard of but never thought I'd own in a million years. Brioni, Tom Ford, Loro Piana...I can only imagine how much this man spends on clothing.

"I like this," he says, stepping closer to me so his finger can run along the band of the cropped white tank top. He grazes my skin, and it sends a shiver down my spine. "And this," he says, moving his finger to tap the corner of my eye where the black liner ends.

"Thank you," I mutter.

"Mmm." The corners of his lips tilt ever so slightly in the smallest smile. "I love when I hear those words from your

lips.” His finger drags down the side of my cheek, landing on my lips as he speaks.

Air freezes in my lungs. I tell myself I don’t want whatever comes next, whatever he’s here for, but I know I’ll give in easily, like I always do. He’s turned me into a caged animal, docile and willing to please my master.

“Happy birthday, little wolf,” Nic says, one of his hands cupping my face now, holding me in place while his gaze burns into me. “Twenty-one.” He says my age like it’s a rite of passage, and I guess for some it is. The age when you get to drink, go to clubs, let loose. But I imagine I’ll be having none of those experiences.

“I have a present for you,” he says, the look on his face making my stomach sink.

What does he have planned for me now?

“Come.” Nic steps back, his hand dropping from my face as he gestures to my bedroom door. “It’s downstairs.”

I hold my breath as I follow him down the steps to the main floor. I don’t know what he brought me, but worst-case scenarios are running through my head. *Is this another lesson?*

When I reach the landing and step into the living room, all the air rushes from my lungs, and I sprint forward.

Dom is standing there, her red curls flowing over her shoulders, dressed in a pair of loose boyfriend jeans with a black t-shirt under her green army jacket. When she sees me, she drops her tote bag and runs into my arms. We meet in the middle of Nic’s living room, arms wrapping tightly around each other.

For the first few moments, we don’t even say a word, just hold each other.

There are so many things I want to say, so many things I want to tell her, but I can feel Nic’s stare drilling into my back as he stands behind us.

This is my present, seeing my cousin, but still, I have no idea what it means, and with Nic, there always seems to be a

hidden agenda.

“How?” I start to ask, but Nic cuts me off.

“I picked her up, Valerie.”

“And you just got in his car?” I ask Dom, shock lining my features.

“He didn’t give me much of a choice.” She glares at him over my shoulder. “What is going on here, Val?” Her eyes implore mine for answers. “Why did Nic Colombo just kidnap me?”

“You *kidnapped* her?” I question, spinning around to meet my captor’s eyes. I don’t know why I ask the question as if it’s so far-fetched, when he did the same thing to me. Suddenly, nausea grows in my stomach. Is he planning on keeping her here too?

“Just for the day,” Nic answers my unspoken question. “She will be safely returned home before your birthday dinner at five p.m.” My eyes dart to the clock; it’s noon now, giving me five precious hours with Dom before Nic takes her away from me.

With that, I move my attention back to Dom, whose hands are still clinging to my shoulders.

“You owe me that explanation now,” she says, her gaze filled with questions.

“Run along now,” Nic dismisses us. “Go play dress up or whatever girls do. I’ll be in my office.”

I pull Dom to the steps, leading her back toward my bedroom, the only quiet spot in this house that belongs to just me.

Pausing on the steps, I look back to where Nic is watching me, his eyes blazing with something I can’t read. “Thank you,” I tell him softly. And I mean it.

“You’re welcome, little wolf.”



“YOU’RE LIVING HERE NOW...” Dom’s eyes are wide as she sits on the plush bed, holding one of my throw pillows against her chest. “It’s fucking wild.”

“Tell me about it,” I huff, pushing myself up to sit on the other side of the bed.

“So...” she trails. “I think it’s time you tell me what the hell is going on here.”

I groan, dropping my head into my palms. “It’s a long story.”

“Alright, then start at the beginning.”

I take Dom back to the first night, when I walked into Nic’s restaurant with every intention of killing him. Her lips pop open and then squeeze shut, but I know the question that’s brewing in her mind.

“I thought he would kill me,” I say tentatively.

“And you did it anyway?” Hurt shines through her eyes, tears lining her lids when she realizes I was willing to die to get my revenge on the man I now live with.

“I was...” I can’t find the words to tell her what a dark place I was in.

“I get it,” she says, her words soft, unusual for my vibrant, life-of-the-party cousin. “You’ve been angry since we were kids. I know you want payback, Val. I just...I guess I didn’t think I would lose you in the process.”

“You’re not gonna lose me-“

“If your plan went accordingly, I would have.” She looks at me pointedly, but it’s not with anger. I nod, swallowing the lump of guilt sitting in my throat. “And at this point, who’s to say?...You’ve been gone for so long. .” A lone tear escapes her eye, rolling slowly down her cheek. “I mean, my father stepping out, that was expected, but you?” Her eyes meet mine

again, the pain in her eyes causing an ache in my chest. “I thought you’d always be a constant.”

“I suck,” I say, barely above a whisper. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to-“

“It’s okay.” Dom waves her hand. “It doesn’t matter. You’re here now and you still haven’t finished your story.”

With a deep breath, I finish telling Dom my story. Taking her through the moments in Nic’s basement when I wasn’t sure if he’d kill me or not, to the agreement I made. A year of my life in exchange for lessons in revenge.

“So you’re gonna kill him then?” Dom questions. “You’re gonna kill Paulie Colombo?”

“Yes.”

“Val...” Dom runs a hand through her unruly curls, shaking her head. “I’m not sure if that’s the smartest idea or the worst one you’ve ever had.”

I laugh at her statement, and soon she’s joining me, both of us cracking up like it’s the funniest thing she’s ever said.

“I have to,” I tell her seriously, once our laughter has settled and we’ve caught our breath. “I *need* to.”

“And after?” Her voice is low when she asks the question. It feels like someone is shaking me, waking up something inside of me. *After?* I’ve been so focused on getting through, on surviving, on killing Paulie, that I haven’t considered anything past that.

Instantly, I think of Leo, and butterflies swarm my stomach as his image comes to mind. Is there an after with him? I feel like I’ve lost my mind at the thought of that. Up until now, I’ve been set on everything that’s happened here being temporary. That any feelings I have for him didn’t matter, because I’ll be leaving when all this is over. But does it really have to be that way? Could I be with him? And would he even want to be with me?

“I don’t know,” I say honestly. “I haven’t thought that far ahead. I just need to do this first. And once it’s done...I think

everything will be better then.” I don’t know if I’m saying it for her benefit or mine. I’m not sure I ever believed everything would be okay after I completed my revenge. But maybe it can be. Maybe there’s a life for me after this.

Dom nods. “I’ll never understand that,” she says, her tone growing solemn. “My dad running off is the best thing that’s ever happened.” She laughs lightly, and my breath catches in my chest. I can’t place the emotion rolling through me, whether I feel better that she’s not missing her father, or if I still feel horrible for the thing I did.

That I killed him.

“I don’t know what it’s like to love your father,” Dom tells me. “So I can’t say I understand your need for revenge, Val. I get being angry, I get wanting to hurt someone for all the bad shit in life, to even the score. But that...” She points at me. “The way you loved your father, enough that you’d risk your own life to avenge his. I’ll never understand that.” When I stay quiet for a moment, she continues. “Just promise me one thing.”

“Anything.”

“Don’t die.” She swallows, her eyes piercing into mine as she makes the request. “Don’t die for this, Val. Live, please. Because I don’t think I can do this without you.”



“D ominique.” I’m not sure what time it is when Nic enters my room, Dom’s name drifting from his lips darkly. “I’m going to drive you home now.”

I sit up from where I’m lying on the bed with Dom next to me. The immediate response on the tip of my tongue is *no*. But I swallow the word down bitterly, unsure if I want to start an argument with Nic.

Instead, I turn to meet my cousin’s sad eyes.

“I *will* see you again,” she says with certainty, her way of reminding me that I won’t let myself die for revenge. The promise sits like lead in my stomach, because up until now, I had been perfectly content with letting myself die if it meant Paulie Colombo finally had a taste of the pain he inflicted on me.

But Dom is right. Letting myself die, either by Nic’s hands or my own, leaves her with no one. I can’t do that to her.

And then I think about Leo, about the slice of happiness he’s given me in my time here. That’s what I want for myself. Somewhere along the way, I think I’ve decided to stay alive.

“You will,” I confirm. She pulls me into her, hugging me tighter than we ever have.

“I love you,” she whispers, the words sounding foreign on her tongue. We don’t say “I love you.”

Love is a scary thing to admit when every person who says it ends up leaving. Or when the people who are supposed to

love you do anything but.

“I love you, too.”

I’m trying not to let the tears fall as Dom gets up, leaving me behind as she makes her way toward Nic. Before she can make it through the door, he snags her arm, pulling her body into his. “Don’t worry too much, red,” he sneers. “I’ll keep her safe.”

Dom’s head whips around to face Nic as she yanks her arm from his grip. Surprisingly, he relents easily. My legs don’t react quick enough, and before I can get up to step between my captor and my cousin, Dom is staring up at him, her feet positioned in a fighting posture.

“Forgive me if I don’t trust you. You did kidnap her after all.” She spins on her heel, red hair flipping over her shoulder as she marches away from Nic.

His eyes stare after the path she went for a long moment, narrowing at her. When he turns to me, his face is normal, as if nothing just happened.

“Shower, get dressed,” he commands. “I’m taking you out for your birthday.” A smile lifts on his lips, sinister enough to make my stomach drop. Nothing good is going to come out of whatever he has planned for me tonight.

After they leave, Dom’s words hang heavy over me. I follow Nic’s intrusions and get ready for the birthday dinner I never asked for.

I’m grateful for my first present, as seeing Dom was something I needed, even if I didn’t know it at the time. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious about Nic’s plan for my birthday, but spending time with him feels like a betrayal to Leo. Every moment I’m with him ends up being a moment I come to regret. He twists my emotions, manipulates my feelings, and worst of all, he knows my body better than I do.

And I like it. He plays me like an instrument he’s practiced his entire life, and I fall for his tune.

“Just get through dinner,” I murmur to myself as I run my fingers over a row of hangers. Tonight will be better. Once Nic

leaves me alone and Leo takes over, I know my birthday will significantly improve. I just have to last that long.

I pluck a black dress from my closet, a small smile gracing my lips. Black seems an appropriate color to mourn my youth. The neckline is squared, and the sleeves are puffy until the point where they cinch at my wrists. It flows out at my waist and hits just above my knee; a little feminine, but I can't deny how pretty it makes me feel.

After running a brush through my hair and swiping on another coat of bright red lipstick, I head downstairs. I don't look like the girl who first showed up here in a ratty pair of blue jeans that weren't her own. I look like someone else, and for a brief moment, I feel gratitude for the chance to become her.

Nic is waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs. Butterflies swarm my stomach at the sight of him, and I curse myself for the reaction. Why can't I just hate him? He looks fresh in a black tailored suit. The top few buttons of his silk shirt are left undone, displaying a trail of dark hair. I try not to look too long, not wanting him to think I like the view as I make my way down the steps.

I steel my spine as I hit the landing, stopping directly in front of him.

“*Stunning.*” His dark gaze roams over my body. “You look absolutely *stunning*, little wolf.”

I don't like the way he says the compliment, the corners of his lips morphing into a cocky grin. Whatever game we're playing, he's already winning.

“Let's go.” I go to move past him and toward the front door, but he stops me, his body stepping in front of mine, his torso meeting my front. It almost catches me off guard, making me stumble in my heels, but Nic prevents me from falling.

“Careful, little wolf. Wouldn't want to piss me off on your birthday.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be nice to me on my birthday?” I spit back at him.

“Who says I’m not being nice?” He smiles around the words. After a moment, he steps back, extending his hand and gesturing for me to go.

There’s a sleek black limo sitting outside, a driver standing next to the back door. When he sees me, he pulls open the door, gesturing for me to slide into the back.

I settle inside, Nic sliding into the seat next to me, sitting too close, even though there’s an abundance of room. I seal my lips and try to look out the window, avoiding him as the limo begins to move, exiting the circle driveway of Nic’s estate.

“Did you enjoy your birthday present, little wolf?” Nic asks.

“Yes,” I say automatically, without removing my gaze from the passing scenery.

“Are you going to thank me for it?” That makes me look at him, and I almost roll my eyes.

“I already said thank you.”

“I can think of a better way.” A predatory gleam flickers in his eyes as he regards me with a wolfish grin.

Somehow, I’m both afraid and turned on. Nic has warped me in that way, mixing pleasure with fear and turning me into a junkie. I press my lips into a thin line and quell my reaction.

“Come here,” he commands, his voice low and deep. When I don’t immediately listen, a frown marks his face and he repeats himself, sterner this time. “Come. Here.”

I slide over the back seat of the limo until I’m close enough for Nic to grab me. He pulls me to him, bending me at the waist until I’m over his lap. With deft fingers, he lifts the hem of my dress, pulling it over my ass to expose my panties.

Rubbing his hand over the swell of my bottom, I hear him groan as I feel his cock stiffen beneath me. He slips his finger under the band of my panties and drags them over my hips, letting the cold air kiss my bare flesh, and I gasp.

“Oh, little wolf...” The way his pet name slips from his lips with a groan is both magnetic and chilling. He glides a finger through my folds, a grunt rumbling through his chest when he finds me immediately slick. All it took was one command and putting me over his lap for me to be ready for him.

Shame coats my cheeks, but it only turns him on more. He pumps a finger into me and then adds another, and I’m lost to his control. When his thumb travels to my clit, I’m shaking, grinding onto his hand and moaning his name.

Then he stops.

I start to groan with frustration. He took me to the edge of my orgasm and then stopped just before I got the release my body was humming for.

“Not yet, baby girl.” He grins wickedly. His free hand goes to his pocket, pulling out a little black satchel and small bottle of lube. Lifting me up to sit, he hands me the satchel.

“Open it.”

I already know what’s inside, but I pull the string and dump the contents into my palm anyway. This time, the butt plug is different, matte black and made of silicone with a silver gem on the flared base. It’s slightly bigger than the last one, making me swallow roughly.

“Nic, I-”

“You can take it, baby girl.” He reaches forward, tucking a piece of hair behind my ear. “You can take anything for me, can’t you?”

I’m dripping. That much I know for sure. Nic has me high on the edge of pleasure.

“Yes,” I murmur.

“Good girl.” He pets my face like I’m an animal he’s praising, and butterflies swarm my stomach. Maybe I’m sick for wanting this, but I don’t stop him as he bends me over his lap again and lubes up the plug.

His finger circles my clit, building me back up before he stops once more, leaving me writhing in frustration on his lap. Then he coats the plug in lube and positions it, slowly pushing the plug into my ass.

“Open up for me, baby,” he whispers, slowly working the bulb into me as I whimper.

When it finally fits inside me and Nic is happy, he rubs a hand over my ass and tugs my panties back up my legs.

“Wait- what about-”

“What?” Nic chuckles. “Oh, baby, did you want to come?”

I nod, and I’m pouting before I can help it.

“Not yet.” He smiles sweetly, but underneath I know there’s a sinister meaning to his words. “I’m gonna take you out for a nice birthday dinner, and then after, I’ll let you come on my cock with that plug in your ass.”

He opens the door, exiting the limo before extending a hand to me.

Dinner first. I’m not sure I’ll make it through a meal with every nerve ending in my body begging for release.

VAL

Nic leads me into a stupidly fancy restaurant. There's an air of sophistication and elegance with high ceilings, ornate chandeliers, and marble floors that exude grandeur. The walls are decorated with intricate murals depicting pastoral Italian scenes and the entire place smells like pasta and fresh baked bread.

My stomach growls, and Nic eyes me. "Hungry, little wolf?"

I nod. I am hungry, but his eyes imply it's for more than just food.

He's not wrong.

The waiter leads us to a table on the second floor; it's private and overlooks the first floor of the restaurant. He pulls out my seat, waiting for me to sit before he asks Nic what kind of wine we'd like. Nic spouts off a bottle I've never heard of and the waiter rushes away to retrieve it.

"Jeez," I mutter. "They treat you like you own the place."

"I do own the place." Nic chuckles as he shakes out his napkin, laying it over his lap.

"Oh."

An amused smile plays on his lips as he watches me, and leaning forward, his elbows resting on the table. "There's so much you don't know about me, little wolf,"

"Like what?" I ask, relaxing back in my chair. I'm genuinely curious about what he'll actually share with me.

Nic's ever-present grin stretches wide across his cheeks as he tugs his phone from his pocket. Two seconds later, something starts to buzz. Inside me.

I jolt at the realization, my fingers gripping onto the edge of the table as I feel the vibrations begin. The fucking plug vibrates.

I suck in a breath as Nic rests back in his seat, delighted with himself. "You didn't know that."

"That's hardly something about you." I'm squeezing the table as I say the words, trying not to cause a scene. Suddenly, I'm thankful for the privacy of the table, so no one can hear the buzzing or see the way I'm wiggling while trying to escape it. "Nic-"

"What, little wolf? Tell me what you want?"

"I want this out!" I nearly shout at him, keeping my voice low enough for no one else to hear.

My plea only makes Nic laugh, his head tilting back. "Well, that wouldn't be very fun now, would it?"

"Fun for who?"

"Me." He chuckles. "I'm having a great time."

"What happened to this being my birthday present?" I hiss.

"You got your present, little wolf. And you get another one later. But this?" He gestures to me, to the way I'm at the edge of my seat, a red flush coating my skin. "This is for me."

"That's not fair." I could scream at how frustrating he is.

"Life's not fair."

I hate those words. I've heard them before; every time I've been upset since the moment my dad died, people were quick to tell me that life isn't fair. What a shitty piece of advice to give a child.

The waiter comes back with a bottle of wine, and I look at Nic with wide, pleading eyes, hoping he'll give me a reprieve from the vibrations long enough for the waiter to pour our glasses. He doesn't, though. Instead, his eyes stay trained on

me while I press my nails into my thighs and squeeze my mouth shut, trying not to moan or make a sound while the man pours our wine and takes our orders. Nic orders for me, something I'd normally dislike, but right now I don't think I could order if I wanted to.

Once the waiter walks away, Nic taps a button on his phone and the vibrations stop. I exhale a heavy breath. "Thank God," I mutter.

"You're doing good, little wolf." He grins, taking a sip of his wine. "Think you can make it through dinner?"

"No!"

A dark chuckle rumbles from his chest. "But I'd like to see you try. Actually, that would make me very happy, and you want to make me happy, don't you?"

"No." I cross my arms over my chest and lean back. And to think I believed for a brief moment that he was human.

Something shifts in his expression with my quick answer. A tap on his phone and the device starts back up, this time stronger. This time, the vibrations flow through me, and I swear I can feel them in my pussy. It's a frustrating feeling, though. I want it on my clit, want any kind of friction to make me come. This just keeps me on edge.

Nic leans in, his body almost halfway across the table. "Wrong answer, Valerie." His dark eyes burn with heat. "I think you've forgotten why you're here."

"I haven't-"

"Yes, you have," he cuts me off. "Is it Leo? Have I let you and my brother get too close?" The assumption cuts me like a knife as he scowls. "If this were him, controlling your pleasure, your pain, would you let him? I bet you're sweet with him," he seethes. "I bet it's all sunshine and roses. But do you come for him, little wolf? Does your pussy leak for him the way it does for me?"

My body is overheating, the vibrations sending shock waves through me. I want to run, to escape Nic's glare and sharpened words. But I can't. I sit glued to my seat.

“Remember...” Nic’s voice is low and heated as his eyes sear into mine. “You made a deal with me, one year of your life and anything I want, Valerie. Anything.”

The vibrations stop, just in time for the waiter to come back with plates of food.

“Pack them up,” Nic orders, waving a hand at the confused man.

“Are we not-”

Nic doesn’t let me finish before his hand is on my arm, pulling me up from my seat. “No, little wolf. Suddenly, I don’t feel like waiting for dessert.”

Air hitches in my lungs as Nic drags me out of the restaurant, forcing me back into the limo before telling his driver something I can’t catch.

As soon as he’s in the limo, he’s on me, ripping the dress from my body. The fabric tears under his rough grip, but I don’t think he minds that he’s leaving me naked in the back seat. He discards the dress like trash and focuses his attention on me. Deft hands travel the expanse of my body, over the curves of my breasts and down to my lace covered ass.

“I’m disappointed,” Nic breathes as his fingers ghost over the base of the plug. “But not surprised.”

An apology is on the tip of my tongue, but even in my lust-fueled haze, I bite it back. He doesn’t deserve my apologies. Not when it’s clear he plans to take what he wants. If he’s jealous of his brother, that’s his own doing. It’s not my fault that Leo is everything he’s not, but telling Nic that would only make things worse.

Nic pulls back from me, picking me up and setting me on my knees in front of the seat he’s occupying. He undoes his belt and frees his cock from his dress pants before grabbing my chin with force to make me look at him.

“I want you to suck my cock, little wolf.”

I nod, dropping my head down and eagerly wrapping my fingers around the base of his thick bulge. He groans when I

slide my tongue along his length, and I decide that I'm going to take my time with this, getting him as riled up as he's made me.

I lick every inch of his dick, working back down to attend to his balls, all before I ever put it in my mouth. When I finally do, the moan that leaves him is deep and guttural. His head dips back and his fingers come forward to fist my hair.

Tapping the screen of his phone again, the plug comes back to life, making me whimper as I take his cock down my throat.

"That's it," he groans. "That's a good girl."

Something about the encouragement sparks a fire within me, and I suck harder for the praise. I ignore how sick it is, that this man can degrade me and I'll sink to my knees, working overtime to get him to call me pretty names again. But he's right; we made a deal, a deal that includes anything, and anything includes me on my knees in his limo with a vibrating plug in my ass and his cock in my mouth.

Nic doesn't let me tease him for long, quickly taking over control. Using my hair as a leash, he tugs me up and down, guiding the motions as he fucks my face.

I'm becoming desperate without any friction on my clit. The degrading scene leaves me needier for him to touch me.

"Good girl," he murmurs, slowing his pace. He pets my hair with one hand as he pulls me off his cock. The other comes forward, spreading my saliva over my face and smearing my lipstick.

I'm sure I look like an absolute mess, but Nic's eyes light up at the sight. "Beautiful," he murmurs. "Do you want me to fuck you now?" he asks, smiling as I stare up at him.

"Yes."

Nic shakes his head with a chuckle. "You know what I want to hear, Valerie."

"Nic... I-" The words stutter from my lips.

“Beg me. Beg me like the dirty little slut you are and maybe I’ll give you what you want.”

Need coils tightly at the base of my spine, filling my body with desperation. I’d say anything to get him to fuck me, to relieve the pressure building between my legs.

“Please,” tumbles from my lips. “Please fuck me. Please use me. Please make me come.”

“Who do you belong to?” Nic asks, his eyes darkening as he looks down at me.

“You,” I say without hesitation, and Nic growls his approval.

Grabbing me with rough hands, he flips me over and presses my face down to the seat while he lifts my hips. As he pushes his cock into me in one quick thrust, I cry out, my nails digging into the leather seat beneath me.

“Good fucking girl,” he growls. “You belong to me, and I’m going to make sure everyone knows it.”

His possessive words shouldn’t turn me on. But they do. They’re like gasoline being tossed on my fire, heightening everything.

“Please.” I don’t even know what I’m begging for, but he has me so desperate, I’ll take whatever he’ll give me.

“I know,” he says, his arm wrapping around my waist, his finger finding my clit. Rubbing quick circles over the bundle of nerves, he speaks in my ear. “You want to come, don’t you, little wolf?”

“Yes, please,”

“Then come,” he demands, his finger working me while his cock drives into me over and over. I come like that, my face pressed into the seat, the plug vibrating in my ass, and Nic fucking me roughly.

Waves of pleasure flow through me, my entire body becoming weightless as my head dizzies.

And when I finally float back down to earth, the pieces of myself forming back into one, he's flipped me onto my back, straddling me while he strokes his cock.

"I'm going to mark you," he growls. "Don't you dare wipe it off, baby. I want him to see you like this, delirious with pleasure and coated in my cum. I don't want him to ever question who you really belong to."

The gravity of what he's saying sinks into me right as he comes apart, ropes of cum landing on my face and chest, covering me just like he promised.

Tears well up in my eyes when I think about the scene he painted. Me walking into his house naked, his cum dripping from me. All I can picture is the disappointment in Leo's eyes.

"Oh, pretty girl," Nic coos. "I love when you cry for me."



VAL

Humiliation burns through my body as I dash up the stairs to my bedroom. Nic was kind enough to give me his suit jacket to cover myself with before I bolted from the limo into the house. It covers the important stuff, but leaves little to the imagination about what happened in the car.

His cum still drips from my face. When I went to wipe it off, he grabbed my wrist, reminding me of his earlier command.

He wants Leo to see me like this.

Slamming my bedroom door behind me, I slump against it, making sure to turn the lock. I only give myself a minute to soak in the well of shame before I pull myself up, shrugging off Nic's jacket and making for the shower. I need to wash his scent from me, clean myself of him completely.

After the hot water has burned all his remnants down the drain, I pull on a pair of sleep shorts and the largest t-shirt I can find and pile under my covers, convincing myself that tomorrow is a new day.

I don't feel well rested when I wake the next morning. I blink my eyes open as three knocks sound on my door. Exhaustion has settled in my bones, and everything aches as I pull myself up from the bed.

When I open the door and meet Leo's deep brown eyes, the entire night comes back to me, slamming into my chest like a ton of bricks. Butterflies swarm my stomach, excitement swirling with the guilt that lingers. *"Don't you dare wipe it off,*

baby. I want him to see you like this, delirious with pleasure and coated in my cum. I don't want him to ever question who you really belong to."

Leo was here when we got home last night, but I ran so fast, ignoring him as I made the way to lock myself in my room. I don't think he saw anything, but...

"I'm assuming your birthday dinner didn't go well?" He tries for a smile, the corner of his lip lifting just enough. It makes me smile, the shame lessening a bit as I open my door wider for him to come in.

"Something like that," I mutter, slumping down onto the bed.

"I'm sorry, tesoro." Leo's expression softens as he moves closer to me, lying back on the mattress beside me. "You deserve so much better."

The comment slices through my heart like a knife. Even if I know there's some truth to it; my self-worth isn't low enough to think I deserve to be treated like shit. But my options are limited, and I walked into this situation, created it myself.

I teeter between regretting my attempt to kill Nic and knowing that if I didn't do it, I would have never met Leo.

"I wanted to wish you a happy birthday." Leo changes the subject, rolling onto his side. I turn my own body so I'm facing him. Knots twist in my stomach as I meet his eyes.

"Thank you." The words "I'm sorry" are on the tip of my tongue, but I bite them back. I wouldn't even know how to explain my apology. I'm sorry I slept with your brother. Again. And I came while he told me he was going to parade me through the house so you could see his cum on my body.

My skin heats just thinking about it. Only, I can't tell if it's shame or lust that prompts it.

"I have a present for you," Leo tells me as his hand brushes hair over my shoulder, trailing down my arm. I shiver under his soft touch, wanting nothing more than to lean closer to kiss him.

“What is it?” I ask, no dread swirling with excitement for this brother’s gift.

“Come on, *tesoro*.” Leo rises to stand, brushing his palms down the front of his sweats and extending a hand to pull me off the bed.

“Get dressed and I’ll take you.”



“ARE WE-” I barely have the full question “*are we allowed to leave?*” out of my mouth, before Leo stops on his way to the car, eyeing me. He turns around, pressing his hand on my shoulders as he grounds me.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” My answer is immediate. Unlike Nic, I trust Leo with my life. But still, I’m here based on an agreement I made with his brother and leaving the house feels...risky. I chew on my lip as Leo’s eyes bore into me.

“Play hookie with me, *tesoro*. I promise it will be worth it.” His finger lifts, tugging my lip free from my teeth before he presses a soft kiss to my forehead.

“Okay.” I nod. “Let’s go.”

Leo ushers me into his sleek black Range Rover. My fingernails bite into my thighs as we navigate out of Nic’s estate. For some reason, I check behind us, as if I’m waiting for him to chase after us. But he doesn’t.

Leo drives through Long Island, past the oversized houses, sandy beaches, and sprawling vineyards. When he finally parks the car, it’s in front of a modern, clean-faced building. As soon as I open the door, I hear the gunshots, stopping me in my tracks, my fingers freezing on the door.

“I know you’ve been wanting to learn how to shoot...” Leo trails off, looking at me, then at the building.

It’s a shooting range.

Relief floods through me, but it's quickly replaced with gratitude.

“Thank you.”

The feeling mixes with wariness, not knowing what Nic would think of this. The back-and-forth between the two has me feeling uneasy, and as much as I want to enjoy this moment with Leo, I can't help the thoughts of Nic lingering in my mind.

Leo guides me inside, where we're not asked to sign papers or give our IDs. One of the men working sees Leo and immediately ushers us back.

The shooting area is large, with high ceilings and barriers between each lane. Leo leads me to a lane at the far end, fitting me with safety glasses and handing me a bulky pair of earmuffs. The man who escorted us gives him a gun and Leo takes it with a nod.

I suck in a breath as Leo looks at me, gun in hand. “This is a small caliber handgun,” he tells me, his voice serious. “Low recoil, easy to handle. This should be a good first gun for you.”

“It's not the first time I've held a gun,” I say, taking it from him with a raised brow.

He pauses for a moment and then chuckles. “You're right, *tesoro*. Sometimes I forget you're not so innocent.” Leo's body presses against me as he shows me how to use the gun. He teaches me how to turn off the safety, how to aim, and how to shoot, and even though I already know, I listen intently, relishing this time with him. When I finally shoot and the bullet flies from the barrel, the kickback pushes me into Leo, and he holds me steady with strong hands on my waist.

The bullet pierces the piece of paper, missing the fake body completely. “Try again,” he encourages, his thumbs rubbing circles where they rest above my hips.

I aim the gun and pull the trigger, and this time the bullet clips the edge of the paper. Leo presses a kiss to the crook of my check, dragging his lips up to my ear. “Closer,” he

murmurs against my skin, warming me from the inside out. “Try again.”

I drop my shoulders and repeat the motions, hitting the target, but not anywhere near the head or chest. “*Brava*,” Leo praises, and then his hands are roaming my body, skating up to my arms and caressing back down. I moan when he grazes my breasts, running his fingers gently over my nipples, before trailing lower until they land on my hips again with a tight grip. My heart is racing, the adrenaline from the shooting and his touch pulsing through me and making me feel high.

We continue like this, until eventually he steps back slightly, and I hold the gun on my own, staring down the black silhouette on the piece of paper and aiming at its head.

Every time I miss, Leo rubs my shoulder and whispers in my ear, and every time I get the paper, his fingers squeeze me - my ass, my tits, my hips. His hands continue to explore my body and his words assault my ears in the most seductive tone that gives me goosebumps.

Good girl. I'm so proud of you. Good shot. You're a natural.

I aim the gun again and shoot, and finally, after an hour of being here, I hit the target dead center in the chest. My eyes light up, and I feel like a kid on Christmas.

“*Brava ragazza*,” he says in Italian, and the sweet words have my heart swelling in my chest. Leo squeezes my hips and spins me around so I’m facing him, his mouth hovering over mine as his dark eyes watch me. “You did so good.” He lowers his lips, finally crushing them against mine. He deepens the kiss, parting my lips and exploring my mouth with his tongue. My arms come around him with a moan of relief, my body pressing against his. His fingers trail a path down the side of my rib cage to my jeans. They travel that seam, until they find the button holding the denim material closed.

His fingers dance over the hem of my panties, threatening to cross a dangerous line knowing we’re in public. But we’re in the back corner, and no one is near us. Just when I think he’s going to dip them beneath the material, he’s spinning me

back around, my hands finding purchase on the counter as he bucks his hips into mine.

“One more,” Leo tells me.

I suck in a breath, trying desperately to quiet the butterflies that he’s ignited. My core is burning, and I want to whine, tell him there’s no way I can shoot a gun right now, but he’s pressing soft kisses to my shoulder and his hands are on my hips to keep me steady. I aim the gun at the target’s head, squinting my eyes as I steel my spine and pull the trigger.

The bullet whooshes through the air and slices through the paper, right in the center of the target’s head.

“*Meraviglioso!*”

I want to turn to face him, but his hands grip me in place. The one at the band of my panties finally dips under, and I gasp.

“Leo...” I’m not sure if I’m saying his name to stop him or to urge him to go faster, but it doesn’t matter.

“This is your reward, tesoro.”

Slowly, his fingers make their way down to my pussy, and the moan that leaves my chest is one of longing. When he finds me already wet, he hisses out a breath. His lips find the most sensitive spot on my neck, and he sucks there softly before trailing kisses up to my ear.

One finger enters me while the heel of his hand rubs against my clit. My body is electrified from every little thing he’s doing, and the gun slips from my grip, resting on the small ledge in front of us and letting my fingers hold on to the edge.

“That’s it,” Leo whispers, his breath hitting my ear and sending a bolt of lightning down my spine. “You did such a good job, ragazza dolce. I want you to come now, and every time you have a gun in your hand, I want it to be my body pressed against you that you think of. My hand on your cunt. My voice in your ear. I want to be so entangled in your memories that you can never forget me.”

My chest warms, knowing how badly I want that too. I whimper, leaning farther onto the ledge as the fire builds within me. What Leo doesn't understand is that he's already entangled deep in my heart. There's no forgetting him now. He's the light that keeps me going, giving me something to live for that isn't blood and vengeance.

"Yes, Leo. Please..." I pant, my fingernails pressing into the wood as I feel my body preparing to fall into an abyss of pleasure.

"Come for me, tesoro." And that's all I need.

I pull my bottom lip between my teeth, biting it to silence the screams lodged in my throat. It doesn't stop the groans, guttural sounds that leave me as nirvana hits, crashing over me in waves of ecstasy.

When it ends, I can barely stand as Leo removes his hand, straightening my panties and zipping up my jeans. He's grinning widely when he spins me around to face him.

"Good job, *tesoro*." He slips the gun from the table and tucks it back into his waistband, pulling me into his chest.

"Thank you," I whisper against him, and it's for so much more than today.

"Happy birthday, Valerie."

It's like a current zips through my body when Leo touches me, and when he holds me against him, I feel safe and protected and content for the first time in a long time. I melt against him, my mind slowing, my heart calming.

I feel myself falling, except the way down isn't fast or harsh. I don't foresee a crash coming at the end of it. Instead, it's a soft blanket, a warm fireplace, pure sunshine. I finally understand when people say cheesy things like '*the light at the end of the tunnel*.' Because Leo's bright, his shine radiating everything around me through the darkness of our lives, showing me a path I've never imagined before.

And for a moment I think I could be happy like this.

But everything comes to an end. Especially the good things.

VAL

“Tell me...” The question has been sitting on my tongue for days, weeks, months even. “Why aren’t you and your brother close?”

Leo and I have settled into the couch in the living room, the fire roaring in front of us as slow music drifts from the speakers. Leo pauses the glass on the way to his lips when I ask my question.

I’ve gotten to know the good brother more since I’ve been here the last ten months. His notes, though light on personal information, have helped me see him clearer as they’ve grown more detailed and thoughtful. He writes to me about books, leaves me lines of his favorite poetry, writes quotes from all his stoic philosophers—even if I don’t understand their meaning. I’ve grown to love waking up and finding the perfectly folded piece of paper slid under my door. I’ve tucked each one away under the mattress. I don’t know if I need to hide them, but the thought of Nic finding them makes my stomach churn, so I do, folding each one neatly back up and tucking it away.

But even with my newfound insight into Leo’s brain, there’s still one thing I don’t understand.

Why live here? If he and his brother hate each other so much, then why be roommates? Why even live near each other? He could just leave, but instead he stays in this city with his father and brother, existing tensely under the same roof as Nic. Nic says Leo owes him—a statement I can’t let go. What could Leo possibly owe him?

It makes no sense to me.

I sip my whiskey slowly, waiting for his response. I've grown accustomed to the burn that sears my throat as I swallow, and now part of me even loves it. Sitting down here with Leo is the best part of the day. The only time I'm truly happy and comfortable. The mind-fucks from his brother are tucked safely away and I can finally inhale. The amber liquid has become associated with the feeling of safety, and the warmth that soaks over me with every drop makes me forget about the psychopath living in the same house as me.

His body stiffens for a moment, and I think he won't tell me before he finally lifts his gaze and softens his posture. "We had very different childhoods," he answers.

A harsh sound leaves my mouth. "What does that even mean?" I don't mean for the question to sound accusatory, but it comes out in an annoyed tone. Everything these two tell me disguises the truth, and at this point my mind is so cluttered with riddles, I don't even know what they're saying.

The leather chair contrasts against his black shirt as he settles in. He takes a swig of his drink, and then adjusts himself to face me. "My mamma died when I was fifteen." He sighs. "I didn't know my father or Nic before that. Paulie had met my ma in Palermo and had taken to her. He moved her back to the states with him, gave her money and a nice apartment. She was his new *plaything*, his favorite *goomah*. Except my mamma didn't know what that word meant, because she thought he loved her." Leo pauses, scrubbing a hand over his stubbled cheek.

It clearly pains him to tell me this, and my heart aches, fearing what he'll say next.

"She thought they would have a happy family together, but he already had a family. He had a wife and baby Nicolai waiting for him at home. When she ended up pregnant with me, she expected him to propose to her." He laughs, his eyes looking up at the ceiling before he continues. "He didn't propose. He gave her a wad of hundred-dollar bills and told her to get an abortion."

I visibly cringe. What a fucking dick.

“Clearly, she didn’t.” He gestures to himself. “Paulie stopped paying the rent and my ma was left on her own. Eventually, we moved to a smaller place. She asked her family back in Palermo for help, but they weren’t thrilled with her running off and getting pregnant at nineteen. She did her best.” He takes a breath, and when he looks at me, I can see the tears that rim his lash line.

Paulie left them with nothing. Not a single thing. The second he came into the world, his dad abandoned him. It feels like my heart has been sliced open when I think about the little boy that Leo was, not knowing he had a father a few blocks away with millions of dollars sitting in his bank account while he’s living in section-eight housing.

“What happened to her?” I ask, swallowing my fear of the answer.

“She developed breast cancer when I was thirteen. She fought like hell, went to chemo until her last minute; she tried everything to save herself even as it tore apart her body.” He exhales a humorless laugh, a soft sound meant to cover up the grief that wants to come out.

I recognize the feeling. I hated talking about my dad after his death. It brought up too many emotions, too many memories. And then the anger would surface, filling me to the brim. Why him? Why my dad? I couldn’t reconcile the fact that one day he was here and the next he was gone.

Heaven was all I was told. Even Kitty had the patience to give me that much. But Heaven didn’t make sense to me. Why take someone to paradise when he still had a daughter left on this earth? How was he supposed to sit back and enjoy the peace without being riddled with worry for me?

He was my everything, my hero.

And Leo was like me; he had no one outside of his mother.

A small tear forms at the corner of my eye, and I raise my hand to wipe it away before he can see it.

“She put his name on the birth certificate, so after she died, social services found my dad.” A fake smile spreads across his lips. “*Che carino.*”

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper.

“Don’t be.” He waves his hand. “At least I have money now, right?” His lips twitch, an authentic smile forming as he looks into my eyes. This smile is better; this is the one I’ve grown to love.

“And Nic wasn’t happy about having a brother, I assume?” I ask, prodding him for more information.

“No, Nicolai wasn’t used to sharing.”

“Why do you live here then?” I question. “Why not move somewhere else?”

He shrugs his shoulders, leaning back into the leather armchair while thinking over the question. “It is as good a place as any,” he says simply, and it only frustrates me.

“Why stay in New York, though? Why be a part of this... family...”

“You don’t just walk away from this, Val.”

“But why not?” I press.

Leo doesn’t answer, just takes a sip of his drink and purses his lips. “What happens if you leave?” I try again. He gives me silence. It wells between us, filling up the space. What is he not telling me? Theories rush through my mind, making my heart race.

“Why... why won’t you tell me?” I’m feeling more discouraged as I stare at him, seeing the answer in his eyes before he speaks.

Leo scrubs a hand over his jaw before he leans forward, his elbows resting on his knees as he thinks over my words. “There are things I can’t tell you.”

There’s a soft look in his eyes, one that’s apologetic and caring. I don’t know what he’s not admitting, but I can tell he

doesn't like it. I wonder if he wants to leave this family, but something is stopping him.

“Leo, I just—” My voice is raspy, emotion welling up inside me at what seems like a helpless situation. If he can't leave, then maybe that means any fantasy I had of us being together isn't even a possibility.

“Don't say it, *tesoro*.” He shakes his head. “I don't want your pity. It is what it is.”

I don't make a conscious decision to leave my seat and make my way over to Leo. My legs move of their own accord, finding him. Darkening eyes stare up at me as I straddle him, bringing my knees to either side of his muscled thighs on the oversized chair. Lifting the bottom of my chemise so it sits atop my hips, I bring myself flush with his body.

“I won't pity you,” I whisper, leaning forward to press my chest against his. His hands find my hips, kneading into the flesh there.

“Tesoro—“

“I won't say I'm sorry for you,” I tell him, needing to feel closer to him as I bring my face to his. “I won't say anything nice. Instead, I'll just say *fuck me, Leo*.”

Both of his hands find my back, running over my skin beneath the silk material.

“I heard you fuck him the other night.” He clicks his tongue, and I shiver at the look in his eyes. “That was really fucking bold of you,” he tells me, his fingers winding my hair before he tugs hard, making my breath catch in my throat.

Heat pools in my belly, a strange mix of shame and lust I've become all too familiar with. I hate that I've been so consumed by Nic physically, that he's in total control... but I also can't deny it's what I think I deserve and that's why it feels so good.

Leo is the better man, the one who I'd hand my loyalty over to in a second for his heart. But, we all know I don't have a choice. As long as I'm here, fulfilling this deal, I'm Nic's to play with as he pleases, regardless of where my feelings lie.

And that shame for not hating it as much as I should will stick with me long after I'm free to walk out the door.

Shaking myself from my saddening thoughts, I find myself pouting. "I told him to be quiet."

Leo scoffs. "He didn't listen." His free hand finds my throat, tracing a line up to my jaw. "I want to return the favor," he says, desire sparking in his eyes as he searches mine. "I want him to wake up to the sound of you coming on my cock. I want my brother to know how I make you scream, how big of a slut you become once I get inside you." His warm hand palms my cheek. "Can you do that for me, sweet girl?"

My stomach flips, and I nod my head.

"Words, *tesoro*, tell me."

"I can do that," I whisper against his lips.

A grin spreads across his lips at my response. "*Brava ragazza*," he says smoothly, while his thumb runs across my bottom lip. I take his digit into my mouth, sucking on the tip. His glassy, whiskey-hazed eyes sparkle as he watches me.

Under Leo's gaze, I also feel beautiful, appreciated. Even as the dirty words leave him, a blanket of warmth is cast over me.

Slut isn't a bad word when Leo says it. It's filled with lust, knowing that for him, I'll sink to my knees and worship without humiliation.

Leo's hand slides down my back, finding the hem of my lace panties. When he travels lower, I raise my hips to give him access. Palming my sex over the material, a hungry noise escapes his throat.

"You're fucking soaked for me, *tesoro*."

"I can't help it," I whisper, a blush creeping up my cheeks. "Being with you turns me on. I think about you all the time."

"Yeah, baby?" He leans in, snagging my lower lip between his teeth.

“Yes,” the word is only a breath, but that doesn’t matter to him. Leo kisses me hard, finally giving me his soft and purposeful lips, his arms wrapping around me as he dives into my mouth. The way he kisses me drowns my body in need for him.

“Please,” I beg, and that only serves to make him grin wider. Below me, I can feel his cock stiffen as I grind on top of him, desperate for any bit of friction to ease the ache building inside of me. “Leo,” I plead.

“What, sweet girl?” He pulls back, meeting my gaze. “Tell me what you want, baby. Say the words.”

These men and their demands will absolutely be the death of me.

And still, I say what I know he wants to hear. “Fuck me, Leo, fuck me loud enough that Nic can hear how you make me feel.”

A devilish look flashes over his face, and his hands find the scrap of lace between my legs, pushing it to the side to give him better access. He strokes me gently at first, ignoring my clit as he gathers my wetness. Thrusting into me, he curls his digits against my G-spot, making me cry out.

My clit is begging for attention, and I shift my hips, trying to get Leo where I need him.

“Ah, ah, ah,” he admonishes. “Be a good girl for me, hmm? Take what I give you.”

I whimper as I nod, letting Leo thrust into me two more times before he finally drags his soaked finger to my clit, giving the bundle of nerves the attention it so badly desires. I moan long and loud in relief as he circles around it lazily, building up the fire in my core.

“You’re such a good girl for me,” he purrs into my ear as he continues his assault on my clit. “You do whatever I say. Such a good little slut.” He knows just what I need. The praise paired with the degradation makes my body shake, greedy arousal tingling within me for more.

“Yes,” I breathe out.

“So, you’ll be a good girl and come when I tell you?” he asks, one brow raising with the question.

“Yes, Leo,” I breathe, my orgasm right on the precipice, threatening to burst, overtaking my every thought.

“And not a second before, right?”

“Mmhmm.” I can barely stand it, the buildup too intense. I need to come. I need to release what’s bubbling up inside me as I writhe above him. “Can I please come?” I ask, the question coming out in a low whine.

“No, baby girl.” He removes his finger, and it feels like he threw a bucket of ice water over me instead. I cry out, an annoyed, petulant yell, and Leo only laughs at my reaction. “Not yet, *tesoro*,” he tells me, bringing his finger to his lips and sucking off my juices. “I want you to come with my cock buried so deep inside you, you see stars as you call out my name.”

I want that. I’m desperate for that. So I nod eagerly as he pushes down his sweats and boxers, freeing his thick cock from its constraints. Gently, he lines the head of his cock up with my sex and guides me down, stretching me as I sink down onto him.

“Jesus, fuck,” I moan.

“Not Jesus,” he whispers. “Say my name, baby.”

“*Leo*,” I moan, and his finger finds my clit again, rubbing soft circles as he bounces me up and down his length.

“Please don’t stop,” I beg, earning myself a chuckle from Leo as I grip onto his shoulders.

He continues playing with me while his cock thrusts at a brutal pace. “Come for me, *il mio bellissimo tesoro*,” he coos. “Come on my cock.”

With his permission, I do, and hard. I call out his name, unsure how loud I’m yelling, but I don’t care. My eyes squeeze closed, stars bursting behind my vision as my orgasm takes over and I convulse on his lap. Leo works me for everything I have, and one release rolls into two, pulling

sounds from my chest I don't recognize as my own until I'm trembling. I hear him grunt, cursing under his breath as his hold on my hips tightens, milking his cock. Each thrust makes me whimper, everything feeling too good and too much all at once.

When he finishes, I collapse onto his chest, both of us panting as we come down from the high. Leo brushes my hair behind my ear and peppers sweet kisses along my jaw. I melt into his touch, wishing I could stay right here in his arms.

“Bellissima,” he whispers. “So fucking beautiful.”

**VAL**

“Pack a bag, little wolf. We’re going on a trip.” The sound of Nic’s voice paired with the bounce of the mattress as a suitcase lands on my bed startles me awake. Using the back of my hand, I wipe the sleep from my eyes, dragging my body upright to look at my captor. I’m not surprised to see his wicked smirk, but I am surprised to see Leo standing in the doorway, his arms resting across his chest.

There’s a worried look settled on his face, creases forming around his mouth while his eyes find me on the bed. He looks away just as quickly, his lips pressing into a thin line. He doesn’t emit the sunshine I’ve grown to crave, instead his presence feels gloomy, and my head spins with anxiety, running through all the possible worst-case scenarios.

Where is Nic taking me?

Is today the day he kills me?

“Are you coming?” I ask Leo.

Before Leo even opens his mouth, Nic is laughing, a mocking sound echoing off the high ceilings of my bedroom as he looks between the two of us. “Yes, little wolf, your boyfriend is coming too.”

“He’s not-“ I try to deny.

Nic waves his hand, dismissing my rebuttal. “You have an hour.”

The boys leave me as I crawl out of bed, noticing there’s no note on my bedroom floor today. I shed the silk camisole

and short set as I drag my feet toward the attached bathroom. I hate Nic's games, they're growing old quickly. But I promised a year.

Only one month to go, I tick off the days, waiting for the one when I'm finally free.

My captor's been distant since my birthday, seemingly spending less time in the house. Or, if he is home, he's tucked away in his office. I've taken that as a blessing. Every time I do see him, his words are harsh, and his punishments harsher. And every time he makes me come undone around his fingers, his tongue, his cock, I feel worse about myself.

I still don't understand why he chose to take me rather than just kill me. And part of me dreads the last day here, unsure if he'll actually ever let me leave.

And if he does...what about Leo?

Can I walk away from this place and leave him behind? It's a question that's been circling my mind more often lately.

Leo was unexpected. I wasn't prepared to care for him, to feel for someone other than myself and Dom. And yet here we are, living in my gilded cage and hoping for leniency from the key holder.

When I exit the shower, Rosa is in my room, pulling dresses from my closet and laying them out on the bed in a neat pile next to the suitcase. She already has underwear and silky nightgowns folded in crisp piles in the bag and she looks at each dress critically, assessing which ones she'll choose to pack.

"What are you doing?" I question, brow furrowing.

Rosa makes a small noise under her breath—for some reason, the woman still doesn't like me. "Packing. Nicolai wants to make sure you have appropriate attire." Her eyes flash to me, scanning over my body wrapped in the fluffy towel. "Here." She hands me a short pink fitted dress.

"I can dress myself," I tell her, pushing past the extended dress and going toward my closet. "Where are we even going?"

Rosa huffs, laying the dress back down on the bed. “You’re flying today, that’s all I can tell you.”

Of course.

I pull a pair of light-washed jeans with matching rips above each knee from the closet. After I slide the denim up my legs, I find a white cropped tank top to pair with them. My tanned stomach shows beneath the gap between the shirt and jeans, but I don’t make any effort to cover my skin. I throw an oversized cardigan over the outfit and slip into a pair of white Keds, arguably the cheapest shoes I own now.

Rosa slides the dresses that made her final cut into a garment bag, zipping it up and smoothing her hand down the front. “Why so many dresses?” I ask. I wonder if Rosa would rather be wearing the pretty garments neatly tucked away in the bag or if she prefers the comfortable black clothes she normally wears under her floral printed apron. What was her life like before she worked for the monster who lives here? My tongue presses against the roof of my mouth and I have to force myself not to ask. Rosa hates questions, especially ones about her or Nic.

“You’ll be going to nice places, so he wants you to dress the part.” She gives me another once over, taking in the rips in my jeans as she speaks, a look of disapproval lining her features.

I add more jeans and a pair of shorts, along with some loose t-shirts, as Rosa packs the gaudy jewelry I have yet to wear. It feels like we’re packing for two different trips as we both fill the suitcase.

“Are you ready?” It’s Leo’s voice that breaks the silence Rosa and I had settled into.

I spin to face him, crossing my arms over my chest. “Can you tell me where we’re going?” I raise my eyes to find his. I want to believe Leo feels the same about me, that he wouldn’t hurt me, but I know his loyalty belongs to his brother. And in this moment, it has an ache settling in my gut.

The chocolatey orbs don't tell me much, and his lips press into a thin line. "You know I can't."

"Can't or won't?" I press, feeling the strained tension building between us. He could ease me of this anxiety, put me out of my misery, but he chooses not to. His choice is Nic, and when it comes down to it, he'll always choose his brother over me.

Leo moves toward me in slow strides, pressing his hands to my shoulders and running them over the chunky sweater that hangs from me. "You know the answer to that too. Don't look at me like that, sweet girl. Per favore." His stare penetrates me, searing through my doubts. My dad used to tell me he could see someone's soul in their eyes; that's what made him such a good casino manager. I think I can see Leo's soul when he looks at me. Behind the swirls of green and brown, there's just a sad kid, longing for a father or anyone who could accept him.

"Do you trust me?" he asks, his eyebrows raising.

I think I know him. I think that he wouldn't betray me, and that I can trust him, more than anything. Trust is something that I haven't had much of in my life, but Leo makes me feel safe. As the heat from his hands finds me through the sweater, seeping into my skin, I feel a calmness sweep over me.

I want to breathe into it, feel my body relax with him. But it's the storm that keeps me on edge, waiting for Nic's lightning to strike.

I inhale deeply, sucking in oxygen and hoping the breath gives me strength. "Yes," I whisper.

The corner of his lips lift into a soft smile before he leans forward to press a light kiss to my forehead. "I'll keep you safe, *tesoro*."

"Let's go." Nic interrupts our moment, and when I look to the doorway, he's watching us with a sinister gaze that pins me in place.

I don't know what kind of test he's planning for me, but his sneer tells me it's going to be hard. My chest tightens at the

thought, my body and mind too tired to keep fighting Nic off.

I nod as Leo removes his hands from my body, instantly making me cold without his warmth to protect me.

“Come on, little wolf.” Nic extends his hand for me. “I have a surprise for you.” I feel like I’m trading security for the unknown. But Nic gives me no choice.

Whatever surprise he has for me, I’m not going to like it.



EVEN AFTER ELEVEN months with Nic, I’m still surprised by the obscene amount of money the man has. A driver waits to take us to his private plane, leaving Leo to travel in a separate car while Nic pushes me into the back seat and slides in next to me.

The game starts now.

He smooths his hands over the black dress pants as he barks orders at the enforcer driving us. The man only nods as he presses his foot down on the gas pedal and starts our journey to the airport.

I keep my eyes glued to the window, watching all the Long Island houses pass by. I don’t bother pestering Nic with questions he won’t answer, instead I ignore him as he types furiously on his phone.

“You haven’t been your normal, sassy self,” Nic voices from his spot next to me, tucking his phone back into his pocket. When I don’t respond, I hear him huff. “Valerie.” He reaches out, his fingertips skimming over my arm. “Look at me,” he demands.

It’s only a few seconds later, after I don’t respond, that Nic tangles his fingers into my hair, pulling on my scalp with enough force to drag my body down. He tugs until he’s able to pull my face into his lap, tightening his grip and holding me in place with one hand in my hair and the other on my shoulder. I swallow a growl at his forceful touch, knowing I’m pushing his buttons, but I can’t find it in me to care.

“Answer me when I talk to you, Valerie.”

I try to pull myself from his grip, but it doesn't loosen, and he just pushes me down harder. “I don't feel like talking.”

“I don't give a fuck.”

“You're a dick, you know that?”

My retort earns me a slap on the ass, the sound reverberating through the car. The enforcer who drives us doesn't acknowledge anything happening back here, instead he keeps his eyes forward and his lips sealed, a requirement when working with Nic.

“Fuck you,” I shout into his leg. My yelling is meant with another smack, and another. He hits my ass, alternating sides until tears begin to fall from my eyes and a sob bursts from my chest. When he's done, he pulls me up, bringing my face a mere inch from his.

“Don't talk back to me, little wolf. This punishment is nothing in comparison to what I could do to you.”

I press my lips into a thin line, my body too sore, my ego too broken to talk back to him now. When he releases my hair, I immediately bring a hand to my head, rubbing over my sore scalp with a quiet groan.

Nic shakes out his hand, as if punishing me was painful for him. I curl into myself, leaning away from him and back toward the window.

“Christ, you piss me off,” he hisses, and I sigh in response, not bothering to look his way again.

When we arrive at the private airport, I leap from the car, needing space between me and Nic and fresh air in my lungs. Being near him is too much, mentally and physically. Leo pulls his Range Rover up next to the Escalade, jumping from the car when he sees me.

“What happened?” The engine of his car is still running, the door hanging open as Leo comes to me. He presses his hands into my shoulders, and they weigh me down, anchors keeping my feet glued to the ground. The warmth steadies me

instantly, and I suck in a breath, breaking the tension that had gathered in the car.

My body betrays me when it comes to Nic. My brain knows his actions are fucked up, that his hands on my body are wrong. The reason I'm here is fucked up on its own, as I'm nothing but a little plaything for him.

But my body reacted. A spark lit up my core that went straight to my clit. My nerves buzzed with energy, begging to be touched.

And I hate myself for it constantly, for being attracted to the man who's making my life miserable. He kidnapped me, for fuck's sake.

"Nothing." I wipe my eyes with the backs of my hands, smoothing away the tears. I'm sure I look disheveled, with my sweater hanging off one shoulder and my hair in a tangled mess. Leo eyes me suspiciously before his attention turns to his brother.

"What did you do to her?" he asks, anger lacing the tone that tumbles from his lips. His face turns to meet Nic's as he steps out of the car, sliding on his Ray Bans to cover his eyes.

"She was being a brat." Nic smirks, his eyes drifting to my ass, probably pink under my jeans.

"*Cazzo.*" Leo waves his hand, the word an angry hiss.

"What, brother?" he taunts. "Are you mad I played with *my* toy?" The insinuation that I'm nothing but an object, just a thing for both of them to play with, makes me sick.

Leo scrubs a hand over his jaw, looking tormented by Nic's comment, his whole body tense. Nic laughs deeply as he straightens out his suit, his wicked eyes roving over me once more before he strides toward the jet.

I'm thankful for the break in his presence. The fog he elicits dissipates, giving me a chance to think clearly.

"It's okay," Leo says, his hands rubbing over my arms as he pulls me closer. "Nic's just being...cruel. You're strong, sweet girl. You'll be fine."

I don't believe him. Nic has me on the edge of breaking with so little time left to go as his prisoner. My insides want to revolt, my brain pleading for a bit of peace. Nic's constant whiplash burns me from the inside out. I never know what to expect from him.

I audibly swallow before I lift my gaze to look at Leo. "*Please.*" Begging feels unnatural to me, but my mind has weakened in the time I've spent with these two. "Just tell me where we're going."

Leo looks torn for a moment, glancing at the plane, like he's checking to make sure Nic is gone. When he turns back to me, he presses another soft kiss to my forehead before he speaks against me. "Vegas."

VAL

My leg shakes on the plane, rocking the seatbelt and causing it to click against the ring on my hand. Nic's eyes stay glued to the source of the noise, his finger resting on his chin as he stares it down.

“Can you stop?” he asks, his deep tenor breaking me from the train of anxious thoughts running through my brain.

I steady my leg, and Nic's shoulders visibly droop, relaxing in the stillness. Beside me, Leo keeps his gaze on the clouds outside of the plane. I can sense his worries in the energy between us.

No matter what moments we share when the skies darken and the only light is the glow of the stars, we're still living at the mercy of the man in front of us.

And if Nic doesn't let me go, Leo and I can never be.

The tension between them is stifling. They're playing their own game, and Nic is winning.

“How long is the flight?” I ask, breaking the silence as I curl farther into my sweater. I have a million questions. The first one being, *why the hell are we going to Vegas?* But I can't ask them all, despite how they're burning a hole through my chest.

I haven't been to the city since I was ten. After social services flew me to New Jersey, I never returned. I spent three days in a foster home after my dad's “disappearance” before he was finally found, and I was shipped to Jersey to live with

my aunt and uncle. My last moments in the city that had been my home for years were filled with fear.

I have great memories of the city too, but they're all tainted by the presence of my father, making it hard to relive them. I never learned what happened to him from the time he left Vegas to when he was found buried in a shallow grave. The official line was that he was picked up by the mob, beaten to death, and then buried.

I had read the words, traced my fingers over the ink on the paper sent from the detective, but I still didn't understand. Why did the mob want to kill my father? Why would they hunt him down and beat him to death? The act was too personal.

My father was a fellow Italian American, his parents having immigrated before he was born, making him a second generation of Italians living in Jersey. Why would they kill him? What could he have done?

But I can't ask Nic. He has no reason to help me anyway, and asking the question would only get me met with anger.

"Only a few more hours," Leo tells me. His eyes drift over my body, before he grabs a pillow and blanket from the seat next to him. "Here, tesoro. Rest." He unravels the blanket, spreading it over my lap. Our eyes meet for a brief moment, and he holds my gaze like he's trying to tell me something. A secret message that only we can hear.

Trust me.

I decide to trust him and take his advice, leaning back into my seat, closing my eyes and letting sleep drift over me.

I'm startled when the plane touches down at a private airstrip in Nevada. Leo is beside me when I wake. He rubs a hand over my shoulder and helps me up. Stopping me before we can exit the plane, his hands find my waist, spinning me around and pushing me against the interior wall. His lips crash against mine, kissing me hungrily, greedily, as if he's afraid he won't see me again.

When he finally pulls back for air, his dark eyes look over me, an emotion sitting in them I can't place. "I'll find you tonight," he tells me. I don't have a chance to ask more questions before he's leading me off the plane.

As soon as the warm air hits my skin, a sense of home washes over me. It's funny, I lived outside of Vegas twice as long, but the desert roads and warm yellow glow of the sun are embedded in my heart. It just feels right.

There's another black Escalade at the private airstrip. I laugh when I see it, earning me a stern look from Nic. But seriously, is that the only car his cronies are allowed to drive? He ushers me inside, forcing Leo to ride separately again.

"Why make him drive separately?" I cross my arms over my chest and jut my chin toward the front passenger seat. "Why doesn't he sit right there?"

Dark eyes flash to mine. "Why? You don't want to be alone with me? Afraid you won't be able to stop yourself from baring your cunt to me once again?" A sinister smile tugs at the corner of his lips.

The breath I inhale sits in my throat despite my body pleading for oxygen. Regardless of everything I say, everything my mind begs me to believe, my heart thrums a quick beat, and my thighs clench at his threatening tone.

"I'm not going to fuck you again." I turn my body away from him as the engine ignites, and the car starts to move.

"Sure," Nic scoffs. "Whatever you want to tell yourself, little wolf, but you and I both know that your pussy loves me. Despite whatever narrative you're spinning in your head, we both know you want to be here. You just want an excuse so you don't have to feel bad about it. That's fine, baby, paint me as your villain. At the end of the day, you'll still be naked beneath me."

I don't respond, instead I stay pressed against the window, keeping myself as far from Nic as possible. He doesn't push me. Even when we arrive at The Royal, he stands behind me as I stare up at the casino. It's different from how I remember

it. It's the same building, the same architecture, but the style seems updated.

Being here now, after all the time that has passed, feels wrong. I can't imagine walking through those doors without seeing my father waiting on the other side. He was always dressed impeccably, in tailored suits of expensive material. His clothes were crisp and perfectly styled, and he greeted every guest with a wide smile, eyes crinkling at the corners. My father had a dark head of hair with just a pinch of gray and thick, bushy eyebrows.

Nic holds my hand, tugging me through the front door as the memories flood my mind. Once the soles of my shoes hit the shiny marble floors, I'm transformed into a child again, a quick image of my feet covered in Barbie sneakers flashing through my mind.

I can't pay attention as Nic leads me away from the casino floor and to the hotel. Stopping only to get a key, he drags me into the elevator. I don't even know if I am breathing until we're in the hotel room.

The onslaught of memories has me overwhelmed.

In my mind, I had everything sorted and stored away. The bullet points of my anger were pinned to the front, memorized and etched to my brain. But I let the actual memories and all of the haunting pain associated with them fade away to a dull ache I could ignore. Reliving everything all at once is too much, and I feel myself getting swept away by the current of them.

"Sit down." Nic guides me to the king-sized bed, his dark eyes looking over me skeptically, like he can tell I'm on the verge of a panic attack. He must not care, though, because he cracks his neck and tells me, "Stay here. I'll be back later."

And then he leaves me. With nothing but my feelings and the onslaught of memories to keep me company.



Nic's face is hovering above mine when I wake up in an unfamiliar bed. There's a pounding in my head, a leftover gift from the alcohol I downed last night. I want to vomit.

After Nic left me here alone with my thoughts threatening to cause a breakdown, I found the minibar, drinking every tiny bottle until there was nothing left, and my thoughts were finally quiet.

Leo never did find me last night. A thought that only added to my bender. I wasn't sure if I was concerned about him or pissed at him. Maybe both.

I push myself up to sit against the headboard, with Nic sitting on the edge of my bed. He wears another suit that probably costs more than my studio apartment, save for the jacket which is draped over the chair. "I have a surprise for you today." He grins.

Instantly, my stomach turns.

"What is it?" I ask, keeping my voice steady.

"*Tsk, tsk.*" He wags a finger at me. "I can't ruin it for you. It's a *surprise.*"

I try not to think about the ball of anxiety sitting in my gut as I move toward the bathroom, locking the door behind me this time. An hour later, Nic drags me out of the casino and down the strip.

“Come on, little wolf.” Nic pulls on my hand, intertwining his fingers with mine as he tugs me along to another building ahead. The cream brick looks aged, but well maintained, decorated with green painted windows and two large banners hanging on either side for *The Mob Museum*.

“Why are we here?” I pull back on Nic’s hand, wishing Leo was here to protect me, to shield me from the monster I’ve let into my bed.

The smile stretched out on Nic’s face is feral, something like a wild animal luring his prey into a trap.

“You’ll see,” he tells me, then he releases my hand only so he can palm my lower back, the heat traveling through my thin black tank top as he pushes me forward.

Vegas is hotter than I remember it to be, and my legs feel like Jell-O as they trudge up the steps and through the old door. Even in shorts and a tank top, my body is coated in a sheen of sweat, and I’m dying to reach the air-conditioned building.

The museum feels like a strange place to take me, considering his ties to the mafia, but I seal my lips shut. Pointing out the flaws in Nic’s plan surely won’t get me anywhere. Instead, I pull my arms around myself and wait as he buys two tickets from the cashier.

Nic links his arm through mine as he walks me through the security checkpoint and into the museum. “I have something I want to show you, little wolf.” He tilts his head down to whisper to me, sending a shiver down my spine.

Something feels off, and I don’t like it.

“What is it?” I question, but it falls on deaf ears. Nic doesn’t answer me, and honestly, I don’t expect him to.

We pass signs pointing to different exhibits, and one takes the form of a blown-up newspaper announcing *Capone convicted of tax evasion* in bold capital letters. Below it points us down the hall, toward a room filled with artifacts from the St. Valentine’s Day massacre. Is that what he wants me to see? Is my next lesson on the mafia?

My heart rate picks up a little. Nic's been a closed box when it comes to questions about what his family does. He refuses to acknowledge that he's part of the organization, even though it's a well-known fact.

Our steps slow to a stroll as we arrive at whatever showcase he wanted me to see. It's not the St. Valentine's Day massacre; instead, he leads me up to a collection of small frames, the sign below them reading, *Anthony "Money" Soressi*.

My hand reaches out, my fingers tracing over the lines of his name. Why is he here? Why does he have a small, honorable mention in *this* museum? With *these* people?

"Why *Money*?" The question pops out of my mouth, looking to Nic for some sort of explanation.

"He was the guy who brought in all the money," Nic answers simply. He hovers over me while I look at the frames. The biggest gold frame holds a black-and-white photo of the man I know as my father. He has matching eyes, framed by bushy eyebrows and ruddy cheeks. The photo portrays him exactly as I remember, as he leans back into a leather seat in the casino with a grin on his face. My father was rarely angry. I saw him sad, especially after my mother's death, but rarely did he ever yell or get angry. He was always happy, and seeing his smile again transports me back in time to Sunday night dinners seated at a circular table, with my dad on one side and Johnny on the other.

The photo next to his is of The Royal, and my heart aches at the sight of it. This is how I remember it: the grand pillars framing the building and a flurry of colors shining from the strip.

Under his name, the small black frame lists his crimes. *Soressi was the front man sent by the Colombo family in New York City to manage The Royal casino, along with his associate, Johnny DeFranzo.*

My chest tightens reading the words. We didn't come to Vegas to escape the city. We were sent here...by the mafia.

After a string of arrests relating to several heists committed by DeFranzo, Soressi was lured back to New York City, where he was beaten and killed before he was buried in an Indiana cornfield.

My arms shake as I wrap them around my chest, hugging myself as I back away from the small showcase. This isn't right, this isn't what I thought. My father wasn't in the mafia; he wasn't the sort of man who skimmed money or shook people down.

He was a father, a warm-hearted man who did honest business.

Why did I ask questions? Why did I open up Pandora's box with my silly curiosity? Maybe I should have left all the memories sealed in my mind, stored away neatly in a box and tied up with a pretty ribbon. Then I could have remembered my father as my hero, as the loving and caring man I spent half my life with.

Now as I glance at Nic, finding him looking down at me with a knowing smirk, I realize why he was so excited about getting me in here. To show me that my father was no different from him, that he was the same breed of cold-hearted.

I had put him on a pedestal. Or maybe it was my grief that did that. Propped him so high up that even the birds couldn't pull him down. I lived happily like that, thinking he was the best man in the world.

But all gods must crumble at some point, and mine have officially fallen from the sky, crashed against the pavement, and have taken my heart with it, shattering the organ into a million tiny pieces.

Learning about his imperfections feels like a knife to the chest. I wish I would have chosen differently in the basement, let Nic kill me right then and there, rather than stretching it out over several agonizing months.

Everything before this moment was clear cut, easily categorized into boxes of right versus wrong.

Now there are shades of gray everywhere, memories that don't fit perfectly in their boxes. Tainted with the stains of the mafia.

My body feels too heavy, too overwhelmed to handle the ache that's settled in my bones.

What am I even doing here?

Why did I come to Vegas with this man, my captor, who just wants to torture me by ripping apart everything I hold dear.

"What's it feel like, Val?" he taunts, his lips coming to my ear as his body presses against mine from behind. To passersby, we must look like a couple in love. But this is just another show of his dominance. Another way for him to remind me who's in control.

Another one of his lessons for me.

"Tell me." His fingers grip onto my shoulders when I don't immediately answer him.

"Horrible." I don't know if he can even hear the word as it comes out in a hopeless whisper. I have to hold my breath not to let the sob building in my chest escape. I can't give in to the weakness that threatens to consume me, not when Nic is waiting for my downfall, for me to finally reach my breaking point.

"Oh, sweet little wolf," he breathes. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

He doesn't mean that, and even as his palms warm my goosebump covered skin, I have to remember that this is all a game, and I'm still losing.

"I don't understand," I tell him, needing more clarity, wanting all of this to be a misunderstanding so badly.

Nic brings his lips to my ear again as his hands press into either shoulder. "What don't you understand?"

"If he worked for your father, why kill him?"

His hands trail down my arms until they land on my hips, anchoring me in place. "You have more to learn, baby girl. I

promise you'll get the answers to your questions, but not today.”



Leo is standing outside The Royal when we get back. His eyes rake over me, his pupils expanding when he sees my tear-streaked face. He loosens a breath, and his hand runs over the rough stubble on his chin.

“Did you know?” I ask, my voice louder and more frantic than I intend it to be. But I can’t help it. There’s a mix of anger and sadness swirling inside of me, and I don’t even know who I’m mad at anymore.

Nic, the man I tried to kill. The man who stripped me bare and forced me to face all of the monsters tucked under my bed. He says he does it to help me, to make me stronger. But I’m beginning to think he enjoys seeing me in pain, my suffering like an aphrodisiac to him.

My gaze stays on Leo, the only one who’s cared for me during this time. But he’s kept secrets. He won’t tell me the whole truth, and we both know he’s not naïve. Somewhere in his mind, he knows what his brother is doing, what the endgame is here, but he won’t tell me. Despite saying he hates his brother, his actions show me where his loyalty lies.

And then there’s my father, and that one hurts the worst. I got myself into this mess because of him, my need to avenge his death blinding me. But was he a monster too? He was one of these men, promised his loyalty to the same organization as them. Does being stabbed in the back make him innocent?

Suddenly, I feel like I’m surrounded by men all connected by the same invisible string that leads them to Paulie

Colombo. Worse, I'm beginning to think Nic is the only one who's ever shown me his true face. My father, Johnny, Leo, they all put a mask over their true selves. Hiding their deeds for the mafia behind the sweetness they give me. But how can both sides exist?

I can't get a hold of my feelings, can't sort through them enough to even understand who's on my side and who stands against me. And there has to be sides in this game, a right and wrong, a good and bad. If there isn't... if everything just is, then what's the point?

I've been fighting for so many years, plotting my revenge... all of this needs to mean something.

It can't be for nothing.

"I'm sorry." Leo puts his hands up as I lunge toward him, beating my fists against his chest. "You can take it out on me, *tesoro*. I'll be your punching bag if that's what you need."

A sob finally bursts from my chest, and my body feels like it's about to collapse. Leo grabs me, his arms wrapping around my body as he pulls me into him. Tears stream down my face, the water dripping from my chin in heavy drops against his shirt. Any chance of holding them back is gone now. They flow freely as my lungs contract and more wailing sounds leave my lips.

I can only imagine Nic is annoyed with my outburst, but Leo holds me closer, whispering soothing words to try to calm me down. I can't see through my tear coated lashes, but I can feel Leo lift me into his arms as I hold on to him tighter. He carries me through the hotel lobby, where I'm sure we elicit a few stares.

I soak in his warmth, clinging to him as he whispers apologies.

Before I know it, we're back in the room Nic and I share, and Leo doesn't let me go as he sits on the king-sized bed. "I'm so sorry, *tesoro*," he whispers. "I wish I could make this better."

“You can’t.” Nic’s harsh voice cuts through, and I jolt. When I open my blurry eyes, I can see him standing at the end of the bed. He ditched his suit jacket, and he works on cuffing the sleeves of his dress shirt, exposing his thick forearms. “You needed to hear the truth, little wolf,” he says, his dark gaze meeting mine without an ounce of remorse.

Another sob wrecks me, leaving me gasping for breath as Nic moves closer.

“Give her space,” Leo growls, his voice angrier than I’ve ever heard it. Leo doesn’t get mad about anything, he’s always my light, but now his gaze has darkened, and he turns to give his brother a menacing glare. Leo tugs me closer to him, as if he’s protecting me, and I bury my face in his shoulder.

“No,” Nic laughs huskily, and my eyes open just enough to look at him. “She came here with grand expectations.” The corner of his lips lifts, a lopsided smile rising on his cheeks that makes me sick. “She thought she was avenging her father’s death.”

“Nic—” Leo tries to cut in, but Nic waves a hand in his direction, silencing him as he hovers over the two of us.

I suck in a breath, holding it in my chest as he moves closer to me.

“But he was one of us, huh, little wolf?” He grins, white teeth flashing with satisfaction. “How does it feel to know your father, your hero, was one of the monsters you claim to hate?” He revels in his win. This is his game after all, and breaking me is the prize. And he has broken me. I can feel the fractures in my chest, my wounded heart bleeding out.

I want to sink into this bed and never come up, but he won’t let me. He needs me to be conscious, needs me to be aware that he’s won.

I will myself not to descend into the darkness of my depression. Nic’s face is still hovering above mine, still smiling widely. If he was an athlete, he’d be the one who flaunts his victories over the other players. He wouldn’t work with his team; no, he’d want all the glory for himself.

My chest throbs from holding my breath, and when I blow it out, more tears come with it. I feel horrible. It's like a thousand horses are galloping over my chest, my entire body aching, and I want to die. There's no point in being here, being alive right now. But I can't tell him that.

I can barely wrap my head around my feelings. They rush in too quickly, filling me with doubt, and anger, and just plain old sadness.

I want to vomit. Or cry. Or both.

Everything I know is a lie.

"I can't..." I breathe out through another sob. "I can't take this," I cry, shaking my head rapidly against Leo's shoulder. "Please make it stop." I grasp onto Leo, nails digging in. "Please," I beg.

"Anything," Leo whispers, rubbing a hand down my back. "What do you need?"

I need the constant thoughts to stop. For my head to quit trying to put pieces together that don't fit. There's one thing that comes to mind, one solution that always turns my brain off, keeps it from overthinking...

"Make me forget, please."

"Oh, how I like hearing you beg, little wolf." It's Nic who answers my pleas, his voice deepening as he recites the nickname.

"Get away." My back hits the mattress, and it takes me a moment to realize Leo set me down. He's on his feet now, his palms pressing against Nic's chest. Rage transforms Leo's kind face, his lips turning in an ugly sneer and his eyes darkened like the devil's he's staring down.

If I had any energy, I would move myself out from the middle of their fight, the feud that's been boiling for far too long. But I can't move. I'm frozen by the rampaging emotions rolling through me, desperate for the pain to stop.

Nic grins as he meets Leo's eyes. "I have to say, I didn't think you had it in you, *brother*." He says "brother" like it's a

bad word, as if it leaves a bitter taste on his tongue.

Leo doesn't say anything, just keeps his eyes locked on Nic with his lips pressed into a thin line, his shoulders tense and fists clenching as they push against Nic's chest.

"Stop." Surprisingly, my voice has both of them pausing, their faces turning to meet mine. I suck in a calming breath as I look over the two brothers. My sun and moon. The daylight that I live for and the darkness that I crave, despite knowing that it always leaves me feeling empty afterward.

I want everything to stop. The aching in my chest, the fighting happening in front of my eyes. My mind and body can take the twisting emotions anymore, my thoughts are running rampant, rewriting everything I know faster than I can process it. Everything is too fast and right now I want it to slow and the two men in front of me know how to do that. They're experts at shutting down my thoughts.

Nic, with his dirty, degrading words, and Leo, with his softness, his sweet nothings that repair the fractures in my broken heart.

I push all the thoughts out of my mind, focusing only on the two men in front of me, both staring at me, waiting for me to say something. And finally, I think I know what I want in this moment.

VAL

“**F**uck me.” The words are a demand coming from my lips, possibly the first one I’ve ever given my two boys.

“Do you want my brother to stay or leave, little wolf?” he asks, his eyebrows lifting with the question.

“Stay.” My answer is immediate; the only way it could be when it comes to Leo. I always want him with me; it’s not even a question. But right now, I want them both, *need* them both. The contrast of their dirty words, the way their hands make me come alive. What happens after, I can’t let myself think about.

Nic grins at Leo. “I think she wants us both, brother,” Nic says, and it sends a shock of electricity down to my core.

“Val?” Leo’s voice is strained as he speaks my name. “Are you sure this is what you want?” Leo asks, checking in. He’s the angel on my shoulder, the one always steering me toward the light, toward goodness. I don’t have it in me to feel guilty that darkness is all I see after today.

“Tell him, little wolf,” Nic goads. “Tell him what you want.” Nic crawls onto the bed next to me so when he speaks, it’s in my ear, his words skating across my flesh and heating every inch of me.

I suck in a breath, holding it in my lungs until they burn. Voicing my desires feels wrong when I’m this heartbroken. I shift my gaze over to Leo, standing next to the bed. He scrubs a hand over his jaw as he watches the back-and-forth between

his brother and I. Nic's hands begin to roam my body, tracing over every curve, and I let him, relishing the way his hands feel on my skin.

My gaze lowers on Leo, finding the erection straining beneath his signature black jeans. And that gives me the push I need.

"I want this," I whisper, my eyes pleading with his. I don't want to be alone with Nic. I need the balance, need Leo to pull me from the depths of this sadness when this distraction fades.

Nic chuckles. "You can do better than that."

"Please," I beg, my eyes never leaving Leo's chocolate ones. "I want you both...I want—"

"Tell me where you want me," Leo cuts in, surprising me.

Nic drags the hem of my tank top up my stomach at an agonizingly slow pace, then he forces me up so he can pull the material over my head, leaving me in my jean shorts and a hot pink bra.

"Ah, now you hooked him." He grins.

"Kiss me," I tell Leo.

He moves in closer, pressing his hands into the mattress as he leans down to kiss me. He's soft at first, and then he moves in with more force. Parting my lips with his tongue and deepening the kiss. It's not rough the way his brother is. Leo's lips are healing, calming the storm raging inside me.

Nic climbs from the bed. "Get her up," he tells Leo, who takes both of my hands, pulling me up so I can stand next to the bed. Nic moves closer, bringing himself in front of me before he grabs my hand, pushing it to the front of his black dress pants.

"Do you feel that, baby?" My hand presses against his straining erection. "Do you see how fucking crazy you make us? You have me jealous of my own brother," he hisses.

My eyes flicker to Leo, wondering if I make him as crazy as they make me. My entire body is heated, a carnal need

taking over, having me desperate for whatever they have to offer.

Whatever they *both* have to offer.

Leo takes the space behind me, his fingers slipping around my waist so he can unbutton my shorts before slowly dragging them down my legs. When he stands back up, Nic helps me step out of the denim and kicks it aside. Leo unfastens the clasps of my bra, and Nic's eyes darken as his brother removes the pink material.

"That's better," he whispers, pinching one nipple between his fingers.

Electricity buzzes through my body, the need to have their hands on my body amplifying. I lick my lips as I watch Nic, his eyes glued to his brother's hands as he slides my panties off, ridding me of my last piece of clothing.

The power dynamic sways in their favor as I stand completely naked between the two fully clothed brothers. But knowing that only makes me clench my thighs tighter together. There's a fire igniting in my belly, burning for what only they can give me.

"Little wolf." Nic's voice is low and husky, his dark eyes finding mine again as his lip quirks up into a sly smirk. "So fucking beautiful," he says, bringing his thumb to run across the seam of my lips. "Such a pretty little slut."

His degrading praise makes the fire burn stronger as Leo's hands run over my arms and down my sides. He brings his hand around the front of my waist, grazing lower until he's brushing his fingers over my pussy with just the lightest touch.

A shiver runs down my spine.

Right as Nic leans in for a kiss, Leo parts my lips and drags his finger through the wetness that's gathered between my legs. He finds my clit, rubbing slow circles over the sensitive nerves. While he plays with me, he brings his mouth to my neck, kissing, sucking, and biting, driving whimpers and moans from my chest.

I'm sandwiched between the two of them, every nerve ending alight as Leo continues to slowly stroke my clit. I want more from them, more than it feels right to ask for. I need their hands on my body, want their clothes on the floor. Just when I begin to shake, positive that my orgasm is close, Leo stops. I'm needy now, and I want to whine and cry out, but Leo brings his finger up, dragging my moisture across my lips before Nic leans in to lick it away.

"Back on the bed," Nic hisses. "Give my brother a taste."

Leo moves out of the way as Nic pushes me back, my spine colliding with the king mattress as my legs hang over the edge. Leo crawls between them, widening them to give him space. He drags my ass to the edge of the bed and blows a long breath over my heated core.

Beside him, Nic unbuttons his shirt, discarding it into the growing pile of clothes. He crawls onto the bed next to me, pressing a chaste kiss to my lips before he moves lower, sucking one of my nipples into his mouth.

"Do you like this, Val?" Nic asks. "Do you like being a little slut for both of us?"

Both of us.

"Yes," I breathe out.

Leo runs his tongue along the seam of my pussy, dragging it through my folds before circling over my clit. My body arches off the bed, the pleasure sending shock waves through me.

"Ahh," Nic purrs. "She likes that." His smile hovers over my face. "You look so pretty like this," he whispers, then his mouth fuses to mine, and I get lost in the sensation. Nic's hands find my nipples, rolling them between his fingertips as he continues to kiss me like he's taking all the air from my lungs.

My body floats in some heavenly orbit as I moan into Nic's mouth when Leo adds two fingers to the mix, pressing into me.

“Such a good slut,” I hear him say before Leo’s tongue finds my clit again, lapping over the bundle of nerves.

I’m on edge, threatening to explode from overwhelming pleasure.

“Please,” I beg into Nic’s mouth.

“Aw,” he murmurs, pulling his face back from mine. “She’s begging, brother.” He grins, pinching my nipple harder and making me gasp. “I think she wants to come.”

I can feel Leo laugh against my clit before he laps at it again. “Should we let her?” he asks, pulling his head up from between my legs. From my spot on the bed, I watch as he licks my juices from his lips.

“Please,” I beg again. The way he’s looking at me has my core clenching.

“She is being such a good girl,” Leo says with a smile, thrusting his fingers into me at a steady pace. He blows a breath over my clit, and I can feel myself shaking for more of his mouth and tongue.

“Please, Leo.” My voice cracks as I ask again.

“I know you can do better than that.” The smile on Nic’s lips is wicked, but I don’t have time to argue, and right now, I don’t want to.

“Please,” I say again. “Please let me come, please, please, please.”

“And what will you do?” Nic taunts. “What will you do once we let you come?”

“Anything.” I don’t even think before the word leaves my lips. I’m too desperate. My brain has left the room and all that’s left is the neediness controlling my body.

Both brothers smile, and Leo dives back between my legs. His tongue swirls and flicks over my clit while his fingers thrust into me, curling in just the right way to make me squirm.

“Anything,” Nic whispers, his warm breath falling over my ears. “I don’t think you know what you just offered up, little wolf.” When I whimper, he presses a rough kiss to my lips.

He’s right, but I don’t care. My orgasm is about to crash over me, and I’m hungry with my need for them.

One more swipe over my clit, and I come undone. I don’t know what words I shout, whose name slips from my lips as the waves of pleasure roll over me. My eyes squeeze shut as colors burst behind my eyelids.

A sheen of sweat covers my skin, and I pant as I come down from my high, opening my eyes to find both men looking down at me, their faces ravenous.

But I don’t feel scared or tentative in their presence. I feel worshiped and ready for the *anything* I offered up.



“I WANT HER ASS,” Nic says to his brother, and my eyes widen. I try to lift my upper body off the bed, but Nic presses my shoulders down, his face hovering over mine. “You said you’d do *anything*,” Nic reminds me. Soaked in the haze of pending pleasure, I agreed to give the two men anything they wanted.

I gulp in a breath of air, and Leo’s fingers trail up my thighs. He alternates between soft kisses and biting the sensitive skin there as I tremble beneath him. “Well, I want her cunt then.” I’m surprised when Leo stops his movements to state his preference.

Nic grins. “Sounds like a fucking plan to me.” Before I can even think to say anything, Nic is standing up, pulling me with him.

“Lay down on the bed, brother,” Nic orders. Surprisingly, Leo follows without a word, ditching his pants and letting his dick spring free before taking me from his brother. He lies

back on the bed, palming his cock as he guides me to straddle him.

Slowly, Leo lowers me onto his cock. My head rolls back as he stretches me, letting me get accommodated to the feel of him inside me. His hand travels up the side of my body, finding my tits and palming one while his other hand squeezes my hip.

“*Bellissima,*” Leo praises. I feel safe with Leo, beautiful and loved under his touch and admiring gaze. I want Nic to see this, to see how close Leo and I are. How he appreciates my body, coating me in warmth and light. “You look so beautiful taking my cock, ragazza dolce.”

“That’s it,” Nic says from his place on the side of the bed. “Show me how soft and sweet my brother fucks you.” The harsh words cut through my delusion as if on purpose. It doesn’t matter if Nic sees me and Leo together, because he’s the puppeteer behind this. He’ll never be truly jealous of his brother, because he can always just take what he wants.

Leo jerks his hips, pushing into me while his brother spews his dirty words. I focus my eyes on him, taking in every inch of the sight in front of me.

“But I’m not going to fuck you like that, huh, little wolf?” His question is teasing as he gets on the bed, coming behind me. I feel his hands grip on to my hips, slamming me down on Leo’s cock and making my breath catch in my throat.

“You don’t actually want it soft, do you?” When I don’t answer, his fist threads into my hair, pulling my head back until it rests on his chest and he’s looking down at me. “Answer me,” he demands.

My head is swirling. Lust is driving now, desperate for another release, for more of the two brothers. The idea of having Nic and Leo inside me at the same time both terrifies and excites me.

“No,” I pant as Leo drives his cock up into me. He reaches up, bringing his mouth to the crook of my neck, peppering me with kisses and gentle bites.

“I didn’t think so.” Nic grins. “You want it rough? You want it dirty, huh? Don’t you?”

“Yes,” I breathe out.

Nic chuckles at my admission, his hot breath dancing across my cheek. “That’s it.” He smiles against my skin. “That’s my dirty little girl.”

He lets go of my hair, pushing me forward until my chest meets his brother’s. Leo pulls me in, one of his hands traveling to my breast, tugging on my nipple while the other holds me in place. He brings my tit to his mouth, his tongue darting out to circle over the sensitized bud.

“*Brava ragazza,*” he murmurs, the sweetness a contrast to his brother’s constant torment. Leo’s hands find my hips and he guides me up and down, his eyes glued to mine as he watches the way his cock affects me. “Keep going,” he urges me. “You feel so good, mio tesoro”

Behind me, Nic palms my ass, spreading my cheeks. The lewd gesture has me flushing hot, only increasing my arousal.

I hear Nic spit before I feel the moisture hit my tailbone, dripping down. I swallow the anxiety that wells up in my throat at what’s to come.

“Please, Nic.” His name bubbled from my lips in a strangled plea. “Lube.”

A dark chuckle leaves his lips. “I’m not that cruel,” he says, and I hear the cap pop open, then the sound of him squeezing lube from the bottle. He pours it directly onto me, letting it drip down the crack. He catches some with his finger, swirling it around the tight circle of nerves.

“Relax,” Leo whispers to me, pausing himself as Nic presses a finger into me. I whimper at the intrusion, and Nic takes a slow pace, pumping in and pulling out, until I find myself pushing back for more.

“What a good little whore,” he praises before adding a second finger. Leo begins to thrust, letting me feel both of them working inside me.

“Beg me, little wolf,” Nic demands. “Beg me to fuck you.”

Shame burns in my gut, but desire is already in charge, mingling with the feeling and making me hotter, more desperate for the dirty words and actions.

“Please,” I say, and Nic laughs behind me.

“Pathetic,” he spits. “Try harder.”

“Please,” I try again shakily. “Please, Nic, fuck me.”

“Where?” he asks, as he pumps his fingers into me again, making me shudder as I prepare to answer his question.

“There.” My voice is nothing but a squeak. “Fuck me *there*.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Nic plays dumb, chuckling when I whine.

“My ass,” I shout, then feel Leo kissing my breasts to relax me. “Please, Nic, fuck my ass.”

“Whatever you want, little wolf.” He guides himself into me, removing his fingers entirely and replacing them with his cock.

I moan as the burning sensation grows, his dick stretching me with every inch that enters.

“Please, please, please. Oh fuck.” The words leave me in strangled cries. Leo is still inside me, but stays still, giving me a chance to get used to the extra pressure. It takes a moment, but once Nic is sheathed completely inside me, I feel fuller than I ever have.

“Breathe,” Leo reminds me, peppering me with kisses.

I suck in a breath, and both brothers start moving.

Liquid heat pools in my belly instantly, the sensation spreading through my body with a renewed orgasm ready to overcome me. Everything else has drifted away, all of the worries, the fears, the thoughts that were torturing me moments earlier. Everything has left, except for the sounds of our bodies meeting each other, our labored breaths, the sinful words we share. I soak it all in, letting it ease me of my pain.

In this moment, I only feel what my two boys can give me, not all that they've taken from me.

The two brothers fuck me at a brutal pace, my body being pushed and pulled between them. I feel used, like the favored toy they pass back and forth. Part of me thinks they're trying to see who can break me first.

My back arches and my toes curl. My brain becomes a foggy mess, nothing mattering but the pleasure that's building inside me and the ache in my heart that dulls with each powerful, claiming thrust.

Each thrust is a reminder of how much they own me. And when I come this time, it feels like an implosion, every fiber of my being going up in flames. It lasts forever, shaking me and tearing me apart as I scream out and moan and convulse between them. Both of their names leave my lips like a prayer on loop, and it's only a moment later that I feel Leo pulse inside me, Nic not far behind him.

I melt into Leo's chest, unable to support my own weight anymore. I'm not sure whose lips are on me, who brings a washcloth and cleans the culmination of their cum from me. All I know is when my eyes drift shut, there's a warm body on either side of me.



I wake up in the middle of the night, enveloped in the warmth of Leo's arms. His eyes are closed, and his breathing is even. I lean my head back against his chest and feel the rise and fall of his breathing—everything feels right, peaceful, as I drift back to sleep, and a feeling of calmness washes over me. All the agony from earlier long forgotten.

When I wake again hours later, I'm alone. My eyes flutter open, immediately looking for the boys. I find Nic first, fully dressed in a new suit with his hair slicked back, sitting on a chair next to the bed. "I had food delivered." He nods to the room service cart filled with covered dishes.

When I fell back asleep, they were both here, on either side of me. Now when I turn my head, Leo's gone, his side of the bed cool and empty. "Where—" Before I even have the question out of my mouth, Nic is standing, brushing off his pants and looking at me expectantly.

"Come on," he says, his expression unreadable, but not in a way that makes me uneasy. "Get up."

I wipe the sleep from my eyes and sit up in bed, brushing the white duvet off me. My entire body aches, soreness settled in my core. I wince when I stand from the bed and attempt to stretch my sore muscles.

"Here." Nic reaches for a bottle on the nightstand, pouring two pills from it and extending them to me. I take them hesitantly, and he grabs me a bottle of water, cracking open the

seal and handing it to me as well. Months ago, I would have been skeptical about the pills, expecting the worst from Nic. But today, I toss them back and chase them down with the water.

Nic pulls out a chair for me at the table. He serves me for the first time, taking a plate from the room service cart and setting it in front of me.

“You need to eat.”

I’m surprised by his sudden shift into caretaker mode. In all the times I’ve had sex with Nic, aftercare has never been his thing.

“What’s going on?”

He quirks a brow, taking the seat across from me. “I’m feeding you, Val. Don’t overthink it.”

“You’re being nice.”

Nic gives me a hard look, his lips pursed tight as his dark eyes assess me. “I’m not him.”

The energy around us shifts instantly, and my chest tightens.

“I know,” I tell him quietly. Nic is nothing like Leo - the two brothers fall on opposite sides of the spectrum. Angel, devil. Hero, villain. Love, hate. Still, something is different about him.

He looks like he doesn’t believe me. “I won’t be soft with you, little wolf.” His eyes drift back to the bed, the one the three of us shared earlier. “If that’s what you want, you’re looking in the wrong place.”

“I’m not...” I’m not even sure what I plan on saying. *I’m not looking for anything from you.* But that’s not exactly true. I’ve come to accept the differences between the two men. Each gives me something the other can’t.

Nic takes a bite of the sandwich he ordered for himself, chewing thoughtfully, his eyes still settled on the bed.

“You know why he hates me?”

The question surprises me. Nic doesn't talk about him and Leo. Nic doesn't talk about his family ever, really. I shake my head and wait for him to say more.

"My dad has always been an asshole." He leans back, and for the first time, his eyes avoid me as he puts space between us.

"When Leo moved in with us, it only got worse. It was like he had two boys to toughen up instead of one. And Leo has always been weak. Before us, Leo was normal; his mother must have been a saint or something." Nic scoffs. "He was polite, read books, had a fucking social life. But that was part of the problem." When he looks at me, darkness consumes his gaze. "He had this friend, Tommy. Tommy wasn't bright, and he hung around too often. Kid had a shitty home life, and then Leo's life got upgraded. Mansion, shiny new toys, a live-in chef. So he came over constantly."

I lick my lips, drawn into the story, fearful of its conclusion. "What happened?"

"Tommy saw something he shouldn't have."

A chill runs through my body.

"My father had people and places for torturing people. But he had a personal vendetta against this guy, so when his enforcers found him, Pops had them bring him to our house, to the dungeon in his basement." Nic shakes his head. "My father is beating the shit out of this man in the middle of the night. He finally takes his gun out and pulls the trigger. You know what he hears?"

I shake my head.

"A squeal. A fucking squeal. And when he turns around, there's Tommy. Kid's fucking pissing himself." Nic sucks in a breath. "He pulled Leo and I from our beds, since he didn't know whose friend it was, just that there was a kid our age who just saw him murder a man. When he brought us downstairs, Tommy was taped to a metal chair sitting on a clear tarp. My father set a gun in front of us and told us to kill

him. It didn't matter who invited him over, didn't matter who killed him. Just that we took care of it."

"That's horrible," I whisper. Nic's staring off above me now, like he's seeing the scene play out in front of him.

"Leo couldn't do it. He started crying immediately, so I knelt down, picked up the gun, and shot Tommy." Nic turns his head, his gaze avoiding mine. "My father would have killed him if I didn't. And if I didn't kill him, he would have beaten the shit out of us. That's what he does. You fail his lesson, you get punished. So I killed Leo's best friend, because I knew if I didn't, he would still die and I'd be punished anyway." My heart beats harder as he meets my eyes, an obvious sadness and resentment there he'd never admit to harboring. "That's the only nice thing I've ever done for my brother, and I've only ever been punished for it."

An ache settles in my gut. Neither of them should have ever had to go through that. And Nic's been carrying it all this time. He tried to protect Leo, but Leo would have never seen it that way.

I can only imagine how betrayed Leo felt. He was thrown into this world, but Nic grew up here.

"You asked me before why I would help you kill my father." He shrugs his shoulders, head shaking slightly. "I never had a good relationship with him, and Leo didn't help the situation, just gave him a reason to pit us against each other. He's not much better with his men, playing mind games with them until bullets are flying through the streets. They think they're looking out for themselves," he pauses to blow out a breath, the minty scent hitting my face, chilling me, "but it's all one big game, and the spectator sitting back and shoveling mouthfuls of popcorn? That's my father."

The words are like a punch to my gut.

"You wanted to know," he whispers, his fingers gripping into my hips. "And that's the reason; he's an asshole because he can be, because he holds too much power. I hate him for that."

My lungs constrict, my throat tightening along with them. Was my father killed because of some sick game played by a man with too much money and time on his hands? But I can't forget what I know now, that my father was a part of this willingly. My eyes water, and I steel my spine, trying not to show any more emotion in front of Nic.

"I want to change things, and getting rid of my father will speed it along."

He looks away for a moment, and when his eyes come back to me, I can fully see behind his carefully constructed walls. There's a little boy needing affection to survive.

No wonder he plays the same mind games... kids learn from their parents after all. And I've been cursing him, hating him even for his lack of remorse. But how can I expect him to show any type of emotion if he was never modeled the behavior?

Nic's dark eyes are staring into mine, waiting for me to say something. In a way, I think this is his version of an apology. And it shouldn't excuse his behavior.

But I get it.

Parents fuck you up.

Maybe Nic's not so different from me. He was just a kid wanting his father's attention. I've spent so much time hating him for having what I didn't, but maybe having a father didn't actually make his life better. Maybe it just made it worse in a different way.

"I get it," I whisper, my voice hoarse.

He nods, pink lips sealed in a tight line. "After you eat, get dressed. I have one more thing to show you while we're here."



VAL

Nic waits for me while I take a shower and get dressed for the day. I think about Leo as I replay the night before. I'm still not sure where he is, or how he's feeling about what we did. Regret lingers at the edge of my mind. Was it stupid to let them both fuck me? Especially knowing how Leo feels about his brother, fucking him while he's in the room seems like a punch to the gut.

But I couldn't help it.

Not when they were both there in front of me and my mind was desperate for the distraction.

I still can't let my mind wander too far into what Nic showed me yesterday, can't face the reality that my father was a part of the organization I've come to hate.

Nic is quiet as he leads me downstairs and through the casino floor. There's another black Escalade waiting for us outside that he ushers me into.

We sit in silence as the driver navigates us off the strip. Slowly, the lights fade and all we're left with is desert highways before we turn into a neighborhood. Winding through the rows of houses with stucco exteriors painted in earthy tones before we pull into a driveway of a plain single-story beige one.

"What are we doing here?" I ask.

"You'll see."

The tone of his voice sends a spark of anxiety through my body. It's the same tone he used before he took me to that warehouse where he bludgeoned a stranger with a hammer. Before he took me to kill my uncle. Each of my nightmares has started with that sound radiating from Nic's lips.

Confusion clouds my brain. After everything he just told me, I thought maybe...maybe he would be done playing these games. Maybe we could move past it. I thought he was opening up, sharing himself with me.

But that was a silly expectation. This is the version of Nic I've come to know. This is the one who's brought me up for the past year. Expecting him to change after one brief moment of softness was naïve on my part.

Nic leads me up to the front door, pushing me in front of him. "Knock," he demands.

I raise my fist to the door tentatively, three quick knocks in succession. I can feel the sweat rolling down my back, whether it's from the Vegas heat or anxiety, I can't tell. But my fingers tremble at my sides as I wait for whoever to answer the door.

Finally, it swings open, revealing a man in his mid-forties with salt-and-pepper hair and bushy black eyebrows. His fingers grip onto the door frame and he looks at me for a long moment, something softening in his expression. When he glances at Nic, he swallows hard, and then brings his eyes back to me.

Before he opens his mouth, everything clicks in my head, and once I hear his voice, it's confirmed.

"I've been waiting for you."

Uncle Johnny.



NIC SITS across from me at the round dining table in Johnny's home. I feel like a child again. As soon as I realized who he was, I launched myself into his arms, longing to feel

the warm embrace I've missed for over ten years. Johnny didn't disappoint, hugging me back as memories of him and my father swarmed my head.

Johnny's house isn't the same one he lived in back then. This one is smaller, sadder. There are no pictures on the walls, no blankets or pillows on the couch. The place is clean, sterile even. There's no life here.

I feel a chill skate down my body as I wait for Johnny to serve coffee and sit down between Nic and I. Nic has a cold expression on his face, one that's only adding to my nervousness.

"How did you know he was here?" I ask Nic.

His eyes meet Johnny's as he answers. "I know everything."

"I wasn't hiding." Johnny stares back at him. "I know what you're here for, and I'm at peace with it. All I ask is that you let me explain myself to her first."

Nic waves his hand dramatically, a lopsided smile rising on his lips. "Explain then."

Johnny weaves his fingers together and clears his throat as he turns his head to face me. I take a good look at him. He's older now, obviously. His once dark black hair is streaked with gray. He's wearing a large pair of wire-framed glasses, and he's put on weight since I've seen him last. It's been years since I've seen the man who helped to raise me. Even if he was only part of my life for half of it, he still feels like a missing piece. After I last saw him in Vegas, I never heard from him again. Over the years, I made up stories, fantastical reasons as to why Johnny would have left me. But now that he's in front of me? All I want is the truth.

"What is going on?"

Clearly, there's something between the two of them. And Johnny didn't look surprised to see either of us. He looked grateful to see me, but Nic... It isn't that my uncle looks scared of him, more like he knows something I don't.

“Just listen to what your uncle has to say, little wolf.” Nic nods to Johnny, a sign to start talking.

Johnny licks his lips and takes a deep breath before he faces me. “I knew this moment would come,” he finally says. “I had hoped I would see you first, but this is okay.” He doesn’t look at Nic again, just keeps his focus on me.

“What does that mean?” I ask, my hands trembling as I link my fingers together.

“I’m going to start at the beginning, and by the end, I think you’ll understand.”

“Okay...”

“Your father was sent to Vegas sixteen years ago by Paulie Colombo. You were just a kid then. Your ma had just died, and your father needed a fresh start, and being front man for the casino was a big promotion for him.”

“So it’s true, he was in the mafia then. And you?” My throat feels dry when I ask the question.

“Your dad brought me with him. He needed someone to keep things in line while he ran the casino.”

“I thought he was just a businessman.” I confess, my voice low and strangled.

Nic laughs beside us like I told a funny joke.

“He was,” Johnny says, trying to be comforting, I think. “He handled the business, and I mostly handled the other stuff. We were doing good too, kiddo.” Johnny smiles a bit. “And everyone loves you when you’re the one bringing in the money. Paulie was happy to let us do whatever we wanted as long as he got his monthly tribute.”

“So what did you do?”

“We made more money. While your father ran the casino, I ran a crew of burglars on the side. We were thieves robbing all of the houses and businesses in the city, brought in some extra cash. We had to pay tribute if it was big, Paulie would get his cut.” Johnny eyes Nic before continuing. “It was all fine until we got caught, and somebody was talking, telling the police

family secrets. When I heard the news, I knew what I had to do. You can't let someone tell our secrets to the cops. But it all went bad."

Johnny looks up at me, sadness ringing his eyes.

"Then your father was called back to New York. I told him I would take care of our problem while he talked to Paulie. We had a plan in place, and he'd call me by a certain time." Johnny pauses for a moment, sitting back in his chair and swallowing. "He never called, Valerie."

A sob lodged itself in my throat. It's too thick for me to ask my question, for me to acknowledge what Johnny is saying.

That's when he knew my father was dead.

"I knew they would come for me next. And you," He pauses, looking like he might cry if he continues. "You were just a kid. So I went to the police. I told them everything."

Nic hisses out a curse beside him. "You ratted."

"Yeah." Johnny nods. "I turned rat." He looks at Nic with steel in his eyes. "Because if I didn't, your father would have sent someone down here to kill me to keep me from ratting. The only way I was walking out of that situation alive was to change sides."

"You should have chosen death," Nic growls.

"Sure." Johnny shakes his head. "Maybe." When he turns back to me, he reaches out and grasps my hand in his. "I had them send CPS to take you back to your aunt's in Jersey. I figured you'd be safe if you got out of Vegas, and then I told them everything I knew. I wanted to take you with me...but I couldn't. They put me in WITSEC and that's where I stayed until a month ago."

"What changed?" I ask hoarsely.

"I heard a piece of information." He looks at Nic briefly. "That a young girl tried to kill Paulie's son. It could have been anyone." He shakes his head. "But I knew." When he looks up at me again, his eyes are glossy, and he squeezes my hand

tight. That's when I feel it, a piece of paper and something hard being pressed into my hand. I bring my other one to clasp around his, so when I pull it back, I can hide the item from Nic.

"I knew it was you, Val," Johnny says, a slight smile ghosting his lips. "You were such a good kid, but you had your father in you. And your father would have wanted revenge. When I heard that he hadn't killed you, that instead he took you prisoner, I left the program. I knew you'd come back to Vegas one day. Knew you'd put the pieces together and trace it back here. I hoped you'd find me before he did. Guess I shouldn't be surprised you came together." Johnny sucks in a long breath. "I'm sorry, Val," he says, tears rimming his eyes. "I wish I could have done better by you. But your father would be proud, you know that. You're not the little girl he left here, you've grown up, you're strong--"

"Enough," Nic hisses. He stands from his seat, pushing the chair back with such force it topples over. His fingers reach to his waistband, grabbing the gun that's resting there and unlocking the safety.

Air freezes in my lungs. "What are you doing?" I rush to stand, slipping the paper from Johnny in my pocket as I face Nic, whose focus is still on my uncle, the gun pointed in his hand.

"Is this who you're loyal to, Val? A rat? A man who turned on his own family?"

"You turned on him!" I shout.

Nic laughs, a dark, throaty sound. "It doesn't matter, little wolf. He took an oath. And he broke it. Go on." He jabs the gun at Johnny. "Tell her what happens when you break an oath." The look on Nic's face is wild, anger like I haven't seen yet radiating from him, and panic sets in as I realize this isn't going to end well.

Johnny looks at me, his eyes still glassy. "It's okay, Val. I did what I needed to do. I'm at peace with this." But I'm not. Not when I don't have all the answers. Not when I just got him back in my life.

“No!” I cry. “No, Nic, you can’t-”

“Don’t tell me what I can’t do,” he growls, venom dripping from his words. “This is how our world works, Val. These are the consequences you pay. Consider it another lesson.”

“No!”

“It’s okay,” Johnny says again. His voice is calm as he looks at me. A slow smile rises, like he’s just happy he got to see me. “I’m okay.”

There are tears streaming from my eyes, blurring my sight. No is the only word I can say on repeat, but Nic isn’t listening anymore. His gun is trained on Johnny, my uncle, my second father. He looks straight at Nic, nodding once as if giving him permission.

When the shot rings out, I see the bullet slice through the middle of Johnny’s forehead. A perfect red circle forming with blood dripping from the wound.

And then, my world goes dark.



VAL

There's a tightness in my chest when I wake up in the back of the car. I don't know how I ended up here. I think Nic must have hauled me over his shoulder and shoved me in the back seat.

I'm sobbing uncontrollably, yet I feel numb inside. Nic sits on the opposite side of the back seat, thankfully. I can feel his eyes on me, but I press my forehead against the cold glass and avoid looking at him.

I can't look at him.

All I see is the man who killed Johnny.

One of the few people left in the world who still loves me.

Agony burns through my veins as my pulse races. My whole world is collapsing around me. My father was in the mob. Johnny was a thief. Paulie killed him because someone talked to the police. And Johnny spent the last ten years in witness protection. If I knew all of this before, would I still be here today, under this man's thumb? My family may have tried to keep me safe and innocent, but all they did was put me on a path set to ruin.

When the Escalade stops at the airstrip and not the hotel, I'm not even mad about it, suddenly feeling desperate to get out of Vegas.

Leo is there when I swing my door open, flying from the car and running to his arms.

“What happened?” He’s soft as he asks me, but when I don’t answer the question, he repeats it louder, harsher, this time looking at his brother. “What did you do?”

“What I had to do.” Darkness radiates from his statement. “I’ve always done what I had to do.”

Another sob escapes from my chest, and my body goes weak, but Leo catches me, pulling me against him.

“You’re a fucking prick,” Leo hisses at him. “Why do you have to hurt her like this?”

Nic laughs. A loud and boisterous sound. I hear his footsteps as he marches up behind us. My fingers grip onto Leo’s shirt, twisting the fabric as I tuck my face farther into him.

Nic stops behind me, facing his brother. “Because I can.” All of the air freezes in my lungs, and for the first time in months, I’m actually afraid of Nic Colombo.



LEO SPENT the flight holding me, wiping away my tears as I cried for hours, while Nic drank glass after glass of whiskey. Luckily, he didn’t intervene, instead letting Leo comfort me for the entirety of the flight.

As soon as I step into the mansion, it feels like another weight has crashed down on me. I don’t want to be here.

“Go to your room,” Leo whispers in my ear, and it’s all the direction I need to take the steps two at a time and lock myself in my room. I feel like a child who lost an argument with her parents and now she’s pouting. Except I didn’t lose an argument and both my parents are dead.

My captor just killed the only pseudo parent I had left.

I wish I would have had more time with Johnny. There are still so many questions left. I twist, hearing the slight crunch of paper, sparking my memory that he handed me something.

I slip it from my pocket, unfolding it slowly to reveal a key. The paper is crumpled and torn so it's only half a sheet, but still, I can make out Johnny's scrawl.

Kiddo,

I suspected you'd show up one of these days. Just as I suspect someone will be along shortly after to take care of me. I'm sorry I sent you away all those years ago. I wish I could have stayed. Your father asked me to protect you if anything happened to him, and I fear I might have done a shit job of it. But I love you. I've always loved you. I hope that counts for something.

I can't fix the past, but I'm hoping this will fix the future.

Take it to the Las Vegas Bank on S 3rd Street. They can help you from there.

I don't think money can truly fix anything, but we sure did love it back then. I hope it serves you better than it did me and your father.

You should know how much that man loved you. You were his whole world. If he knew what you did to avenge him, he'd be both proud and pissed. But he would have done the same for you.

Don't do it again, though. Take this and get out of New York.

And don't let him know.

Love,

Uncle Johnny

Wet tears hit the torn paper, and I rub my fingers over the key, feeling the metal on my skin. What does he mean? He said to take the key to a bank on S 3rd St, so does that mean he left me something?

How the fuck am I supposed to get back to Vegas to see what it is?

A knock sounds on my door, and I jolt, shoving the key and the note into my bedside drawer and straightening myself.

“Who is it?”

“*Tesoro*, it’s me.”

I heave a sigh of relief and move to unlock the door, letting Leo in. He closes it behind him, scooping me into his arms and taking me to the bed. I can feel his heart racing as he holds me close.

“I’m sorry,” he says softly, running his fingers through my hair.

“It’s not your-” He stops me from saying the words, grabbing my chin and forcing me to look at him.

“I should have known,” he whispers. “He told me to meet him at the airstrip, and I assumed you’d be right behind me. If I would have known what he was going to do...”

“Stop it,” I tell him, brushing his hand away. “Don’t beat yourself up. You couldn’t have stopped him. Nic gets whatever Nic wants.”

“It’s not right.” Leo shakes his head, his dark hair falling out of place.

“No,” I agree. “It’s not. But it is what it is.”

“Val-”

“I’m leaving,” I cut Leo off. “Once he lets me go, I’m going.” I heave a breath, the next words sitting on my tongue, feeling heavy.

“*Tesoro*.” He looks into my eyes, confusion and hope shining back at me. “What about Paulie?”

“I don’t care. I don’t care about Paulie. I don’t care about any of it anymore. I’m done, Leo.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that,” I say with a nod, pressing a kiss to his cheek as I settle back against his chest.

This nightmare I’ve entangled myself in has no happy ending. I don’t get to murder a man and then run off into the sunset. And after today, I don’t think I want to kill anyone.

Visions of the blood dripping from Johnny's forehead replay on a loop, making my stomach churn.

Anger boiled inside me, and for most of the trip, I wanted to murder Nic, even through my never-ending tears. I thought about it over and over, what it would look like to see him bleeding out in front of me.

But it never ends then. It's a vicious cycle of revenge that goes and goes and goes. And I want off this ride.

I pull back to look at the handsome Italian man in front of me and decide I'll take Johnny's advice and get out.

My only change? I want Leo with me.

"Come with me," I say, taking a chance and putting it out there, my stomach fluttering with nerves. Moving so I'm straddling him on the bed, his arms wrap around my waist as he holds me against him.

We're quiet for a long moment while Leo thinks. His deep, chocolate eyes study mine, as if they're searching for something. I can almost hear the gears turning as he sorts through all his thoughts. Then he finally says what I want to hear.

"Okay."

That one simple word brings a smile to my face, one he matches. I've been on a hunt for vengeance for too long, letting myself live in the bitter nightmare the world had handed me.

But now? I see a way out. A future coated in sunshine and warmth. Walks through the park, coffee at quaint shops. Maybe I'll even get a pet—I imagine a fluffy cat purring on my lap. And every vision includes the man in front of me.

A year ago, I didn't see a light at the end of the tunnel. I was too soaked up in my pain to realize there was even an option where I let it all go and walked away.

For a long time, I believed that happiness wasn't possible for me. After everything was taken from me, I felt trapped in

that darkness. It's funny that this house brought me so much pain, but also so much light.

I hadn't looked forward to anything, save for getting revenge, until Leo entered my life. And then I realized that the time I spent with him was my favorite part of the day. Waking up felt better when I knew there'd be a note tucked under my door, and falling asleep was easier with his nightly words still lingering in my ears. Now I can see a future, one that's far away from this house, one that's just the two of us. And now I want that more than anything.

Fuck Nic and his stupid games, I'm done. I'm choosing light. I'm choosing happiness.

"Where would we go?" Leo asks, leaning his back against the headboard as he tucks me into his side.

"Anywhere." I answer. "I've always wanted a cabin, somewhere surrounded by nature, with no one around to bother us."

"I like the sound of that," he whispers. "And what would we do in this new life as cabin people?"

A smile rises on my lips as I think about it. "I'd learn to cook."

"Well, one of us would have to." He laughs.

"And we'd read a lot of books, I think. Sitting by the water, listening to the sounds of nature, soaking in sunshine and fresh air. Maybe I'll even work at the bookstore in town."

"And what about me?" He turns his face so he can look down into my eyes. "What would I do for work, tesoro?"

"Anything you want," I tell him contentedly.

For a moment, he looks like my answer pains him, and then he sucks in a deep breath and leans down to press a kiss to my lips.

"I love you." It's the first time I say the words, and I'm too afraid to see his face, so I duck my chin, waiting for the response.

Leo grabs it, forcing me to look back up at him. “Do you mean that?” he asks, his eyes burning as he watches me.

“Yes,” I exhale over his lips

“Say it again.”

“I love you.”

“*Cazzo*,” he hisses.

And then he’s on me, his mouth pressing against mine, his hands roaming my body. He flips me over and lays me out on the bed, his hungry gaze roaming my body.

“Those words sound so pretty coming from your mouth.” He’s smiling, and I think it’s the happiest I’ve seen him. He crawls over me until he’s hovering over my body, looking down at me.

“Say it again,” he demands.

“I love you, Leo.”

“I love you too, *tesoro*.” My body tingles from his admission, chest warming, everything feeling like it’s just as it should be for this moment in time. And hopefully it’s only the beginning.

Bringing his mouth back to mine, he kisses me fiercely while I writhe beneath him. His lips are searing, both of us desperate and needy to have our fill of each other. His hands caress every inch of my skin, his fingertips memorizing every curve. I can feel the heat radiating from him and it only makes me want him more.

He pulls away for a moment and looks deep into my eyes. “Are you sure?” he whispers, cupping my cheek with his palm. “Are you sure you want to walk away from this?”

“Yes,” I whisper, with no hesitation. “If I have you...that’s all I want.”

He responds to my answer by kissing me again, smiling against my mouth. He rids me of my clothes swiftly, undressing me like a present he’s been waiting his whole life to open.

Once he has me naked, laid out in front of him, he takes his time kissing me. Starting with my lips before languidly working his way down my body, leaving a trail of kisses along my skin. By the time he reaches my core, my body is heated, and my fingers are gripping at his head and shoulders, trying to push him closer to where I need him.

“Always so impatient,” he murmurs, laying one kiss on my heated sex, but it’s not enough to give me any sort of friction, only enough to make me even more desperate for him.

“Please,” I whine, trying to grind my hips up into his face.

“I like you like this.” he whispers, his lips ticking up into a grin. “I can imagine you like this in our cabin, sprawled out and completely at my mercy. I’d take you like this every night.”

“I’d beg you to,” I tell him, lifting my head so I can watch the way his eyes darken at my words. “Please, Leo,” I add. “Please make me come for you.”

At those words, his mouth drops down, and he drags his tongue along my slit. “Dolce come una caramella,” he murmurs before diving back in. This time, he finds my clit, lapping at the bud as I writhe and whimper beneath him.

My hands find his hair, running my fingers through the dark locks as he continues his work. Pushing into me with his fingers, he finds my G-spot, curling the digits perfectly while his tongue circles my clit.

“Fuck,” I moan long and loud, seeing stars.

“Come for me, tesoro. I want to taste your sweet pussy as she falls apart for me.” He pairs his dirty words with bringing his lips back to my clit, sucking on the bud until I’m screaming out his name. Using his fingers to pump into me while I come undone, he doesn’t stop until I’m crying and begging for reprieve.

He sits up, making a show of licking my juices off of each finger. “Perfezione.” He grins. “I want to feel you come again around my cock, sweet girl. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes, please, please, please. That’s all I want.” I’m begging and breathless as he positions himself on top of me.

When he breaches my entrance, everything else melts away. His lips press against mine as he holds himself close, and I can taste myself on his lips as he moves inside me, slowly and sweetly at first before gradually picking up speed. His hips rock against mine in perfect rhythm as he buries his head in my neck, breathing husky words of love and adoration into my skin that leave me breathless.

He murmurs something in Italian, the words quick and soft, but it doesn’t matter that I don’t understand them; somehow, I still know exactly what he means.

My heart hammers against my chest while pleasure washes over me with each thrust of his hips. He pushes deeper inside me until all I feel is him, until nothing else matters.

And when we come undone this time, it’s in each other’s arms, reciting *I love you* like a prayer that will save us.

And for a moment, I believe it will.



NIC

“Come with me.”
“Okay.”

Leo. Leo. *Leo.*

Rage rolls through me, and I back away from the door before I tear it down. She reacted exactly how I expected her to, and still, something burns through me, anger like I’ve never felt filling me to the brim.

She clung to him the whole flight home, and now she’s planning their imaginary futures.

I make my way downstairs, heading for my bar cart and taking a long pull of whiskey straight from the decanter.

Fuck them.

I shouldn’t have expected anything different. I knew she’d never fall for a monster like me. I’d been the villain to her since the day she walked into my restaurant, ready to shoot a bullet into me. Not one brief moment of honesty and a childhood story were going to change it. She was always going to choose him over me. The good brother. The sweet one.

Even though we both know what she really wants. That her pussy loves for me to put her in her place. I shake the image of her being impaled on my cock from my head. The vision of her sweet body laid out on the dining room table. I shake it all away.

None of it matters now.

She chose him.

And now?

Now it's time to finish it once and for all.

If she wants a villain, I'll give her one.



I'm debating between running away and waiting out my sentence a whole two weeks. The pros and cons list in my head is building, adding reasoning for each of the possibilities. Who knows what else Nic has in store for me. Worse, will he actually let me go at the end of all this?

It's been a week since Vegas, and I've managed to avoid Nic every day. Luckily, he doesn't seek me out. Leo and I take our nighttime rituals to my room, allowing me to avoid common areas at all costs. He doesn't say anything about it. A part of me suspects he's happy I'm finally over the hold Nic had on me.

The ringing of my cell phone is what breaks me out of my haze. Dom's name lights up the screen.

"Hey-"

"Val." My cousin's voice is filled with grief, and I can hear her sobs as she says my name. "I fucked up."

I sit up, my spine straightening. "What happened?"

"I'm so sorry." She's hiccupping between words and cries. "I fucked up. I'm sorry."

"Dom, what's going on?" I'm shaking now, heart thumping, listening to my cousin cry while I try to figure out what happened.

"Little wolf." I freeze when I hear his voice.

No. No no no.

“Are you there, little wolf?”

“Y-yes.”

“Good.” I can practically hear his smile, picture his lopsided smirk.

“What’s going on?”

“Time for your final test,” Nic says. “There’s a driver waiting downstairs for you. Get in the car.”

I rush down the stairs, everything in a blur as I go. Like he said, there’s a car waiting for me, and I get in, not even questioning it. The only thing on my mind is Dom.

The drive to the warehouse feels like it takes forever, but finally, the driver stops the car, hitting the button to turn off the ignition.

Energy buzzes over me, adrenaline coursing through my veins where blood should be. I’m not sure if it’s anxiety or fear that’s overwhelming my senses as I step into the warehouse where Leo told me to meet him, but I don’t overthink it.

My mind is focused on Dom. It’s my fault she’s wrapped up in this mess. I never should have mentioned her name to Nic, never should have asked for his help. I practically handed him all my cards on a silver platter.

My eyes take a minute to adjust from the bright sunlight outside to the dark warehouse as I step inside. Immediately, the sight has me gasping for breath, my bag dropping to the floor.

“It’s time, Val,” Nic’s voice booms throughout the large, empty space. “This is your final lesson.”

It takes everything in me not to collapse on the floor as I take another tentative step forward.

In the center of the space, tied to a chair sitting on the hard concrete, is Dom. Her hair is a knotted mess, ratty tangles of red falling from her head. There’s a piece of cloth tied around her face, the fabric digging into her mouth, silencing the cries that attempt to escape.

My cousin. My best friend. The only person who has ever been there for me.

My mind flashes a highlight reel of our lives. Snarky comments, hiding underneath the covers of her single bed, trading clothes, battling high school bullies together. She was there for me when I had nothing but the clothes on my back.

And now, she's tied to a chair in a mafia warehouse because of me.

"Dom." Her name leaves my lips in a sad whisper, a pathetic incriminating depiction of my feelings.

Worse than seeing my cousin tied to a chair, dark streaks of mascara trailing down her cheeks, is the man who stands behind her. Dark jeans, leather jacket, and a head full of black hair. My Leo.

I choke on the sob that threatens to escape me.

He stands behind her with his head down, a gun gripped in his hand, the nozzle pointing at the back of her head.

This can't be happening.

I told him I loved him. I put my heart out for him, gave him something I've never given anyone. Why would he...how could he?

"The first time I met you..." Nic drawls, stepping forward, "I called you a *dumb bitch*. Do you remember that?" He's grinning. Nic likes to play with his food, and right now I'm a fucking feast for the taking.

He's talking about the basement, after I tried to kill him.

"I think that's the appropriate thing to call you now too, huh, Val?" He takes another closer to me, and I let him. He's not wrong; I am a dumb bitch. Because whatever this is, I never saw it coming.

Even now, I'm losing my sanity trying to put the puzzle pieces together. I don't know what side I'm on, where I stand in the equation in front of me.

Betrayal from Nic, as painful as it is, I can understand. Hell, on some level, I think I expected it.

But then my eyes find Leo again, the gun in his hand as he stands behind Dom, and that betrayal guts me. That betrayal I never in a million years expected.

“Why?” I ask, my eyes focused on Leo. Tears threaten to spill from my eyes as I wait for an answer, practically begging as I stare him down.

He doesn't answer me. Doesn't even look at me. His head is still down, eyes pointed at the back of Dom's head, where the barrel of the gun is resting.

Instead, Nic strokes the back of his hand against my cheek. “Baby girl,” he taunts, “Did you think my brother loved you? Did you think that he would abandon me and build a life with you? That you'd walk into the sunset and live happily ever after?” He laughs, his eyes watching my bottom lip quiver in response to his bitter words.

I did think that. I believed, despite all the warning bells, despite everything in me that said love doesn't exist, that what Leo and I had was different.

I thought I had healed, and Leo was my savior.

But I should have known better. This life doesn't forge pure souls, no matter what kind of lies Leo spoon fed me.

This life creates villains. And the two in front of me are the worst of them.

“When I met you,” Nic continues, all too eager to cause me more pain, “you wanted revenge, right, little wolf?” He grips my chin when I don't respond, forcing me to look into his dark eyes. “Answer me.”

“Yes,” I breathe out harshly.

Nic's lips tug up into a devilish grin. “And now, you can have it.”

He lets go of my face, pushing me forward just as Paulie Colombo steps out of the office at the back of the warehouse.

He barely spares a glance at me as he walks forward, shiny leather shoes tapping against the concrete.

The mob boss looks out of place in the dingy surroundings. I bet he hasn't done the actual dirty work for years now. I'm just gum on his shoe he needs to rid himself of.

He looks too happy in his expensive clothing, a glass of some pricey alcohol in his hands. He wears a grin that matches his son's, and my stomach sinks at the sight of it.

I might die in this warehouse.

Mobsters don't like to be threatened, and it's clear that the New York Don knew I was gunning for him.

"I told you," Nic says, stepping back from me, facing me head on. "That I would teach you everything you needed to know? Right?"

I nod, too scared to speak. My voice will surely betray me in front of these men.

"So now, for your final lesson, I'm giving you that revenge you seek. It's been burning a hole in your chest, right? Revenge is a tricky drug, it's like a fuel propelling you forward. But you have to be careful, my sweet Val, because it can make you stupid. Did it make you stupid, Val?"

I swallow thickly. Yes, yes, it sure did.

"You don't have to answer." He laughs. "We all know." He paces in front of me, that grin ever present. Turning his back, he walks around Dom and over to Leo, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "It did. Because you thought my brother here would betray me."

Leo's eyes avoid me, even though I look at him, pleading, begging for him to see me, to give me some sign that this wasn't all a big joke to him. That he meant the words he said, that he loved me too.

But his eyes don't find me, and he gives me no sign.

I'm the butt of the joke in this scenario. The stupid girl who let love sway her. Who believed it.

And now, I'm going to lose my cousin because of it.

"What's the endgame, Nic?" I choke out the words, tasting like poison on my tongue.

"Ahh, there's my bitter girl." He smiles brightly. "Well, you have two options. You can have your revenge as promised, as my father is right here." He gestures to Paulie, who only smiles and takes a sip of his drink. "I have a whole slew of weapons in the back, so you can pick whatever you want. Torture him, shoot him, whatever you think he deserves. Right, Dad?" They share a knowing look.

"Right." Paulie's dark eyes find me, and a smile tugs on his lips. "I'm all yours, doll,"

"The catch?" I ask shakily, my nails biting into my palms as I listen, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Ah, you're learning." Nic chuckles, circling Dom. "When you kill, there's always someone else who wants payback. And you'd be killing *the boss*, not to mention, my father. So I'd want *my* revenge. It's only fair." He mocks me, stalking closer to where Dom is tied up. He wraps a tendril of her hair around his finger, hovering over her while she shakes, fear wrecking her body. "So in return, I'll kill her." Reaching out, I wipe a tear from her face.

This time, I can't stop the tears that stream from my eyes. It's all too much. The betrayal, the loss. My heart feels like it's exploded in my chest, the ache too painful. And still, I find myself longing for Leo, for him to scoop me up like he did after my first lesson. Taking me home and running a hot bath. I'm longing for him to whisper in my ear that it's okay, that he's going to fix this all, but the look on his face tells me how wrong I was to put my trust in him.

I was a fool to think I could just walk away. I started something, and it has to be finished. No matter what I do now, I'll never be free. I was ready to give up my quest; I thought I could leave this all behind, but that was just a lie.

It feels like I'm being torn apart, my limbs being stretched beyond their limits.

Leo. Dom. Paulie.

And then there's Nic, the puppet master. The orchestrator of all my nightmares.

"Leo..." His name stumbles from my lips. For a second, he finally looks at me, his eyes dark and unreadable, and then he looks away, his gaze settling on the back of Dom's head.

I feel myself crumbling, and my knees hit the floor as more tears fall from my eyes. I'm gasping for air, panic overwhelming all of my senses. The tears blur my vision, making it hard to focus on the leather loafers that stalk toward me. A rough hand grips my chin, tugging my face up again. Nic looms over me. "You have to choose," he tells me. "That's the only way you leave this warehouse, little wolf. You choose."

When he drops my chin, I slump back down to the floor, my chest heaving with every breath.

I was ready to walk away a week ago, but that was before Leo betrayed me. So much has changed in seven days.

All of the anger that I thought was gone starts to return, barreling up with more force.

My hatred of Paulie never truly went away. I look at him now, sipping his gin while my father is dead. Dead for no reason other than the idea he *might* rat. He was loyal. A father. A good man. But none of that mattered to that fat jackass over there. Still doesn't. He watches me, looking down at me as my sanity teeters, unsure what to do.

I want to kill him with every fiber of my being. I want him to suffer, want to draw it out in the worst ways possible. I want him to be alive, conscious as I bury him, dirt filling his lungs, a slow suffocation. I want him to feel every ounce of pain my father felt. Every ounce of pain I've felt the last ten years.

I slam my palms down on the concrete as another sob erupts from me.

All three of them stand there, so damn cocky because they know they've won.

Despite how badly I want to kill him, I won't.

I lift to my knees, using the back of my hand to wipe the tears from my face. Dom is crying too. I can see her body shaking, makeup spilling down her cheeks.

When I glance at Leo again, there's nothing there. Nothing in his gaze. Pain slices through my heart. The kind a Band-Aid can't fix. The kind even now I know will never go away.

"You win," I whisper, turning my gaze from the man I love.

Nic grins. "Say it louder, baby."

I push myself up, standing on my feet. Willing myself to be strong. "You fucking win, Nic. Is that what you want to hear? A year of lessons. A year of being your little bitch," I seethe. "And you win. I'm walking away. Just let her go."

Nic gives Leo a nod, and he slips the gun into his waistband before tugging out his pocketknife and slicing through the binds that trap Dom.

As soon as she's free, she runs for me, her arms wrapping around me before she even removes the gag.

"Good choice." Nic smiles. "But damn, I won't lie, I was kinda wishing you would have killed him, just so I could see more of those pretty tears."

"Fuck you," I hiss.

"Already have."

I can't stomach the grin on his face. I look to Leo one last time, praying for something. *Anything*. But all I find is a hard wall of muscle and a blank stare. And if I thought I felt heartbreak before, I was kidding myself.

"Let's go." I spin Dom around, urging her out of the warehouse. The bright sun greets us. This should be a better moment for me. I should have had my revenge, should have killed the man responsible for my shitty life.

But instead, I let them make it worse. I fell right into their trap. Let them use and abuse me.

The enforcer who drove me here is smoking when we exit the warehouse. I run to the Escalade before he can turn around, finding the keys in the ignition. Ushering Dom to the passenger seat, I take the driver's seat, slamming the door and hitting my foot on the gas pedal before anyone can stop me.

"What now?" she asks, her hands wiping at her dirty makeup smeared face as we speed away.

"I don't know," I tell her honestly, barely able to catch my breath.

I can't go back to his house. I have about five hundred dollars in cash of his money and this car. Nothing else to my name.

But I do have one thing... the key and the letter Johnny left me.

"How do you feel about Vegas?" I ask Dom as we pull onto the highway, leaving the warehouse in the rear-view mirror.

"Vegas," she repeats, like she's testing out the word on her tongue. "Okay."

I don't know what to make of everything that just happened. How everything I thought my life would be has been ripped away so viciously.

I never understood how a person like Nic, like Paulie, could be so cruel.

But now I get it.

This is how villains are made.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There's a running joke between my husband and my bestie that I always thank her first in my acknowledgments - so I'm going to thank neither of them first this time. Instead, I'm going to thank myself. I've grown a lot through the writing of this book. It took me two years on and off to get this story out. There were days I felt like I was Val - trapped and uncertain, searching for love in the wrong places. There were moments where I thought I could never finish this. But I did. And I'm very proud of myself for that fact. If I could talk to the version of myself that started this book two years ago, I'd tell her to keep going, to stop doubting herself, to stop trying to convince herself that this book is too dark and no one will read it. But mostly, I'd tell her I'm very proud of her for writing it despite every reason she came up with not to. You did it.

Onto the real acknowledgements....

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XOXO,

Natalia

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Natalia Lourose writes angsty romance about broken people figuring out life and finding love along the way. Television and far too much smut as a teenager left her obsessed with dark-haired bad boys who are moody, wear leather jackets, and do bad things but only for good reasons. She calls Buffalo, NY her home and can be found tucked away in her writing nook with a dog at her feet and two cats on her keyboard. When not writing she can normally be found on tik-tok or some form of social media, you should probably follow her there for more about her books and lots of shenanigans.

She loves interacting with fans and fellow book lovers, so be sure to find her on social media!



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