



A DARK
ROMANCE
COLLECTION

ELLA JADE
CANDACE AYERS & OONA RYDA
DEBORAH GARLAND
JANUARY JAMES
MERISSA BARTLETT
P.T. MACIAS

MERCHILESS

desires

Merciless Desires

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One

CONDEMNED DESIRE BY ELLA JADE

Condemned Desire

The mafia princess belongs to me, but breaking her is harder than I anticipated.

I am mafia royalty.

I have the looks, the charm, the power, and the money. Women line up to warm my bed. The problem? The beauty I crave lives a continent away, waiting to be married off to her father's highest bidder.

When he sends her to America, I'm supposed to keep her safe and in line while he deals with an enemy. He trusts me with his most prized possession, but how can I be expected to send her back to marry another?

Her defiance arouses me, her beauty tempts me, and knowing she's forbidden makes me desire her even more. I want to keep her, possess her, make her mine. If I take her innocence, she'll be useless in any arranged marriage her father chooses for her.

If I do that, I'll break an alliance my family needs to survive in this brutal world we live in, but I won't give her to another man. She won't become a bargaining chip on my watch.

CHAPTER

One

Gio

Gio

"ITALY IS COMING TO AMERICA."

Romero flipped through a stack of papers on his desk. "I hope you're ready."

"What do you mean?" I took a seat across from his desk and scrolled through my phone, waiting for him to tell me how this week was going to go. "Are we expecting a shipment?"

"You could say that." My brother glanced at his Movado. "It lands at Kennedy in two hours."

"What are you talking about?" The shipments my brother and I moved through New York did not come via Kennedy International. "Janero reached out?"

"He did." Romero stared at me. "This particular favor is all you."

Janero Malatesta was the most influential Don in all of Italy. His connections were far-reaching. If you were in the business, you knew Malatesta, and you didn't cross him. Janero took my brother and I under his wing after our father died and we fled to Italy over a decade ago. Romero and I wouldn't be in the position we were in today if not for him. So when he asked us for a favor, we didn't say no.

"The situation in Italy is becoming more contentious," Romero continued. "Janero is ensconced in a turf war, and he

has to focus if he wants to come out on top. He can't have any distractions."

"What does he need me to do?"

"Look after his daughter."

"Cinzia?" It had been a few weeks since I had gazed into her stunning chocolate eyes. We had recently spent time together under the watchful rule of her father. "She's coming here?"

"In two hours."

My curiosity was piqued like a wolf in waiting. Cinzia had been the prey I had been forced to walk away from, but my inner-beast never forgot, and now she would be handed to me.

"He needs us to keep her safe while he protects his territory. He's in deep negotiations with another family and..." Romero leaned back in his chair and ran his fingers along the stubble on his chin. "She might be a bargaining chip, and he needs her under control."

"What kind of bargaining chip?"

Romero shrugged and held his hand up. "You're not going to like it."

"An arranged marriage?" I asked. *Fuck no.*

"Possibly." He tapped his impatient fingers against his desk. "Some of them do work out."

Romero's own marriage to his wife Luciana had been an arranged union situation. It may have worked out, but it started rough. No one was happy when they got together, and our family was still dealing with the consequences.

"Cinzia is only twenty. Who would Janero consider for her?"

"Look," my brother said. "If this is too much to ask of you, or if you did develop feelings for her when you were in Italy the last time, she can stay with me and Luciana. I just thought maybe she'd be more comfortable with you."

"It's fine." *None of this is fucking fine.* "I got this."

“You’re sure?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I know you kind of have a thing for her. I thought it was a get-in-her-panties type of thing, but if it’s more...”

“A thing for her? What am I? A teenage girl?”

“No, we’re fucking arms dealers with all of the east coast in our pocket. Can we act like it?” He shook his head. “I know you have this, so let’s discuss this week’s agenda and then you can get to the airport to pick up your latest assignment.”

As Romero talked about shipments, guns, and whatever the hell else we had to do to survive, I thought about the last time I saw Cinzia.

Her long, black hair cascaded down her shoulders and over her back. Her huge, expressive eyes gazed into mine, making it difficult to get into my waiting car. We had been inseparable for the past few weeks. I had toured the countryside with her family, stayed in their villa, and shared most meals with them. We didn’t have a whole lot of alone time between her father’s protective nature and her various aunts, uncles, and cousins dropping in to visit, but we managed a few stolen moments.

“Why do you look so sad?” I asked her.

“I’ll miss you.” Cinzia swept the wind-blown hair from her face, revealing her soft glowing skin. “You made life interesting around here. You’re the only one who speaks English with me.”

I had gotten used to her Italian accent, and the way she messed up American phrases made me smile.

“You can call me whenever you want,” I said, hoping she would take me up on that offer.

“It won’t be the same.”

“I’ll come back to visit when I can.” That wouldn’t be anytime soon, but I did want to see her. Now that she wasn’t a child any longer, my view of her had changed. I wanted to get to know the woman she had become.

“Why can’t you stay?”

“Because Romero needs me.”

“My father needs you.” She bit the tip of her perfectly polished pink thumbnail. “Business is getting intense. I can tell. He relies on you.”

Her perceptiveness surprised me. Business was getting intense and her father had been relying on me these past few weeks to get things done, but she never let on that she paid any attention to what went on around her.

“Your father needs me to go back to New York.” Even if I could stay a few more days, Janero wanted me back with my brother. No matter how much I wanted to be with Cinzia, business came first. Her father’s orders couldn’t be ignored.

“Well, if that’s what Papa wants, we can’t argue.”

She was right about that.

“There is uno thing I want before you go.”

“Uno?” I laughed at her cute habit of mixing Italian into her English conversation.

“One thing.” She giggled but it didn’t reach her eyes.

“Anything for my little Cin.” What I would give for her to be a sin I had to atone for. “What do you want?”

“This.”

She inched up on her toes and pressed her full, sexy lips to mine. The contact caught me off guard, but I went with it because I had been thinking about kissing her for weeks. I stepped forward, pushing her against the SUV waiting to take me away from her. Conflict ripped through me. She was off-limits for now. I stole one more kiss as I lingered against her eager mouth, savoring the sweet taste I had found there, craving more than anything to claim her.

“Whoa.” I took her slender shoulders in my hands, noting how heavy her breathing had become. If I stayed any longer, I’d never be able to leave her. “I have to go.”

“Take me with you,” she whispered. “Please.”

“Fucking, Gio?” Romero’s agitated voice pulled me from my sweet memory. “Where the fuck are you?”

“I’m here.” I looked at him, realizing I didn’t have a clue what he had said in the past three minutes. I had been too busy reminiscing over a moment that never should have happened. “I was, um... Sorry.”

“Are you alright? Because if you’re too preoccupied to handle what I’m asking of you, then you’re of no use to me.”

“You couldn’t manage without me.” My brother knew that was true. If I wasn’t around to rein him in, I didn’t want to think about the trouble he would get us into. His temper was as notorious as his trigger finger.

“I’ll handle tonight’s shipment,” he said. “You focus on your latest situation. She’s flying in with two of her father’s security guards. They’ll remain with her for as long as she’s here, but you have total control on her security detail.”

“How long will she be staying?” I stood, smoothing out my pants.

“As long as the tensions are high in Janero’s territory. It could be a few weeks unless he negotiates with the Calabrese family.”

“That family has three sons,” I said. “All in a position to overthrow Janero.”

“Unless...”

“They form an alliance.” It wasn’t unusual for two families to join forces in our world. Would Janero offer his daughter as an incentive? Could I live with that? Would I have a choice?

“That alliance and the details of it isn’t our concern, but we stand to gain a hell of a lot more if Janero stays in control.”

“I understand.”

“You better.” Romero pointed at me. “Janero is trusting you with an important job. Don’t fuck it up.”

“Have I ever fucked anything up?”

“I’ve never seen you look at a woman the way you do at the mafia princess.” He shook his head. “Don’t let her beauty confuse you. We can’t afford a war with Janero. You cannot fuck this woman and kick her out of your bed the next day. As a matter of fact, you can’t fuck her at all.”

“I get it.” As much as the idea of Janero bargaining by using his daughter infuriated me, I knew that was the life we lived. Our business required extreme measures sometimes. I wasn’t in a place to question his motives. It was better for my family if everything ran smoothly.

“You better get going,” Romero said. “Janero will expect you to intercept his daughter as soon as she lands.”

“I’ll go now.”

I shoved my phone in my pocket and left without saying anything else. Romero was a good listener, but he didn’t often allow feelings to get in the way of business. Luciana was the only exception, and even then, he didn’t always make the best choices.

Once I was outside, I nodded toward Conti, my driver slash guard. “We need to go to Kennedy.”

“No problem.” He flicked his cigarette in the street and stomped it out before opening the front passenger door for me. “Are we picking someone up?”

“Yeah.” I slid into the seat and then shut the door.

“Business or pleasure?” Conti asked as he got behind the wheel.

“Only time will tell.”

CHAPTER

Two

Cinzia

“TAKE ME WITH YOU.” *I hadn't meant to blurt that out, but after the kiss we just shared I couldn't imagine my life without him.*

“Please.” I stared into his mesmerizing hazel gaze, hoping he would grant me my wish.

“Cin.” When Gio pressed his palm to my cheek, the heat of his flesh set me ablaze with desire. “You know that's not possible.”

“Why?”

“This is your home.”

“I'm a prisoner here,” I said. “I can't go anywhere without a guard, and my father rarely lets me leave.”

“It's not safe.” He dropped his hand to his side. “Your father is trying to protect you.”

“From the danger he has created.” I didn't speak about my life or my father's business, but if there was anyone who would understand, it would be Gio. “I'm sorry.” I backed away from him. “I got used to having you here.”

“I liked being here.” He reached for my arm. “I have to go now, but I will miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too.” He brought me closer to him, dropping his gaze to my lips. We had never been this intimate before. “Until next time.”

I closed my eyes when his lips connected with mine again. He twisted his fingers in the ends of my hair, pulling on it as he deepened our bond, pressing against my lips. No one had ever kissed me with such force, with such desire.

By the time I opened my eyes, he was getting into the SUV, smiling at me with his sexy, full mouth. The mouth that had just assaulted mine. He winked as the driver pulled away, leaving me wanting more. How could I live without him?

“Welcome to New York.” The pilot’s voice pulled me from my unsettled memory.

In a few minutes, I would come face to face with the man who had unwittingly broken my heart when he left for America. I tried to forget him. I didn’t contact him like he had requested because I wanted him to have the next move. He hadn’t reached out to me either.

Was I just the twenty-year-old girl with a crush on the ruthless mobster from New York? Gio flirted with me for years. From the time I was fourteen, I had loved him with all my heart. I had met him when I was even younger, but I didn’t know then that he would become the center of my world. He teased me, taught me English, made me forget my sheltered life, but then he left for a few years. He returned this summer, and he didn’t see me as a child anymore. There was a spark between us. We just needed time to explore it.

After going through customs, my guards, Alberto and Leo, retrieved my luggage. I sent my father a quick text telling him I had landed. He would have preferred I called him instead, but I still held a grudge for him making me come here without any input from me. Of course, I wanted to see Gio, but I wanted Gio to have been the one to send for me.

I never understood my father’s motives. It was no secret how I felt about Gio, but it was even less of a secret that my father wasn’t going to approve of a relationship between him and I. Over the summer, I thought he might be softening to the

idea, but as his business became unsettled, he was far too focused on work to entertain what I needed.

Once I stepped out of the huge automatic doors, the crisp fall air swept over me. Gio stood in front of a black SUV, much like he had the last time I had seen him. I hadn't caught his eye yet, but he had certainly had my attention standing there in his dark suit that was tailored for him. Even in the dim lighting of the underpass where the cars waited to pick up their passengers, his shoes shined and his silver watch sparkled.

Absolute perfection.

I was used to well-dressed men. My father was meticulous in every aspect of his life and insisted the men who surrounded him look the part of the business he involved himself in. Even if I wasn't supposed to speak of his dealings, I knew he wasn't a legitimate businessman. Neither was Gio, but I didn't care.

Gio was on the phone, listening intently. He nodded a few times as he leaned against the vehicle. He didn't have a tie on and the first few buttons of his shirt were undone, revealing the black ink that was sprawled across his solid chest. He ran his fingers through his dark brown hair. My fingers twitched at the thought of being able to thread them through his luscious locks.

If he was aware of the women who practically walked into him because they were so busy staring at him, he didn't show it. I had gotten used to random women seeking his interest whenever we went out. My own aunts and cousins were guilty of trying to steal his attention away from me. Again, if he knew he was the object of all these women's desires, he never mentioned it.

As I approached Gio, he ended his call and placed his phone in his inside jacket pocket. When he looked up, our eyes connected. My stomach flipped in excitement and I couldn't help the smile that took over my face when he grinned at me.

No! He left me. I wouldn't make his new babysitting gig easy for him.

“Bellissima.” Gio came toward me, leaning in and kissing both my cheeks. “You look incredible.”

I wanted more than a peck on the cheek, but I wouldn’t show my disappointment.

“Gio.” I touched his bulging bicep as I breathed in his comforting, fresh scent. “Ciao.”

“How was your flight?”

“Uneventful.” I glanced at his driver who waited by the passenger door. “It was so kind of you to pick me up.”

“Are you ready to go home?”

“Home?”

“I have a penthouse in the city. I’m sure you’ll love being in the center of everything.”

“I assumed I’d be staying at a hotel.”

“A hotel? I don’t think so. Didn’t your father tell you you’d be staying with me?”

“He was quite vague.” I didn’t expect to stay with Gio. This could work to my benefit, but I didn’t want him to know that. “He said you’d be looking out for me and that I shouldn’t give you any trouble.”

“Trouble?” His lips curved into the most delicious smirk. “I doubt you’d be any trouble.”

Don’t be so sure.

“I can stay at a hotel. I’ve researched a few places. I want to overlook Central Park. I’ve seen it in movies. I want to be able to go shopping on Fifth Avenue as much as possible.” I motioned to Alberto and Leo. “I have my own security, so you don’t have to worry about me.”

“That’s very considerate of you, but you’ll be coming home with me. Alberto and Leo will be on your security team, but I’ll be taking the lead.” He turned to his driver. “Conti,” he said. “Help them load Ms. Malatesta’s things into the SUV and then we can get going.”

“Sure.” Conti smiled at me. “Welcome to America.”

“Thank you.” I turned to Gio. “What do you mean you’ll be taking the lead?”

“I don’t plan to let you out of my sight.”

“At all?”

He shook his head before speaking to my guards. “You two can ride in the SUV behind us. The two men in there will give you your assignments and show you where you’ll be staying when you aren’t on duty. Please make yourself at home.”

“Thank you, Mr. Bilotti,” Leo said. “We look forward to working with your team.”

“Wait, they are my guards,” I said. “You can’t tell them what to do.”

“I believe I just did.” Gio opened the back passenger door for me. “We’re all on the same page. Your father has briefed them, and they know what’s expected of them.”

“We’ll see you in the morning, Cinzia,” Alberto said. “You owe me a rematch in checkers.”

“You cheat.” I kissed his cheek. “But I’ll humor you.”

“Thank you.” Alberto waved as he and Leo walked to their car.

I had become quite fond of them over the past few weeks. Once Gio left Italy, my father assigned both of them to me. They kept me company and helped pass the time while I waited for Gio to contact me. Technically, I was still waiting.

“Get in.” Gio pointed to the backseat, his demeanor not as charismatic as I had come to expect.

“Ask me nicely,” I challenged him. “Maybe I’ll consider it.”

“Please get into the car.” He sighed. “We have to move it before airport security comes over, and I don’t need that hassle.”

“That’s better.” I slid into the backseat with him quickly getting in behind me. I had never been more aware of someone’s presence than I was at this moment. I wanted him close, but at the same time I had to keep my distance. I had to figure out how he felt about my father sending me here. Was I an obligation or a welcomed guest?

Once Conti got behind the wheel, he pulled away from the loading area. A tinge of excitement coursed through me as I gazed out the window. I had wanted to see New York City for as long as I could remember. Experiencing it with Gio was more than I ever expected.

“Do you make it a habit of kissing your guards?” Gio asked.

“What?” *Is he upset?*

“You kissed him.” His jaw tightened when he clenched his fist and rested it on his thigh. “Why?”

“Because he’s my friend.”

“He’s your guard. There’s a difference.”

“Why can’t he be both?” I asked. “You’re my friend and now you’re my guard.”

“I’m not your guard.” When he looked into my eyes, I remembered why I had fallen for him all those years ago. They were fierce and determined, but they were also sexy and mysterious. He would protect and care for me, but he could also make me a woman.

“Are you my friend?” I asked.

“You know I am.”

“Then tell me why I’m here. Why did my father send me?”

“Because his business was getting too intense. He couldn’t focus on getting the job done and protecting you, so he sent you to me.”

“He could have sent me to a safe house in Italy like he’s done before. Why would he send me to America?” I would much rather be with Gio than under my father’s strict rule, but

I wanted to know if he did this as more than a debt he owed to my father. “Why am I here?”

“I didn’t question him.” He shrugged. “He gave me a job and I’m doing it.”

“So, I’m only business to you?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You haven’t said much of anything.” I inched closer to him, placing my hand on his thigh. “You haven’t even given me a proper kiss hello.”

“Is that what you want?”

“Isn’t that what you want?”

CHAPTER

Three

Gio

WHEN CINZIA CAME through the airport doors in those white pants and shimmery silver halter top, looking more like a runway model and less like the girl I had left in Italy, I had to play it cool and pretend I was too busy on the phone to notice her. That couldn't have been further from the truth.

An awareness came over me that I hadn't expected. I had been attracted to her once she came of age, but I thought it was just a physical thing. Not that she wasn't smart, funny, and charming, but because of who she was and where she came from I couldn't expect to make her mine. That was up to her father. But once she walked onto American soil—my territory—something shifted. In the few minutes we were at the airport, I caught the glances from the men who couldn't take their gazes away from her as she walked toward me. Complete strangers lusting after her. My own security team was taken aback by her grace and beauty. So was Alberto, her guard.

“Isn't that what you want?” Cinzia asked.

We sat face to face as she waited for my answer. She offered me those full, natural lips that a lot of women paid big bucks to achieve. Those same lips that would make a man do insane things to taste or to have them wrapped around his cock. As I leaned into her, the scent of her floral perfume lingered between us. *Am I crazy enough to...*

The vibration from my phone buzzed against my chest, saving me from a huge mistake. She exhaled when I reached inside my pocket and glanced down at the screen. *Thank you, Romero!*

“I have to take this,” I said.

“Whatever.” She took her phone from her bag and began scrolling as I took the call.

“Hey,” I answered. “What’s up?”

“I just spoke to Janero,” Romero said.

“I did too.”

“He’s not worried about Cinzia now that she’s with you. He can focus on what’s going on with his business. He trusts you.”

“That’s good.” I glanced at Cinzia who was lost in her social media feed. “We’re heading back to the penthouse now.”

“Remember, this isn’t like when you take a woman back to your place. This is different.”

“You don’t have to tell me that.” Maybe he did, considering I had been in her presence for three minutes and was about to kiss her. “I’m not an idiot.”

“I didn’t say you were, but I know this job is complicated.”

“I’ll come to the house tomorrow.”

“Bring your new companion.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Luciana wants to meet her, and they can get to know one another while we’re discussing business.”

“Do you need me for anything tonight?”

“You have enough on your plate,” he said. “Focus on getting her settled.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” I ended the call, leaning back against the seat. “Are you hungry?”

“No.” Cinzia dropped her phone in her bag and then stretched out her neck and back. “Just stiff from the flight.” She licked her lips. “You probably know what it’s like to be stiff.”

“What?” I tried not to laugh, but she wasn’t wrong.

“You’ve traveled from Italy to New York before. Even in first class, it’s not that comfortable.”

“Right.” I smirked.

“Wow!” She looked out the window. “It’s really hectic here. The lights, the people, the buildings. This is fantastic.”

“It’s nothing like your country.”

“I want to see it all. The clubs, the nightlife, the Broadway shows, the shopping, and the restaurants. Everything.”

“It sounds like you’ve researched all of this.”

“It’s where you live.” She smiled at me. “I wanted to feel connected to you, so I learned as much as I could.”

“That’s sweet.”

“I was a kid the first time you left. I was totally infatuated with you.”

“And now?” I ran my finger down her arm, stopping at her wrist.

“Am I still a kid?”

“I know you’re not, but are you still infatuated?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know, Gio Bilotti?”

I liked how she teased me.

“Ammazza!” She straightened her posture and gazed out at Times Square, expressing her excitement. “It’s just like I’ve seen on TV!”

“You can see all of it from my penthouse.”

“Are you kidding?”

“It’s a few blocks from here.”

“Can we walk?”

Conti’s gaze connected with mine in the rearview mirror, conveying his displeasure over the idea of us walking through the crowded streets.

“Per favore,” Cinzia said. “Please!”

“Pull over.” I nodded toward the curb, surprised by my own desire to give into her so easily. *Just this one time.*

Cinzia clapped her hands in delight. My decision was worth it.

“Gio?” Conti shook his head.

“Have one of the guys in the car behind us get out and shadow us,” I said as I got out of the car and extended my hand for my new guest. “We’ll stay on the busy streets. We’ll be home in ten minutes.”

“Stay close to me.” I held her hand as we walked because the streets were crowded. I did not want to lose her on her first night here.

“Your guards don’t get mad when you don’t listen to them?”

“They work for me.”

“It smells like cinnamon.” She inhaled. “And smoke.”

“The vendors are roasting pecans and some are steaming hot dogs.”

“Interesting.” She glanced across the street at the table set up with bags, hats, and watches. “Are they selling Gucci?”

“Not the Gucci you’re used to.” I hurried my pace, dodging through the hordes of people that I usually tried to avoid. “Have you seen enough?”

“Not at all.” She laughed as she kept up with me. “Let’s go dancing.”

“No.”

“Don’t you own a club?”

“I do.”

“Can we go?” She inched closer to me until our arms touched. “You know Papa doesn’t let me do much, but you could show me everything while keeping an eye on me.”

Janero did keep her pretty sheltered. She had been homeschooled and didn’t have close friends because her father didn’t trust many people. Their house was a fortress. Visitors were carefully vetted. When Romero and I fled to Italy after our father died, we spent much time with Janero. I had just turned fifteen that summer and she was around five.

By the time my brother and I had moved back to America, she was barely a teenager and I was in my mid-twenties. I taught her English and we spent days by the ocean, but I never saw her as a woman. That changed this past summer when I went back to Italy. Our ten-year age gap didn’t seem so big now, but that wasn’t what kept us apart.

“Your father has his reasons,” I said.

“But he let me come here. That’s a good sign.”

“It won’t be a good sign for me if anything happens to you, so I need you to follow my lead and do as I say while you’re visiting.”

“I can’t make any promises.”

“Cin.” I stopped walking and made her face me. “The same rules apply here as they did in Italy. My job is to keep you safe.”

“Gio,” a loud voice called from across the street.

“Hell.” When I glanced in the direction of the familiar voice, I wished we had stayed in the car.

“Gio.” Paulie Santoro and his three henchmen approached us. “What are you doing out here with the commoners?”

“Getting some air,” I said.

“Who is this beautiful woman?” Paulie raked his gaze down Cin’s body, causing me to bring her closer to me.

He wasn’t the type of man I associated with. He tried unsuccessfully to worm his way into the Bilotti organization,

but he couldn't be trusted and he had nothing to bring to the table. His uncle worked with my father years ago, so he thought that gave him an in with Romero and I. He was wrong.

"A friend," I said.

"I'm Cinzia Malatesta." She let go of my hand and extended it for Paulie to take. Did she have to tell him who she was?

"I'm Paulie Santoro." When he brought her knuckles to his lips, I tensed. "Is your father Don Malatesta?"

"He is." She subtly withdrew her hand from his before I had a chance to intervene. "You know him?"

"Everyone in our business knows him," Paulie said. "Is he accompanying you?"

"No." I nodded at my guard, Max, who had been hanging back until now. "Cinzia is visiting me."

"Hmm." Paulie stared between Cin and I. "He sent his daughter all this way to visit with you?"

"We're old friends," I said.

"That's interesting." Paulie grinned. "Some might see that as an alliance in the making."

"And others might see it as two friends spending time together." I shrugged, not wanting him to speculate on circumstances he knew nothing about.

"Well, if that's the case..." When Paulie turned his attention back to Cinzia, my chest filled with rage. "Maybe you and I can get together while you're in the city."

"I was just saying to Gio that I want to go to his club," she said. "Have you been?"

"All the time." He motioned toward his guys. "We're going tonight. Do you want to join us?"

"No." I placed my hand on the small of Cinzia's back, staking some sort of claim I had no right to. "She landed an hour ago. She's probably exhausted."

“Really, I’m not.” She smiled at me. “Can we go to the club?”

“I already answered that question.”

“You’re no fun.” She pouted, and if I wasn’t annoyed at her attitude, I might have found it cute.

“I’m a lot of fun,” Paulie said. “I’ll save a dance for you if you can manage to get away from him.”

“Don’t hold your breath, Santoro.” I nodded. “Have a good night.”

“I will.” Paulie winked at Cinzia. “See you around.”

“No, you won’t.” I stared at him until he looked away.

I hurried down the street, making my way through the crowd, not particularly caring that Cinzia couldn’t keep up with me in her high heels. Who takes a six-hour flight in heels?

“Gio! Slow down,” she yelled.

“I want to get home.”

“Why are you being this way?”

“What way?” I turned the corner.

“You’re different from the man I knew in Italy.”

“The man in Italy wasn’t in charge of your safety. The dynamics have shifted.”

“So you can’t be my friend anymore? You have to be a bully? Like my father?”

I halted in front of my building, turning to face her. If she only knew how much I was like her father, she wouldn’t look at me with all that trust in her eyes.

“I didn’t ask for this.” I raised my voice in frustration. “I found out two hours before you were coming. Your father and my brother asked me to look after you, and I’m going to do it. You might not like my rules, but you are going to follow them.”

“I won’t be your prisoner.” She put her hand on her hip, trying to establish her independence, but she would soon learn she wasn’t going to get the freedom she sought under my watch. “I didn’t come all this way to live like I do at home.”

“I’m glad you’re here.” Although, I wished it was under better circumstances. “But this isn’t an opportunity for you to defy your father. He sent you here so he wouldn’t have to worry about you while he deals with some business.”

“He made me your problem.”

“I don’t view you as a problem.”

“You didn’t look that happy to see me.” She stepped toward me, closing the space between us. “You still haven’t kissed me hello.” She licked her lips as she focused on mine. “What are you waiting for?”

She closed her eyes when I ran my thumb along her lips, fighting the urge to give into temptation. If Janero planned to marry her to an ally, I couldn’t complicate matters for any of us. I needed more information. More time to assess the situation. It didn’t matter what I wanted. This was not meant to be personal.

“We’re here.”

“What?” She fluttered her long lashes, opening her eyes and looking into mine with deep confusion. *You’re not the only one.*

“This is my building.”

“Oh.”

Max climbed the steps and opened the front door to the lobby for us. As we entered, Conti pushed the private button on the elevator for the penthouse. Walking through the lobby, we were bombarded with the normal barrage of stares from my neighbors. Most of them were used to me and Romero and our entourage of security, but others were still intrigued by us. A few pretended to take selfies as we stepped into the elevator so they could capture us in a photo that would end up on social media in a few seconds.

“Why is everyone staring?” Cinzia asked.

“They’re wondering who you are,” I said. “Just ignore them.”

“Why would they care who I am?”

“Because you’re with Gio,” Conti answered, because he probably recognized the need to set some ground rules too. “Gio is a celebrity in this building, and by association, that makes you fair game for the press and all these onlookers who want to get close to him. Keep that in mind before you talk to anyone.”

“She knows the drill,” I said as the doors shut.

“They’re not afraid of you?” Cinzia looked at me. “They know what you do?”

“They don’t know everything, but my persona in the city isn’t as discreet as I would like. That’s the age we’re in. People are intrigued by men like me. Social media doesn’t help.”

“It’s not like that at home.” She bit her bottom lip. “My father keeps his dealings private.”

“That’s a luxury we don’t have here in New York City.” I ushered her out once the elevator doors opened. “It’s a different culture here.”

“So, you don’t have to hide?”

“I don’t post my every move on social media.” I nodded at the guys standing at the doorway. “This is Cinzia. She’ll be staying with me for a few weeks.”

“Hello.” She shot them her signature flirty smile and they were already sucked in by her beauty. “I’m sure we’ll be fast friends.”

Don’t count on it.

CHAPTER

Four

Cinzia

I ROLLED out of bed much later than I normally did, but the time difference and sleeping in a strange bed had thrown off my schedule. I made my way down the grand staircase and into the main living space of the stunning penthouse. The windows surrounded the open room, creating a spectacular view of the city.

When we arrived here last night, Gio showed me to my room, had my things delivered, and then shut the door. I got the impression he wasn't pleased with me. If he didn't want me here, why did he agree to let me stay with him?

I didn't understand his hostility toward me. We had such a fantastic time this summer. I couldn't stop thinking about his lips on mine. It was more than a goodbye kiss. It was the start of our future. Why couldn't he see that?

It was quiet except for some distant voices coming from down the hallway. I didn't bother to investigate, because if Gio ran his house like my father did, my presence wouldn't be welcome during a meeting.

The less I know, the better.

I followed the smell of coffee and ended up in the immaculate white kitchen, accented with black and gray tiles and large, gourmet appliances. Mia, my father's personal chef, would give an arm to cook Sunday pasta here.

Someone had left coffee, juice, fruit, muffins, and yogurt in the center of the kitchen island. Pouring myself a huge mug of the freshly roasted liquid, I closed my eyes and savored the taste. *Delicious*. Gio enjoyed the finer things in life.

“What the fuck?”

I jumped when Gio yelled, spilling some of my coffee on the counter, and turned to see him standing in the doorway of the kitchen.

“What?” I asked as he came toward me, dressed in a dark suit and light blue shirt. The man could wear a designer suit, but all I could think about was peeling him out of it and running my tongue down his body.

“Why are you practically naked in my kitchen?”

“Huh?” I glanced down at my pink tank top and matching boy shorts. “I slept in this.”

“You can’t walk around here like that. I have men all over the penthouse.”

“So?”

“Go put some clothes on.”

“You would see more if I was wearing a bathing suit.” Why were Americans so uptight when it came to clothes, breasts, and nipples? They made everything about the human body so taboo. “As a matter of fact, I sunbathe topless.”

“On your father’s private island where I seriously doubt he lets his guards see you.”

“Hey, Gio, I need...” Conti stopped in the doorway of the kitchen. “Oh.”

“Hi, Conti.” I waved as I popped a grape into my mouth.

“Get out!” Gio yelled at his guard as he pointed to the hallway.

“Sorry.” Conti held up his hands as he backed out of the kitchen.

“Do you see why you can’t walk around here in your underwear?” Gio shouted at me.

“No, I don’t.” I sat at the island and put some fruit on my plate. “It’s not my problem if your guards can’t be respectful. Why would you have such men work for you?”

“Cin?”

“My father’s guards don’t disrespect me like that.” I bit into a piece of pineapple. “But they know he would gut them if they did.”

“I should gut my guards because you can’t put your clothes on?”

“Yes.”

“Makes perfect sense.” He let out a frustrated breath. “Did you sleep well?”

“It took a while to fall asleep, but once I did I was out.” I got up and walked around the island and stood next to him. “How come you gave me the main bedroom?”

“It wasn’t being used.”

“Why don’t you sleep in there?”

“When Romero and I bought this place, he took the main bedroom. When he got married, I wasn’t sure it was going to last, so I didn’t move in there.”

“Why didn’t you think his marriage would last?” I asked.

“It’s a long story.”

“I have time.” I took another grape from the tray of fruit. “Didn’t you like his wife?”

“I adore her. They ended up staying married despite their rocky start and even moved back in here when I was in Italy and their house was being renovated. I just haven’t seen the need to move out of my room.”

“The view is spectacular.” When I pressed a grape to his mouth, he parted his sexy lips and took the offering. “Maybe you want to share the room with me. The bed is really big.”

“I don’t think so.” He chewed the grape. “Finish your breakfast, and then get ready. We’re going to Romero’s in an hour.”

“How come?” I moved closer, standing in front of him. “I thought you could take me sight-seeing.”

“I have business with my brother, and Luciana would like to meet you.”

“Gio.” I placed my hands on his biceps, remembering how muscular and tattooed his arms were. “Why are you mad at me?”

“I’m not mad at you.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Trust me, sweetheart, you’ll know if I’m mad at you.” He dropped his gaze to my mouth. “It’s not something you want.”

“I know something I want.” I trailed my fingers along his jaw. “I think you want it too.”

“Cin.”

“I like when you call me that. Do you want me to be...” I stood on my toes and brushed my lips against his. “Sinful?”

He picked me up and set me on the counter so fast my heart rate increased before my head had a chance to catch up. When he gripped my face between his strong hands and stared into my eyes, I lost my breath. No one had ever looked at me like they wanted to devour me.

“You’re playing with fire,” he whispered against my lips. The heat of his breath sent a violent shiver through me.

“I’ve never wanted to burn so badly.” I arched into him. “Please, Gio.”

“I can’t.” When he gently kissed me, it wasn’t what I had anticipated, but there was an intensity having him this close to me, seeing the conflict in his expression.

“Why not?”

“Finish your breakfast.” He lifted me off the counter and set me down. “Be ready in an hour. Don’t keep me waiting.”

“And if I do?”

“I already told you, you don’t want to be on the receiving end of my anger.”

We’ll see about that.



“You’re late,” Romero said to Gio when he opened the front door of his lavish home in the New Jersey suburbs of the impressive gated community. “Is my time not important to you?”

“Traffic.” Gio took the blame for my tardiness, but in my defense, I couldn’t decide on what to wear. I had it narrowed down to the blue and white striped romper and the sleeveless white shirt and black pants. I had to go with the latter when Gio practically pulled me out of the bedroom and shoved me into the elevator.

“Caio.” When I leaned forward, Romero kissed both of my cheeks.

“It’s lovely to see you, Cinzia.” He widened the door. “Please, come in.”

“Thank you.” I entered with Gio close behind.

“How was your trip to America?” Romero asked.

“Good, but now I’m feeling the effects of the time change. It was my fault we’re late. I’m slower this morning. Gio warned me not to be late, but I didn’t listen.” I graced Gio with a playful smile. “Now he’s angry with me.”

“It’s fine.” When Romero smirked, I noted how much he and Gio resembled one another. They were both tall and muscular, and their arms and chests were covered in expressive ink. Both inherited a strong jawline that could make them appear intimidating, but once they smiled the frightening features disappeared and explained why they were

so popular with most of the women in the city. A quick social media search led me down the Bilotti rabbit hole. Everyone wanted to sleep with them.

“Hey, beauty.” Gio walked down the hallway to meet a stunning woman who I assumed was Luciana. “How’s the beast treating you?”

“He has his moments.” The woman hugged Gio, lingering against him for a few seconds. Gio’s jaw relaxed when he held her, making him irresistible. “How are you?” she asked.

“Can’t complain.” He released her. “Luciana, this is Cinzia.”

“It’s so nice to meet you.” Luciana hugged me. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“From Gio?” I asked.

“Who else?” Luciana smiled at Gio. “He doesn’t stop talking about your summer in Italy.”

“It was a magical time, wasn’t it, Gio?” When I brought my thumbnail between my teeth, his gaze followed. *That’s right, think about what you’re missing.*

“Lu,” Gio said. “Why don’t you and Cinzia get to know one another. Romero and I have business to discuss.”

“What else is new?” Luciana laughed. “Don’t be too long. Lunch is being delivered soon.”

“Are you telling me what to do?” Romero grabbed Luciana’s arm and tugged her to him. “Because you know I’m not a fan of that.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, but I don’t want you to get hungry.” Luciana kissed him, softening his tense stance. “We all know how you can be.”

“I agree,” Gio said. “You’re an absolute asshole when you’re hungry.”

“My office now.” Romero pointed down the hallway.

Both men engaged in conversation as they moved in the direction of Romero’s office. Neither of them looked back.

Knowing how brutal my father's business was, I didn't take it personally. It didn't appear as if Luciana did either.

"Your home is gorgeous." I looked around the bright foyer. "Thank you for having me."

"I was excited to meet you." She motioned toward a sitting room across from the foyer. "I didn't realize you were visiting the states."

"Neither did I." I sat in a posh white chair by the window. "My father didn't give me much warning."

"I get that." She sat on the light blue sofa across from me and brushed her bare feet along the plush matching throw rug. She was a stunning woman about three or four years older than me. Gio said she had lived an isolated life as I did and understood what it took to be in her husband's world.

"Is your father overbearing too?" I asked.

"I was raised by my uncle, and he wasn't the most gentle man around." She tucked her shiny, long, dark hair behind her ear. "That's probably why I can handle Romero."

"How did you and Romero meet?"

"Oh, well that's a story, but it wasn't love at first sight." She laughed. "It was more of an arranged situation."

"Really?"

"I don't freely admit that, but I know you know this life, and sometimes we're expected to do things out of duty or obligation. In my case, marrying Romero was the best thing that ever happened to me."

"I don't know how I would feel if my father made me marry someone out of obligation." That wasn't entirely true, considering I would be ecstatic if he arranged a marriage between me and Gio. "It seems a little barbaric."

"Believe me, when I walked down the aisle, I thought it was the most barbaric thing ever, but once I got to know Romero, I fell in love with him. We both made mistakes, but we found our way."

Luciana beamed when she spoke about her husband. I remembered Romero when I was a child. Brutal didn't seem to do him justice. My father often praised his ruthless demeanor and his ability to get the job done, no matter the risk.

"I'm happy it worked out for you." I gazed out the window, observing a group of guards hanging out on the side of the house. "My father's security team is so discreet. It's difficult getting used to them being so out in the open."

"You're probably more secluded on your father's property. We're pretty isolated here, but when we're in the city, Romero doesn't take any chances. That's why the penthouse is so heavily guarded. They want people to know they're protected."

"Do you go to the city much?"

"I try to get there once a week, and tonight we're going to Cantinos."

"Romero and Gio's club?" I had seen pictures and videos posted by mob-obsessed women who couldn't wait to get close to the Bilotti brothers.

"You should come with us," Luciana said. "It's a cool scene. I don't see much of it without Romero or Jag and Sam, my security team, by my side, but the drinks are fantastic and the music is fire. It's always a good time."

"Do you think Gio will go?"

"I don't see why not. He's there at least four nights a week."

"I would love to go."

"Go where?" Gio asked when he and Romero came into the room.

"That was fast," Luciana said.

"We're not done," Romero said. "But I saw on the cameras the delivery service bringing the lunch to the back patio. They're setting up now. I figured we could eat and get back to business afterward."

“Perfect.” Luciana stood. “I ordered the guys lunch too.”

“They don’t deserve you.” Romero wrapped his arm around Luciana’s waist and brought her to him. “You’re the best.”

“Fed guards are happy guards, right?” She giggled when he buried his lips in the crook of her neck. They were so at ease with one another.

“Fed husbands are happy husbands too.” Romero kissed her neck, making her laugh even more.

I loved seeing Romero so happy. I couldn’t help but stare at him as he playfully teased his wife. When I looked away, I caught Gio looking at me. Our eyes connected, and he held my gaze for a moment. He didn’t seem hostile toward me, so I smiled at him.

“Let’s go to the patio,” Luciana suggested. “I brewed some iced tea.”

“You didn’t tell us where you wanted to go,” Gio said to me.

“Oh, Luciana invited me to your club tonight.” I took his hand as we followed Luciana and Romero through the family room and to the patio. “Isn’t that exciting?”

“So exciting.” Romero glanced over his shoulder and smirked at Gio.

“You might be too tired to go,” Gio said. “You said you weren’t used to the time difference yet.”

“I’ll be fine.” I squeezed his hand. “I have the perfect dress. A Versace.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” Luciana said as we made our way onto the patio.

“Papa has connections. This one isn’t even available to the public yet.”

“Are you kidding?” Luciana took a pitcher of iced tea garnished with lemons from the beverage cart on the patio and placed it on the glass table. “That’s amazing.”

“I could reach out to his contact and probably get you something here by next week.”

“Yes!” She bit her lip when she looked at Romero. “A Versace that no one has even seen.”

Romero nodded. “Whatever you want.”

Gio pulled out a chair for me, and then sat next to me. I inched my chair closer to him and rested my palm on his lap. He glanced down at my hand and then into my eyes. His weren't as soft as a few minutes ago when we were in the sitting room. He was mad again.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

“I didn't say you could go to the club.”

“I wasn't aware I needed your permission.” I looked in the direction of Romero and Luciana who were busy talking to the men who delivered lunch. “I already told you I won't be your prisoner.”

“And I told you, you're my responsibility.”

“I'm going to the club.”

“I just hope you don't make either one of us regret it.”

I can't make any promises...

CHAPTER

Five

Gio

I HAD my irresistible sister-in-law to thank for this unplanned evening at the club. I didn't mind having the most alluring woman on my arm, but it was the reality of knowing she wasn't mine to claim. I would have a difficult time separating my feelings of desire for her and knowing she was my responsibility.

When Cin came down the stairs in the dress she was so enthusiastic to wear tonight, I lost my focus. That was dangerous. It was far more revealing than I would have liked but she looked amazing in the low-cut, short, backless, fuchsia dress with the spaghetti straps.

I had to back off several guys with a fierce glare and a subtle placement of my hand over my concealed gun to get them to stop staring at her as we walked through the club. She stayed close to me, keeping me aware of how much I liked her flesh against mine.

"Wow." She gazed around the packed club. "This is so cool."

"Do you remember the rules?" I brought her close to me so we didn't have to scream over the music.

"The rules we just went over in the car?" She rolled her eyes. "How could I forget them?"

"What are they?"

“Don’t talk to strangers,” she said in a deep voice that I guess was supposed to mimic me. “Don’t leave your side. Don’t drink that much.”

“Don’t drink at all. You’re not legal.”

“I can drink in my country.” She placed her hand on her hip. “You’ve had bottles of wine with me under the stars, remember?”

I did remember and that was most of the problem. I wanted to get back to a simpler time between the two of us. When I could be the man she thought I was and not the ruthless one who agreed to protect her while her father made arrangements to marry her off to a stranger.

“What country are you in now?” I asked. “You only got into a club because you’re with me.”

“I can’t dance or have any kind of fun either.” She exaggerated a dramatic sigh. “Can we find Lu?”

“She’s over there.” I pointed to the private area that was reserved for me and Romero and our selected guests. “Let’s go.”

Conti stayed by my side as Leo and Alberto followed behind. We had enough security tonight that I was comfortable letting the two guards Janero sent with his daughter look after her when I couldn’t. Leo took his job seriously, but Alberto seemed more into Cinzia than I would have liked. How could he protect her if he was too busy sizing up her ass?

“I need to speak to the bar manager,” I said as Cinzia waved to Luciana.

“I’ll be over there not having any fun.” She kissed my cheek as she let go of my hand. “Come on, Alberto.” She hooked her arm in his and hurried him over to Lu.

Once they reached Lu, she separated herself from Alberto, but he stayed close to her.

“What’s got you so pissed?” Romero joined me and handed me a vodka.

“What?”

“You look mad.”

“That guy pays too much attention to Cin.” I sipped the expensive alcohol. “I don’t like it.”

“Isn’t that his job?” Romero laughed. “To pay attention to her?”

“I don’t see Jag standing that close to Lu,” I said. “He still protects her.”

“He knows I would kill him if he got too close to her.”

“That’s my point.”

“It shouldn’t be your point.”

“Why not?”

“Do I really have to explain it?” Romero finished his drink. “Luciana is my wife. Cin doesn’t belong to you.”

“I’m still supposed to protect her.”

“But it shouldn’t be your concern if her guard has a hard-on for her. Fuck, most of the guys in this place have one for her. She’s fresh meat around here. They all want a piece. You just have to keep her safe and make sure she doesn’t do anything stupid.”

“That’s easier said than done.” I slung back my vodka, remembering how she looked in her pink underwear this morning. “We need another round.”

I followed Romero to the private bar and held up two fingers. The bartender nodded and quickly granted my request by placing two more drinks in front of us.

“How are things going between the two of you?” Romero tossed a hundred-dollar bill on the bar for the service. “It seemed a little tense at lunch today.”

“We’re finding our way.”

“What’s that mean?”

“She wants me to kiss her.”

“So, kiss her.”

“She wants me to really kiss her.” I glanced over at her, taking in her beauty as she took charge of the conversation. Whatever she was saying, the whole table hung on her every word.

“She’s hot, so I wouldn’t blame you for indulging a bit. I mean, if it were me, and I’m saying if I wasn’t married and not totally and completely in love with my wife, I would partake.”

“Weren’t you the one who said I couldn’t sleep with her? Would you have agreed to marry Lu if she wasn’t a virgin?” If I slept with Cin, all bets would be off for Janero and I’d be a dead man. “Do you want Janero to kill me?”

“I didn’t say you had to fuck her, but you could play with her. No one would have to know as long as you didn’t pop anything.”

“I’m not having this conversation with you.”

“Fine.” He held up his drink. “You’re the one who said she wanted you to kiss her, so I’m sure she’d be open to you satisfying some of her needs.”

“And what about me?”

“What? She could help you out too.”

“I’m not talking about that, you asshole.” There were plenty of women who would do that for me, and I was free to fuck them without getting myself killed. “I’m saying maybe I can’t get attached that way.”

“Why not?”

“Because then I couldn’t watch her marry someone else.”

“I knew you had feelings for her.” He slammed his hand on the bar. “Luciana and I saw it as soon as Cinzia walked into the house. I gave you the benefit of the doubt and told my wife you could separate your feelings for her and do your job.”

“I can.”

“Then why are you being such a pussy over a kiss that hasn’t even happened?”

“Fuck you.” I finished my drink. “I’m not kissing her.”

“Well, now that that’s settled.” Romero laughed. “I’m going to go kiss my wife.”

“I’m glad you think this is one fucking big joke.” I followed him toward the table. “Where’s Cin?”

“Hello to you too, Gio.” Lu reached for my hand, so I leaned down and kissed her cheek.

“My brother and I were just discussing his desire to kiss Cinzia,” Romero said as I gazed around the bar, trying to find her. “You were right, he likes her.”

“She’s very pretty and so funny.” Lu took a sip of her drink. “She thinks Gio is uptight, but I told her that couldn’t be further from the truth.”

“Where is she?” I asked, ignoring Lu’s statement.

“She went to the ladies’ room.” Lu motioned across the dance floor.

“Alone?” I told her not to go anywhere alone. “Don’t women usually go together?”

“If I would have gone with her, Jag would have followed. Cinzia was already going with Alberto. We would have made a scene, and then every woman in this place would have flocked to you and Romero, because they would have thought you were fair game.”

“She has a point.” Romero downed his drink. “But maybe you should find someone to relieve your stress. I can look after Cin tonight.”

“No, thank you.” I looked at Leo. “Find them.”

He nodded and quickly took off in the direction of the bathroom.

“Gio.” Conti approached us. “I don’t think you’re going to like what’s going on over there.” He pointed to the edge of the dance floor. “Paulie got here a few minutes ago and intercepted Cinzia and asked her to dance. I didn’t want to make a scene, so I came to get you.”

“You did the right thing.” Romero stood. “Let’s get it taken care of quickly. I don’t want a fight to break out.” Romero motioned for a few guys to go with us. “The rest of you stay with Luciana.” Romero looked at Jag. “If anything happens to my wife while I’m gone, I’ll kill you.”

“I won’t leave her side,” Jag said.

“It’s always an interesting night at the club.” Lu sighed.

“I’ll be right back, baby.” Romero kissed the top of her head. “Behave.”

I didn’t wait for Romero as I hurried to where Cin was bumping and grinding against Paulie. Her pert breasts swelled out of the top of her dress as the bottom rose up her thighs. One more booty pop and her ass would be on display for everyone who was already mesmerized by her.

In a sea of dark suits and black and gray dresses, she stood out as if a spotlight shone on her in that bright-colored dress. If I wasn’t so mad, I would have cut in and danced with her.

“I’ll take care of Santoro,” Romero said. “You handle Cinzia. Take her to the office if you want privacy, but make sure she understands that this can’t happen again. If Janero can’t trust us with his daughter, then he will never trust us with anything else.”

“Don’t worry.” I moved toward her and grabbed her arm.

She turned in my direction and smiled.

“There you are.” She placed her hand on my jaw as she moved to the music. “Dance with me.”

“What the fuck?” Paulie grabbed her arm and tugged her back to him. “You’re dancing with me.”

I guided Cin toward me, tucking her behind me before getting in Paulie’s face.

“Touch her again, mother fucker,” I shouted, “and it will be the last thing you do.”

“I got this.” Romero stepped between us. “Go take care of your shit.”

“Let’s go.” I tugged Cin off the dance floor as people snapped photos of us. This would be all over social media in three seconds. An attraction Romero was trying to avoid, because the last thing we needed were cops in our business. If they thought the atmosphere was hostile here, that would give them a reason to come in whenever they wanted.

“Where are we going?” She pulled on my arm, trying to stop me.

I ignored her, dragging her out of the club and down the hallway that led to mine and Romero’s office. Once we were inside, I shoved her into the room and locked the door behind me.

“How dare you?” she shouted. “I will not allow you to treat me this way.”

I loosened my tie and took it from my neck. When I came toward her she backed away, but I grabbed her and spun her to face the desk.

“What are you doing?” She tried to struggle out of my hold. “Stop!”

“Stay still or this will be so much worse for you.” I positioned her arms behind her back, and despite her efforts to get away from me, I secured her wrists with my tie.

“Untie me!”

“Princess, you’re about to find out what happens when you don’t follow the rules.” I wrapped my arm around her and kissed the back of her neck, inhaling her luscious scent. “Did you really think dancing with that worm would be in your best interest?”

“Who I dance with is none of your business.”

“You don’t think so?” I turned her to face me, holding her by her upper arms so she didn’t lose her balance. “Everything you do is my business.”

“Do you think my father would appreciate what you’re doing to me?”

“I haven’t even begun to do anything to you.” I reached into my pocket and took out my favorite blade. The one I carried in case of emergencies. “That’s about to change.” I deployed the silver blade and waved it in front of her face. “Do you want to argue with me now?”

“Gio.” Her voice was low as she focused on the knife. “Put that away.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I said. She flinched when I ran the tip of the knife along her collarbone, making sure I didn’t apply any pressure. “Stay still.”

“I’ll scream.”

“If you do, I’ll gag you, and you might not like how I go about doing that.” I gazed at her body. “Then again, maybe you will.”

She tensed when I trailed the blade to her shoulder and slid it under the spaghetti strap of her dress. With one swift flick of my wrist, I sliced the thin material. When she gasped, I knew I had her attention.

She swallowed hard enough for me to see the muscles in her neck move when I carefully drew the tip of the knife across her vulnerable throat and to the other strap.

“Don’t.” She pleaded with her wide eyes. “You’ve made your point.”

“I’m far from done.” I lifted her onto the desk and spread her legs apart. “You’re not going anywhere.”

CHAPTER

Six

Cinzia

THE DETERMINATION in Gio's gaze as he ran that blade across my neck and to the strap of the dress should have sent me running in the opposite direction, but it didn't. The chill that prickled along my skin wasn't fear when his knife cut the second strap and caused the dress to reveal my chest to him. An energy pulsed through me, an awareness that had longed to break free. One that I could only find with him.

Arousal.

I arched my back when he ran the tip of the knife between my breasts. My nipples hardened in response. Why was I responding this way? I shouldn't have liked this, but it was Gio. I would do anything to please him.

"You like this?" He traced the blade along my breast and around my nipple. "You're full of surprises."

"I'm not afraid of you." That wasn't entirely true. I trusted him, but one wrong move on either of our parts and I would regret it.

"Good." He circled the tip of the knife around my nipple, being careful not to apply any pressure. "I need you to trust that I have your best interests at heart. When I tell you to do something, or not to do it, I have my reasons."

"What if I don't like your reasons?"

“Do you like when I touch you?” He continued to torture my sensitive bud with the knife as he reached under my dress and swiped his fingers across my panties. “Are you wet?”

“Why don’t you see for yourself?” I wanted to appear bold and confident, but my heart pounded so fast I was afraid he could hear it.

I had very little experience in the sex department, but I had thought about an intimate moment between Gio and myself for as long as I could remember. My first, and probably only, sexual thoughts were of him. I had imagined more times than I could count what it would be like to be with him.

“You’re awfully brave.” He skimmed his fingers under the elastic that rested on my inner thigh and swiped them along my bare mound. “Smooth.” He smirked. “I like that.”

“I had a feeling you might.” I inched closer to him, gazing between my legs and then back into his eyes. I had read enough of those cheeky articles on how to please a man to know what they might like. “Touch me.”

When he pushed his fingers inside me, I clenched around him and scooted back on the desk, not prepared for the intrusion. He stopped for a moment, looking into my eyes.

I darted my gaze away from his, embarrassed that I had shown my inexperience.

“How about we start with one finger?” He slowly slipped his finger inside me, moving it in and out. “We’re playing a dangerous game,” he whispered against the corner of my mouth. “We shouldn’t be indulging in one another.”

“Says the man who is holding a knife against my chest.”

He set the knife on the desk without stopping his motion between my legs. I exhaled and closed my eyes, focusing on the rhythm his finger created inside me. In and out, swirling, going deeper. Over and over until the longing I had for him turned into a ticking time bomb. The sensation climbed until I was about ready to explode.

When his mouth ghosted mine, my eyes fluttered and my lips trembled. We were barely touching, but his breath swept

along my lips. I yanked against his tie that secured my wrists, but I couldn't break free. I wanted to run my fingers through his hair and force his lips to mine, but I was his prisoner. Not only in this situation but for as long as he was responsible for me, I would be at his mercy.

Before that realization had a chance to settle in, Gio pressed his lips to mine, giving me the one thing I had dreamed about since I was an awkward teenager. He kissed me, setting off a violent shudder that ripped through my body and combusted inside me.

I clenched around his finger as he forced his tongue inside my mouth, kissing me without hesitation or rules. He withdrew his finger from between my legs, rubbing the arousal on my inner thigh as I tried to catch my erratic breath.

"Is that what you wanted?" He ran his tongue along my lips. "Will you stop acting out now?"

I stared into his intense gaze, matching his fierceness, as I said, "Not on your life."

"Cin." He reached into the back of his waistband and took out his gun, setting it next to the knife on the desk. "I'll never be able to atone for tonight." He unbuckled his belt. "So, if I'm going to hell, I'm taking you with me."

"I'm not afraid of the fire."

"That is what concerns me."

He lifted me off the desk and spun me around, raising my ruined dress over my hips. I tensed when he pressed on the small of my back and forced my chest onto the smooth wood of the desk.

"Untie me."

"No." He rustled behind me, lowering his zipper. "I'm in charge."

"But I've never... I don't want to like this."

As aroused as I was to have Gio do these things to me, this wasn't how I envisioned my first time. I dreamt that he would be removing my designer wedding dress and making love to

me in a private Italian villa that overlooked the ocean. The sound of the waves would crash to the surf under a full moon. I'd be drunk on prosecco and him.

Sappy? Maybe. But I am a mafia princess.

“Relax.” He stepped closer to me, running his hand along my backside. “We’ll leave this on.” He tugged at my thong. “I have to retain some control.”

What is he doing?

“Oh.” I wiggled my hips when he pushed his very hard and very erect penis between my thighs. “You’re um...” He had lowered his pants and now the only thing that came between us was the thin silk of my thong. It left nothing to the imagination. As he rubbed against me, I realized my fantasies had not been imaginative enough.

“Cin.” His voice vibrated against my neck. “I want to fuck you.”

If he ripped my thong off me and shoved inside me, I wouldn't protest. His long, thick shaft moved between my legs, creating a delicious friction. When he gripped my backside and spread my cheeks apart, it caused my vagina to spread open, allowing his tip to enter me through the thong. All that stood in his way was a thin scrap of lace.

“Gio.” I arched my back and thrust into him, wanting to satisfy the tingling inside me. The air conditioning vent from above blasted cold air into us, intensifying the sensation. I didn't know if I was hot or cold, frustrated or satisfied, right or wrong. None of it mattered because I had the one man I had coveted for years. “Please.”

He reached around me, sliding his finger inside my panties and gliding it along my slit.

That helped! “Oh...” My legs trembled, threatening to buckle as I climaxed a second time. I twitched against the restraints as I squirmed under his touch.

“Bellissima.” He thrust one last time before a hot liquid streamed across my lower back and butt cheeks. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

I rested my face on the desk, coming down from my second Gio-induced orgasm of the night.

“Don’t move,” he said.

“Where would I go?”

He didn’t answer as his footsteps moved away from me. I heard a door open, and then he switched on a light in the distance. I assumed it was a bathroom when he turned on a sink. A few seconds later, he returned and wiped my back and butt with a warm, wet cloth. He dried me off with another towel before undoing the tie from my hands. Next, he gently tugged my dress over my hips and put it back into place.

He helped me stand as I stretched out my back before turning to face him. He took my wrists and placed soft kisses on the inside of them, and then gently rubbed the marks where the restraints had left indents on my skin.

I gazed into his eyes, confusion clouding my thoughts. When we came into this room he was furious with me. How did we end up doing what we had done? I glanced down at my exposed chest and rage filled me. When I looked back at him, he was grinning.

I tugged my hands from his hold and hauled my hand back, taking satisfaction in the loud smack that echoed throughout the dim, cold room when my palm connected with his cheek.

“What the fuck was that for?” He rubbed his face. “Are you out of your mind?”

“You ruined my dress!”

“Seriously?” His laughter infuriated me. “I restrained you, took a blade to your nipples, and came all over your ass. But you’re mad because I cut your dress?”

“Yes!” I shouted. “It’s a Versace.”

“I’ll buy you four more, but now you know what happens when you disrespect me.”

“I disrespected you?” I pulled my dress over my chest, trying to hold it in place. “How did I do that?”

“By dancing with that wanna-be mobster. Letting him rub against you and sweat all over you.”

“You’re exaggerating.” Paulie and I were on the dance floor for less than three minutes. He intercepted me on my way back from the bathroom. I figured if I danced with him, Gio would come and look for me. It worked.

“Am I?”

“Last time I checked, dancing with someone was not an invitation to marry them.”

“When you act like that, it could be construed as an invitation for other things.”

“You mean like when a man restrains you against your will and does nasty things to you.” I wasn’t complaining, but I thought I should act a bit offended.

“You liked those nasty things.”

I would hit him again if I thought he’d let me get away with it a second time.

“I specifically told you not to talk to strangers.”

“We weren’t talking, and he’s not a stranger. You introduced me, and he knows my father.”

“He knows *of* your father. He’s never met him. He’s nowhere near your father’s league, and he doesn’t have any business being around you.”

“Why not?”

“Because you are mafia royalty,” Gio said. “This isn’t your country. Some people don’t have the same respect for your father as they do in Italy. Men like Paulie don’t have any honor. That’s why he can’t join a respectable organization.”

“I don’t care about any of this. I don’t want to be involved in your business. I’ve had enough of it my whole life.”

“Then you need to pay attention.” He put his knife back in his pocket. “You are here to obey me.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I don’t care what you think.” He placed his gun back in the waistband of his pants. “You’re not on some vacation where you get to do whatever you want. You’re here because your father needs me to keep you safe and away from people like Paulie.”

“Isn’t that difficult to do in a place like this?”

“Exactly.” He took off his suit jacket and draped it over my shoulders. “Which is why you won’t be coming back here. From now on, you are confined to the penthouse.”

“I am not your prisoner.”

“I beg to differ.”

“I’ll call my father right now and tell him how you’re treating me. How do you think he’ll feel about what happened between us tonight?”

“Are you going to leave out the part where I made you come two times in ten minutes? Make sure to tell him how I drenched your pussy with my blade.”

“You’re vile.”

“That’s true.”

I thought by coming to America, I had found the freedom my father never gave me. I wanted a life with Gio, a world where I could be free to do what I wanted and go where I wanted. Gio couldn’t give me those things because he was cut from the same cloth as my father.

I had fallen in love with a lie. He wasn’t the man he portrayed himself to be when he was with me in Italy. That was a show for my father. He had been a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

The problem...I prefer the wolf.

CHAPTER

Seven

Gio

I DOWNED A BOTTLE OF WATER,

trying to get rid of my headache. I drank too much vodka after I sent Cinzia back to the penthouse last night. I worked out hard at my home gym this morning, so I was probably dehydrated. Getting very little sleep and trying to come to terms with what I had done in the office with her wasn't helping matters.

I secured my gun in the back of my pants and then put on my suit jacket.

"Where are you going?" Cinzia came down the steps in another pair of tiny shorts and a tank top. "It's so early."

"It's ten o'clock," I said. "Put some clothes on."

"No."

I wasn't going to win this battle. "Did you sleep well?" I asked.

"I'd sleep better if you were in the bed with me."

"That's not happening."

"Whatever." I found the way she pretended she wasn't mad kind of cute. Those sexy lips of hers pressed into a hard line as she rolled her eyes. "Are you going to work?"

"I'm going to Romero's," I said.

“Isn’t that work?”

“Yes.”

“I want to go shopping.”

“You can use my laptop. Buy whatever you want. I’ll leave my credit card on the desk.”

“I want to go shopping on Fifth Avenue.” She said, raising her voice. “I can shop online whenever I want.”

“Then today shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Gio?” She stepped toward me, straightening my tie. “You ruined my favorite dress. You owe me.”

“I said I would leave my card.” I ran my hands down her sides.

“I want you to take me shopping,” she demanded. “I want to try on dresses for you.”

“Another time.” I glanced at my watch. “I have to go now.”

“Will you be home for dinner?”

“I don’t think so.” I went to the club most nights to make sure everything was running smoothly. “Don’t wait up for me.”

“Why?”

“I have to go to the club.”

“I’ll meet you there.”

“Are you out of your mind? Do you not remember what happened last night?”

“I remember the good parts.” She ran her hand along my arm. “Take me with you.”

“No.” I threaded my fingers through her silky hair. “I’m sorry about your dress. We can go together this weekend and replace it.”

“I accept your apology.”

“Thank you.” Now maybe she would stop acting like such a brat. “I’ll be home later.”

“Can I have a kiss goodbye?”

I took the side of her face in my hand and tilted her head as I leaned down and brushed my lips along those forbidden lips. I went too far last night, and now I had to figure out how to come back from my misstep without hurting her.

“Gio.” Conti came into the room. “The car is ready.”

“I have to go.” I gently kissed her. “Have a good day.”

“I hope your credit card has a *grande* limit, because I’m about to exceed it.”

I couldn’t tell if she was teasing me or being spiteful as I left the penthouse. I had a feeling she was going to be an expensive houseguest.



Thirty minutes later, I sat in Romero’s study listening to the wrath of Don Malatesta over the phone.

“Why was my daughter dancing with Paulie Santoro? Weren’t you supposed to be with her?” he shouted. “Why do my people have to bring me pictures of her from the internet?”

“She was with me,” I said. “She went to the ladies’ room and I lost track of her.”

“Why would she go to the ladies’ room alone?” Malatesta mumbled something under his breath, but I spoke fluent Italian and understood his frustration.

“She didn’t go alone.” Romero held his hand up, indicating he would handle this conversation. “She was with one of the guards you sent her here with. We’re tightening up her security. We won’t have any more issues.”

“Gio.” Malatesta raised his voice. “My daughter is going through a phase. She has never given me any trouble before. She began exerting her independence shortly after you left this

summer. I thought she would get over whatever was going on with her. I sent her to you because I hoped you could rein her in and talk some sense into her. She likes you. She always spoke very highly of you.”

I pointed at Romero, stifling any snide comment he was about to make about my relationship with Cinzia.

“I’ll try,” I said. “She was under the impression that she was here for a visit and didn’t understand that she was supposed to listen to me.”

“I specifically told her she was to listen to you. That you were going to keep her safe while I dealt with business. If all goes well, I will secure her future and she can return home.”

“How are you going to do that?” I asked.

“Ah.” Romero shook his head. “What my brother meant to say was that he will protect Cinzia and make sure she understands she has to follow the rules and live as she does when she’s under your roof. It’s for her own good.”

I gave Romero the finger.

“I trust the both of you,” Malatesta said. “If what I have in the works pans out, it will be beneficial for all of us.”

“We understand.” Romero nodded.

“Good.” Malatesta lowered his tone. “My next shipment will be arriving at your club in a day or so. Is everything in order?”

“It’s handled.” We had been laundering money for him for a few months, and while Romero had initially wanted to keep Cantinos legitimate, the partnership with Janero proved to be quite lucrative. It was a good thing, because every five minutes I received a text from my credit card company alerting me to an online purchase being made. Cinzia had found an expensive way to occupy herself.

“I’ll be in touch,” Malatesta said. “Make sure my daughter’s picture stays off social media.”

“Yes, sir,” I said as Romero ended the call.

“It hasn’t even been forty-eight hours and you’re fucking this up royally.” Romero tossed his phone on his desk. “What were you thinking questioning him about his plans for his daughter?”

“I don’t like the idea of her being in an arranged marriage.” Cin was too vibrant and full of life to enter into a marriage her father set up for her. It would break her spirit if she married the wrong man.

“It’s not up to you.”

“No, but it should be up to Cinzia,” I said.

“She doesn’t have that luxury.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not the family she was born into. We didn’t get to choose our path either. It’s the same thing.”

“It isn’t.”

Our father was a ruthless mobster who ran the New York City family. Before he was assassinated, he was at the top of his game. Romero and I despised him. When he died, we fled to Italy to escape the life he had built for us. We didn’t want his throne or his territory. Janero took us under his wing and protected us. Years later, we returned to the states on our own terms, making our own way in this brutal business.

“We figured it out,” I reminded him. “We could have chosen a different path.”

“But we didn’t because we bleed this life. The same way Cinzia does. The same way Luciana does. She married me out of duty. We all have a cross to bear.”

“It’s fucked up.”

“You’re only saying that because you want her.” Romero stood from his desk. “You know the rules and the codes we’re bound by. Sometimes negotiations have to be made for the greater good of the family. Whatever Janero has in store for his daughter is his business. We have to support him if we want to stay his ally.”

“That’s easy for you to say. That shit deal you made with the Torrios was bad business, but it still worked out for you and Lu.” Luciana’s family sent her here to spy and report back to them. Romero married her because he thought it would be a solid business alliance. In the end, Luciana chose Romero, but it took a while for him to trust her. “What if Cin isn’t as lucky? What if she ends up with a man who hurts her the way Dad did to Mom?”

“Janeiro wouldn’t risk his daughter that way.”

“You don’t know that.”

“This is out of our hands,” he said. “But you know I’ll support you no matter what happens.”

“I appreciate that, but nothing is going to happen.”

“Did *nothing* happen at the club last night?” He smirked. “I noticed when Cinzia left she was a little disheveled. Her dress wasn’t intact either.”

“I may have taken it a step further than I had to.” That was an understatement. “But we’re on the same page now.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

“I’ll trust your judgment.” He took his gun from his desk and secured it in the back of his pants. “Let’s get to the club.”

“Do you think you’ll need me there all night?” I stood and stretched out my back.

“Why?” he asked.

“I should probably go home and have dinner with Cin. Maybe if I take a different approach, she will settle in faster and cause us less problems.”

“Or you just want to have dinner with her.”

“Can we go to the club?” I opened his study door. “Why are you so concerned about what I want and don’t want to do?”

“Because if you continue to act like a little bitch, you’re going to get us both killed.” He followed me down the hall. “Put her in her place or don’t, but make up your mind. Janero won’t tolerate any more fuck-ups when it comes to her.”



All seemed well at the club. It was the portion of the evening where things were calm. A few people sat at the bar, enjoying Happy Hour. The regulars wouldn’t start filtering in for a few more hours. Once the city filled with the club-goers, the line to get in would wrap around the building.

Most people came for the drinks and the music, but there were many others who came to get a glimpse of Romero and I. We tried to keep it low-key when we were here, only allowing the occasional selfie with us. Now that we were working with Janero, we didn’t want to alert the FEDS where they could find us every night. Although most of them knew. It helped having our half-brother Rocco, who was an attorney, get us out of jams that mostly amounted to harassment on the cops part and nothing more.

“I’m heading out,” I said. “Try to stay out of trouble.”

“I could say the same to you.” Romero handed the tablet back to the bar manager. “These numbers look good.”

“Gio.” Conti approached us.

“Is the car ready?” I asked.

“I was on my way to the garage to get it when I saw a potential problem,” Conti said.

“What is it?” Romero shook his head. “It’s too early for problems. I haven’t even had a drink yet.”

“Santoro is here,” Conti said. “He’s not alone.”

“Who is with him?” I tried to push back the rage, because I already knew the answer. I hadn’t had an alert from Cin’s shopping spree in hours. I thought she got bored with spending money, but had she found something else to occupy herself?

“You’re not going to like it.” Conti motioned toward the smaller bar at the other end of the club. “She’s with Alberto too.”

“Fuck!” I pushed past Conti and headed toward the bar.

“Gio.” Romero followed me. “We’re going to have to take him out back and send a message.”

“I know.”

Conti joined us. “He only has two of his men with him. I can have someone occupy them.”

“Get it done quickly,” I said. “What the hell is she thinking?”

“Look who it is.” Paulie held up his beer bottle. “The Bilotti brothers.”

Cin turned in her chair and smiled at us. “Caio, boys.”

She wore a strapless black dress that sat on her mid-thighs. Had she chosen no straps for a reason? Was she afraid I would cut this dress too? Her flawless skin glowed under the dim bar lights as her long, sexy hair cascaded down her back, stopping at her waist. The red lipstick on her plump lips matched her nails, and the dark eyeliner made her look older. If she wanted my attention, she had it.

“Paulie.” Romero grabbed his arm and yanked him off the barstool. “My brother and I need to have a word with you.”

“Get your hands off me.” Paulie looked around for his guys, but Conti had already taken care of them.

“What are you doing?” Cinzia asked. “He didn’t do anything.”

“We’ll talk about it when I get back.” I leaned down and whispered into her ear. “It’s not going to go like it did last night.”

“Gio?” She touched my shoulder. “I came to see you.”

“Alberto.” I motioned for him. “Do not leave her side. She stays right here until I get back.”

“He can’t tell me what to do,” Cinzia insisted. “Neither can you.”

“If you don’t stay put,” I said and pointed at Alberto, “he’s going to pay the price.”

“You’re a bully,” she shouted as I followed Romero, Conti, and an uncooperative Paulie through the back of the club and out to the alleyway where three of our security team waited for us.

“Conti,” I said. “Make sure Cinzia doesn’t leave this club.”

He nodded and went back inside.

“Obviously, there is a misunderstanding.” Paulie struggled against Romero’s hold.

“Possibly,” my brother said. “We’re going to clear things up so there are no more misunderstandings.”

“In case you didn’t figure it out last night...” When I placed my hand on the back of my waistband, Paulie’s gaze followed my movement. I needed to stay in control, and if I took my gun out, I might shoot him for the way he pawed her last night. “Cinzia doesn’t exist in your universe. Are we clear?”

“Are you kidding me?” Paulie laughed but quickly yelled out in pain when Romero twisted his arm. “Fuck!”

“I’ll break it in half,” Romero said. “This is no joke. Don Malatesta saw pictures of you dancing with her last night, and he wasn’t pleased.”

“Both times I was minding my business.” Beads of sweat covered his brow. “She wanted to dance with me last night. Tonight I was sitting at the bar alone when she approached me. If you don’t want her on another man’s radar, maybe you should keep better track of her, because she throws off all kinds of fuck-me vibes.”

Romero held Paulie still as I hauled my arm back and punched him in the face. Blood leaked from his nose when I went for the second hit.

When Romero threw Paulie to the ground, he held up his hands in defeat. “I don’t mean any disrespect. I’m just telling you she has an agenda. Maybe she’s trying to make you jealous. I don’t know, man.”

“Consider this your only warning,” I said. “You do not want the Bilotti family as your enemy.”

“Especially when you don’t have your own organization to stand behind.” Romero extended his hand for him, helped him up, and then shoved him in the direction of our men. “So there’s no more confusion in the future, it’s in your best interest to stay out of this club.”

“You’re making a mistake,” Paulie said. “I could be an asset.”

“We don’t need any more of those.” I looked at the guards. “Get him back to his guys and escort them out of here.”

“You’re making a mistake,” Paulie repeated. “I know things.”

When Romero and I entered the club, the rage that coursed through me after hitting Paulie hadn’t subsided. He may have been inappropriate, but Cinzia played a part in this too. If she had stayed home like I had asked her to, we wouldn’t be in this situation.

“Gio,” Romero said when we got to the bar where I had left Cin. “This can’t get worse.”

“I get it.”

“Do you?”

“What the fuck do you want from me?” I asked.

“I want you to get her under control or I will.” He stared at me with anger in his eyes. “None of us want that.”

CHAPTER

Eight

Cinzia

“I CAN'T SERVE you without Gio here,” the annoying bartender said. “I’ve told you this several times.”

“Let her have the drink.” Gio took a seat at the bar next to me and nodded to the server. “I’ll take my usual.”

“Of course, Mr. Bilotti,” he said.

“Where’s Conti and Alberto?” I looked over my shoulder. “They’ve been watching me like two hawks.”

“Alberto is off duty for the rest of the night. I don’t care what he’s doing. Conti is doing exactly what he’s supposed to be doing.”

“I told Alberto it was okay to take me here.” Alberto had been resistant, but when I turned on the charm, he agreed. “This isn’t his fault.”

“You don’t have to worry about Alberto.”

“Why not?”

“Because I said so.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“Do you really have to ask?”

“Then it’s a good thing I didn’t wear a dress with straps.”

He tapped his fingers on the bar, gazing straight ahead. “Thank you,” he said to the bartender who seemed less annoying now that he had a glass of white wine for me.

“How did your conversation with Paulie go?” I took a sip of my wine, trying to calm my nerves, because if his mean tone and tense facial muscles were any indication of the mood he was in, I was in trouble, and not the good kind.

“You don’t need to be concerned with that.” He pressed his glass to his lips, reminding me how much I liked when they were close to mine. “You do, however, need to be concerned with your future.”

“What do you mean?”

“I warned you to follow the rules.” He chugged his drink, finishing it in one quick motion before slamming the glass on the bar. The bartender quickly brought him another. “Now, what am I going to do with you?”

“I only came because I wanted to see you.”

“I had already told you that you wouldn’t be joining me tonight.”

“I don’t like the word *no*, and you keep saying it to me.” I took another sip of my wine. “I don’t want to sit in your penthouse alone and wait for you.”

“So, instead you disobey me and show up at my place of business and flirt with someone I told you to stay away from.” He finished his second vodka. “If you want to be with me, you have an odd way of showing it.”

“You are abusive.” I pushed the wine glass away from me. “I don’t care for the way you treat me.”

“I’m abusive? You’ve been nothing but a bitch to me since I left Italy.”

“That’s right!” I shouted. “You left Italy.”

“What?”

“You left me.” How dare he walk away from me and not even call or text for months. To make matters worse, when I

showed up here, he acted as if I meant nothing to him. I refuse to stand for this. “You didn’t even text me.”

“That’s what this is about?”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Don’t I mean anything to you?”

“We’re not discussing this here.” He got off the stool and took my elbow in his hand and tugged me to my feet. “You have no business being here. Dressed like this and flaunting everything for every man to see.”

“Why do you care?” I dug my heels into the floor, but he continued to pull me toward the exit. “It’s not as if you want what I have to offer.”

“So you’ll give it to someone else?”

“Maybe.”

“Fuck no!” He pushed me against the wall, holding my throat in his hand. “You have no idea of the things I’m willing to do for you.” He brought his mouth to mine. The scent of the alcohol on his breath lingered between us. “What I’d be willing to risk for you?”

“What does that mean?” Our lips touched as I spoke. “What do you have to risk?”

“Let’s go.” He released me from his hold and stepped away. “The car is waiting.”

“I’m not going with you until you tell me what you meant.”

If he needed to tell me something that concerned me, I wanted to know. He had been a different person than the one I had come to expect. Whatever he had to say, might solve that mystery.

“Don’t make a scene here.”

“Or else what?”

“I’ll make one for you.” He scooped me up, knocking the wind out of me when my ribs hit his shoulder. I dangled from him as he carried me to the car.

“Gio!” I smacked his back with my hand as my dress rode up my backside, exposing my underwear. “Put me down!”

People stared as he hurried me to the SUV. Conti opened the door, and then Gio bent down and tossed me into the backseat. He climbed in behind me, slamming the door with such force that the windows rattled.

“Who the hell do you think you are? You can’t treat me that way.”

“Not another fucking word better come out of your mouth.” He pointed at me. “You need to learn your place.”

“Culo!” I shouted as Conti pulled the car into the street. “You’re an ass.”

I turned and looked out the window, smoothing my hair with my hand and trying to gain my composure. Why did this barbaric man infuriate me? Why did I allow it?



I stormed into the penthouse and threw my wristlet on the sofa. We hadn’t spoken to one another the whole ride from the club. Gio ordered the guards to stay out of the penthouse before we got into the elevator. Two stood watch outside the door, but we were the only two inside.

“Go upstairs,” Gio said.

“No.” He was not going to dismiss me.

“No?” He took a bottle of vodka from the shelf in the corner of the room and set it on the coffee table. “I don’t want to see you right now.”

“Then you go upstairs.”

“This is my fucking house.” He tore off his jacket and slung it on the back of the sofa.

“I’m a guest, and you insisted I stay here, remember? I wanted to go to a hotel.”

“That was bullshit.” When he loosened his tie, a thrill coursed through me as I remembered what he did with it last night. “Your father told you that you would be staying with me. That scene at the airport was an act. You knew the terms before you stepped on that plane. You’ve been playing games since you arrived.”

“Whatever.” I leaned against the back of the sofa. “I’m positive my father would not appreciate the way you have been treating me.”

“Do you want to call him and find out?” He slid the tie off his neck and placed it on top of his jacket, and then undid the first few buttons on his shirt. His sexy chest tattoo caught my attention. “Why don’t we mention how you persuaded your guard to go against my wishes and leave the penthouse to explore the city without me looking the way you do. Should we send him a selfie?”

“My father doesn’t dictate what I wear.”

“I can.”

“In your dreams.”

“As a matter of fact, he’s given me permission to do whatever I want with you.”

“He would never do that.”

“He did.” Gio came closer to me, trapping me between him and the sofa. Although, was it really a trap if I wanted to be caught? “If you don’t want me to treat you harshly, then I suggest you reevaluate your attitude.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my attitude.”

“Are you sure?” He swiped the back of his hand down my throat. “Because from where I’m standing, it looks like you could use an attitude adjustment.”

“I could use so many things.” I slipped my hand inside his shirt and swirled my fingers along his chest. “Only things that you could give me.”

“Stop playing with me.” He moved his hand over my breasts, cupping one in his hand and squeezing it. “It’s dangerous.”

“I like danger.” I kissed the corner of his mouth. “I like you.”

“You don’t know anything about the danger I could unleash on you.” He bit my bottom lip, tugging on it as he gripped my breast even harder. “You can’t handle me.”

“You’re wrong.” I trailed my hand down his chest and along his sculpted stomach muscles. “I can handle whatever you give me.” I closed my eyes and let my bold side overshadow my fears when I rubbed my palm along his erection.

“Cin.” He breathed against my lips. “You’re playing with fire.”

“You don’t want this?” I gripped his rigid shaft in my hand. “You don’t want us?”

“No.”

“You’re a liar.” *Why is he fighting this?*

“You’re a fool.” He took my chin in his forceful grasp and kissed me hard, shoving his tongue inside my mouth and slowly and deliberately swirling it against mine. When he broke the kiss, he pushed me against the couch and stepped back. “Go upstairs. Don’t make me say it again.”

“Not without you.” I placed my hand on my hip. “I want to be with you.”

“That’s not happening.”

“Tell me why you’re struggling?” I inched closer to him and stroked his cheek. “You’re conflicted. Tell me why.”

“I need you to leave me alone.” He pressed his hand over mine and gazed into my eyes. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You’re not going to hurt me.”

“Cinzia, please,” he shouted. “Just do what I asked you to do.”

“No!” I felt the connection between us. We had already established the emotional part in Italy a few months ago, but now the physical chemistry was heating between us and he wanted to deny it. “There’s something between us. Why are you holding back?”

“Ignore it.” He removed my hand from his face. “Trust me, we can’t be together.”

“Why?”

“Because you can’t follow the rules!” He ran his hand through his hair. “You don’t even know what the rules are. You don’t know what you’re setting in motion. Please, forget about us.”

“Why are you so frustrating?” I yelled as I paced in front of him. “I’m not stupid. I felt something when you kissed me before you left Italy.”

“I was wrong to do that.”

“Don’t say that.” That was my first real kiss. It meant everything to me. “If you want to deny that the kiss meant anything, you can lie to yourself, but what about last night? That was nothing? We were in sync.”

“No.” He shook his head. “That got out of control. I should never have used you like that.”

“You didn’t use me.” I stopped pacing and stared into his eyes, searching for the truth. “You wanted to do that with me.”

“You’re not experienced enough to know what I wanted.” He clenched his fist by his side. “You frustrated me when you caused a scene. I reacted.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that our argument aroused me, and I took it too far. I used you to take my frustration out. That’s what I do. I fuck a woman when I need a release. It doesn’t mean anything. It meant nothing.”

No! The hurt his admission evoked in me was nothing compared to the anger and humiliation that pulsed inside me. Not even his gorgeous green eyes could stop the rage surging

through me. I raised my hand, fully intending to hit him with more force than I had the night before, but this time he was ready for me.

He caught my wrist in his tight hold and shoved me against the wall, knocking me into it hard enough to shake the pictures.

“Last night that slap was a freebie.” His tone was low and steady. “I wouldn’t raise my hand to you, so I don’t expect you to do it to me. If you do, there will be consequences.”

My chest tightened as I tried to take a deep breath, but I couldn’t seem to get enough air in my lungs. My legs trembled beneath me and a chill ran along my skin. I had never seen this side of Gio before.

“I’ve had enough.” He released me from his hold. “This isn’t going to work.”

I didn’t say anything as I tried to gain my composure. He swiped the bottle of vodka off the coffee table and headed for the stairs. I wanted to follow him, but there was a finality in his words when he said he’d had enough.

“We’re not doing this anymore.” He turned and looked over the banister. “I’m sending you to Romero. He can handle you.”

“I’ll behave,” I mumbled, but I was too tense to go after him. “I’ll listen to you.”

“Neither of us believe that.”

He finished his journey up the stairs and then shut his bedroom door, leaving me alone and afraid. Not afraid of who he was and what he was capable of—I could handle that. I was groomed to be a mafia companion. My fears ran much deeper than not being able to stand by his side. No, I was terrified to know the reasons why he didn’t want me there in the first place.

There was only one way to find out. No one walked away from me. I inhaled that elusive breath and exhaled as I slowly progressed to the steps to claim my future.

Gio Bilotti would not send me away. Not today.

CHAPTER

Nine

Gio

I DRANK straight from the vodka bottle, waiting for it to numb whatever these feelings were.

Rage, lust, disappointment, anger, happiness, frustration, arousal. She pulled it all out of me. Cinzia's ability to make me feel every emotion in a span of three minutes infuriated me. I wanted to push her away, but at the same time I couldn't stay away from her.

I have to stay away from her!

I set the vodka bottle down on the bathroom counter and then turned on the water for the shower. As I stripped out of my clothes, I tried to block her from my thoughts, but I couldn't. This was why she had to go stay with Romero and Luciana. Cinzia wouldn't act this way with them. There would be no reason for her to. She had feelings for me. Feelings that I couldn't reciprocate. I couldn't even tell her why. It was her father's place to inform her of a possible arranged marriage.

Fuck! I took another swig from the bottle before I walked into the doorless shower stall, immersing myself in the jets and allowing the steam of the water to engulf me.

I had never let the life I lived consume me with emotions. I rolled with the punches. I learned that at an early age. My father had been abusive toward my mother. Romero and I watched him beat her and break her. When she died, I was too

young to understand that it was at the hands of my father. I buried my feelings. My father and brother insisted on it. We were Bilotti men designed to rule an empire. We didn't show emotion unless it was rage, dominance, or control. So when my father was murdered in front of our home, I felt nothing. I was a Bilotti.

Things couldn't be any different with Cinzia, but I had to take things as they were. My feelings couldn't matter when it came to her, because I had no right to her.

I placed my hands on the tiled wall and let the hot water wash down my head and neck.

"Gio," she whispered from behind me.

I couldn't turn around, because if I did, she would be standing there naked and in my shower. In any other circumstance, I would have welcomed a hot, sexy, naked woman who was willing to give me everything but... *Ah fuck.*

"Gio, please look at me."

"I can't."

"Why?" She came up from behind me and touched my shoulder. "What have I done to make you so angry with me?"

"Didn't you just promise to behave?"

"This is me behaving."

The hot water did nothing to relax my tense muscles. Her presence only made things worse. It took all the control I had not to slam her against the wall and fuck some sense into her.

"I don't understand why you don't want me." She wrapped her hands around my chest and pressed her lips to my back. "I can be whoever you want me to be."

"You're perfect the way you are."

"Then why can't we be together?" She glided her hands down my stomach. "I've been waiting for you."

"Cin." I hissed when she swept her fingers along my now erect cock. So much for my self-control. "Don't..."

“Don’t do this?” She gripped my length and pumped me in her hand. “Doesn’t it feel good?”

“So fucking good.” I pressed my hands into the wall. “You have to stop tempting me.”

“You don’t want me to stop.” She picked up her tempo. “Any more than I want to stop.”

“I’m going to hell.”

“Take me with you.”

I turned to face her, taking in her wet, naked body. Her damp hair curled at the ends, and her mascara smudged underneath her eyes. Her breasts were round, full, and perky. I reached out and circled my finger around her nipple, lowering my gaze to the one place that would make me lose my mind.

She guided my hand from her breast and to her pussy, moaning when my fingers grazed her slit.

“I told you not to tempt me.”

“I don’t listen.” She draped her arms over my shoulders, initiating a deep and slow kiss as I pushed my fingers inside her. “Mmm.”

She wasn’t as tense as she was last night. We continued to kiss as the steam swirled around us. With each thrust of my fingers inside her hot, wet core she moaned louder. Clenching around my fingers, she hitched her leg over my hip and moved in sync with my hand.

“Why didn’t you listen to me?” I whispered into her ear. “There’s no going back now.”

“I don’t want to go back, Gio.” She gripped my shoulder. “I want to be yours and only yours.”

If only...

“Oh!” she screamed out when I curled my fingers inside her and rubbed her clit with my thumb. “Oh, *Dio!*” She slipped into her native tongue and cried out for a god who couldn’t save her now.

“No, not God.” I slowed my pace. “Try again.”

“Gio.” She closed any space between us and clung to me as she climaxed. “Only you.”

“Cin.” I withdrew my fingers and gripped her face between my hands, kissing her with a sense of possession. “You’re incredibly sexy.”

“I’m getting quite used to you making me feel so good.”

“It’s addictive.”

“Maybe I should...” She glanced down between us, taking my cock in her hand. “Make you feel good.”

“What did you have in mind?” I mean, if I was going to hell and all, I might as well make it worth it.

“Whatever you want.”

I ran my fingers across her sexy lips, pushing my thumb between them. She swirled her tongue before sucking my thumb into her mouth.

“Have you done that before?” I asked, preparing to be disappointed if she answered yes.

“No.” She released my thumb from her mouth. “I’ve only ever wanted to be with you.”

“Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes, but you might have to help me.” She kissed my neck, working her way down my chest and stomach before dropping to her knees. “I want to do this right.”

“I don’t think you could do it wrong.” If she knew how close I was to coming, she wouldn’t be worried at all.

She took me in her hand and leaned forward, gazing up at me through those big, innocent eyes. For all her boldness and sassy words, she was afraid.

“All that confidence was an act, wasn’t it?”

“Not all of it.”

“I admire the confidence you showed in going after what you want.”

“I want you.” She twirled her tongue around the head of my shaft.

“Fuck.” I grasped her chin and shifted my hips toward her mouth, but she tensed. “Relax, you can do this.”

She swallowed around me before finding her rhythm. I tried not to be impatient, but the sight of her on her knees, pleasing me with that smart mouth, was too much to manage. I thrust faster and harder, making her work for what she wanted.

“Hmm...” she hummed around me, keeping up with my demand.

I twisted my free hand in her wet, tangled locks, tugging on them. She slammed her hands on my thighs to hold herself in place.

“Cin...” My feral moan echoed off the tile walls as the water cascaded over us. “I can’t...” There wasn’t time for me to finish my thought, because within a second my lust took over and my arousal spilled out of me in a violent shudder and flowed into her mouth.

When she looked up at me with shock in her expression, I released her hair.

“What?” I smiled. “Where did you think I was going to do it?” I trailed my finger along her jaw and pushed on her bottom lip, making her open her mouth so she could lose what she held in there.

My come dripped from her mouth and onto the stall floor, swirling down the drain.

“Next time, you’re going to swallow that.”

“I told you I’m learning.”

“I’m a really good teacher.” I extended my hand for her and helped her into a standing position. “That was fantastic.”

“Really?” She rested her hands on my shoulders.

“Really.” I tilted her chin and gently kissed her. “We better get out of this shower.”

“Did you know the one in the main bedroom is double the size of this one?”

“I do.”

“Can we take one in there next time?”

“Already thinking of next time?”

“There will be a next time, right?” The uncertainty in her eyes was enough to crack my stone exterior. “Are you done fighting?”

“No.”

“What?” She let out a frustrated breath. “After what we just did?”

“Listen to me.” I wrapped my arms around her waist. “There is more at play here than you’ll ever understand. Don’t ask me questions I can’t answer right now. There’s a lot to consider.”

“Like what?”

“Didn’t I say not to ask me questions?”

“I’m not very obedient.”

“We have to work on that.”

“As if.” She rolled her eyes, and I liked her fire.

“When I say I’m fighting, I no longer mean against us.” I kissed her, igniting a slow burn that had to be extinguished tonight if I wanted to move forward with a clear head. “I’m going to start fighting for us.”

“Against who?”

“No questions.” I kissed her harder than before. “You’re going to have to trust me.”

“As long as we’re together, I’ll trust you.”

“You have to trust me always.” I held her against me, kissing the top of her head. “I’ll keep you safe, but you can’t pull any more stunts.”

“I’ll try.”



After I persuaded Cin to sleep in her own room because I didn't trust myself to sleep in the same bed with her, I went to my room and called Romero.

"Hey," he answered.

"Can you talk?"

"Yeah, I'm on my way home from the club. What's up?"

"We have to find a way to get Janero out of the turf war he is in without him having to sacrifice Cin."

"Fuck, Gio. How are we going to do that?"

"If I knew, I would tell you, but I can't stand by and watch her be sold off that way."

"Does she know that's what her father is planning to do?"

"No." She would be on the first flight back to Italy, trying to convince her father not to use her that way, and that would only make him angry. He didn't like to be told what to do, especially not when it came to his business.

"Did you already taint his bargaining chip?"

I didn't answer.

"Gio, did you fuck her?"

"No." *We're getting closer.*

"Let's keep it that way until we can come up with a solution."

Maybe that's the solution. If I took her innocence, I took away Janero's bargaining chip.

"You'll help me?" I asked.

"I'm your brother. I stand by you the same as you would me."

"Thank you."

“But I promise that I will not allow you to get killed over this.”

“I’m doing this for her.” *Am I trying to convince my brother or myself?* “She has the right to choose who she ends up with. Not her father.”

“She’s already chosen you, so that makes all of this a little easier.” He sighed. “You’re absolutely sure she’s worth making a possible enemy out of Janero? Because if we can’t come up with a way to secure his territory, we’re going to have to defy him. Will she stand by you then?”

“I can’t answer that.” I closed my eyes. “I want her.”

“Then let’s go to war.”

CHAPTER

Ten

Cinzia

“GIO!” I shouted throughout the penthouse. “Gio Bilotti!”

How could he have done this? This was my fault. Not Alberto’s.

“Why are you yelling?” Gio came toward me from the kitchen. “What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong?” I clasped my hands together, fighting the urge to slap him. “You fired Alberto.”

“I’m rearranging your security team. I’d say I’m justified, wouldn’t you?”

“You had no right to do that.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I have every right to protect you how I see fit.” His voice was so matter-of-fact. I hated the business he and my father were in. “I’ll play checkers with you if you’re that upset.”

“Don’t dismiss me,” I said. Why were things always so contentious between us? Why did we have to fight about everything?

“I’m not dismissing you, but I don’t have to give you a play-by-play of everything I do.”

“This isn’t a...*scherzo*. I mean, what’s the word?”

“Joke?”

“Yes!” Sometimes, when I was mad or upset, I slipped back into Italian and I forgot the English word.

“You’re right, your safety is not a joke. Alberto violated my trust and put you in danger. What did you think I would do? What would your father have done if someone jeopardized your safety?”

“You’re not my father.”

“I’m here in his place.”

“That’s weird.”

“Stop making my job so difficult.”

“Alberto was only listening to me when I asked him to take me to you.” I waved my hands in the air as I often did when I got upset. “He was only following my orders.”

“He should have known better. He follows my orders, not yours.” Gio sat on the sofa. “You can’t have a guard you can manipulate. You need one who won’t give into your emotions or cater to your whims, because that could get you killed. I’m assigning someone who won’t get attached to you. Who will put your safety first.”

“So you fired Alberto?”

“I didn’t fire him. I sent him back to your father. It’s up to him if Alberto stays employed.”

“You know what my father’s going to do.”

“That’s not my problem. Alberto had one chance with me, and he screwed up. I’m not taking any other chances when it comes to protecting you.”

“Why didn’t you discuss this with me first?”

“Because it didn’t concern you,” he replied.

“How could it not concern me? I’m the one being guarded.”

“Security is my job.” He looked at his phone. “This discussion is over.”

The hell it is.

“Pay attention to me!” I grabbed his phone and tossed it on the coffee table.

“Watch it.” He didn’t raise his voice, but the look in his eyes was enough to make me rethink my approach. “I will not tolerate your disrespect.”

“I’m tired of guards, safety, and not being able to do what I want when I want to. Do you have any idea what it’s like living like a prisoner?”

“Princess, you have a pretty good life.” He sneered. “Do you know how many women would trade places with you and your Versace dresses?”

“Yes, I have money and material items, but what kind of life do I have?” I had lived under lock and key most of my life. Never making lasting relationships unless it was with one of my guards or a housekeeper. “How can you say I have a good life when you grew up in the same environment? Secrets, lies, betrayals. Always knowing there is something you should know, but no one will tell you what it is.”

“It is what it is,” he said. Why was he being so dismissive? “Don’t question it.”

“I thought by coming here it would be different. You would be different.”

When my father told me he was sending me to Gio, I believed it was because he wanted us together, but from the moment I got here, Gio acted as if I was an obligation. A job he was doing for my father. I wanted more with him.

“I’m trying to make that happen.” He reached for me and pulled me into his lap. “You have to stop making it difficult for me. I can’t do what has to be done if you’re fighting me all the time. It’s exhausting.”

“What is difficult?” I straddled his lap, causing my dress to hitch over my thighs. “Why are there so many secrets?”

“It won’t always be this way, but you have to...” He didn’t finish his sentence, but he didn’t have to.

“Trust you?”

“Yes.” He took my hips in his hands. “That’s the only way we’re going to get to be together.”

“But we are together.” I rocked into him. “We could have more if you stop being so stubborn.”

“We will.”

“When?” I brushed my lips along his. “Now?”

“No.” Despite his reservations, he kissed me. It was soft and slow. His mouth heated me in places that tingled. He tangled his fingers in my hair and yanked my head to the side, pushing his tongue deep into my mouth and making me moan.

“I want you to be my first.” I arched my back, moving my crotch against his growing erection. “Now, Gio, please.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“You’re not mine to take.”

“I told you I want to. I don’t understand. I want to be the woman you need. Tell me what I have to do to be her.”

“You are her, but it’s complicated.”

“Do you want me?”

“Yes.” He kissed me again, tugging on my hair. “More than I’ve ever wanted another woman.”

“I’m an adult, Gio. I know what I want.” Why did I have to explain this? “There’s nothing complicated about two adults wanting to be together. You don’t have to ask my father for his permission to take what I’m offering you.”

“There are complications when it comes to us.” He released my hair from his hold. “Complications you can’t possibly understand, but I am working on them.”

“I can’t accept that.”

“You have to.” He shooed me off his lap and then got up. “No more questions.”

“I have plenty of questions.”

“Cin.” He sighed. “I can’t do this.”

“Okay.” I got up and joined him by the windows, taking his hand in mine as we looked down at the bustling city. “How about we compromise?”

“I might be able to do that.” He gazed into my eyes. “If what you request is reasonable.”

“Can we go to dinner?” I motioned out the window to all that was going on in front of us. “Not to the club. Someplace where it can be just the two of us on a date like we did when you were in Italy. We laughed and talked for hours. I want that back.”

“I do too.”

“I won’t ask any questions about why we can’t be together.” At least not tonight. I’d give him a few days to work out whatever he thought needed to be done before we could move forward.

“I’ll take you to dinner.”

None of this sat well with me, but I couldn’t force him to tell me. Getting him frustrated would only work against me and could get me sent to live with Romero. If that happened, I would never make any progress with Gio.

“I do have one request,” I said because I was greedy.

“What is it?”

“Kiss me.”

“That’s an easy request.” He took my face between his hands and brought my mouth to his.

Once our lips connected, sparks exploded inside me. Every time we kissed, I wanted more. I had been restless the past few nights, knowing how he had made me feel with his fingers. What could he do with his tongue? His...

I shuddered against him, causing him to break the kiss.

He looked down at me with curiosity in his expression.

“I have another request.”

“I’m afraid to ask.”

“If I behave at dinner, follow all your rules, and don’t ask any questions, can we take a shower together when we get back?”

“We’ll see how the night goes.” He winked. “But I have a feeling I’ll feel quite dirty after dinner.”



An hour later, we were in the lobby waiting for Conti to bring the SUV around for us to go to dinner. The usual groups of people stood in awe as Gio and his men walked through the lobby. It amazed me how bold some of these observers were. In my country, when my father and his associates walked through a crowded room or on a busy street, people looked down at their feet and didn’t dare take their phones out to get a picture.

“Do they wait here all day hoping to catch a glimpse?”

“Some of them do. Others are just lucky and happen to be in the lobby when I come through. You should see when I’m with Romero. They go crazy with the two of us. Like we’re some kind of royalty.”

“You are.”

“We’re criminals,” he whispered. “We’re supposed to keep a low profile.”

“I don’t think you know how to do that.” I laughed as one of the team held the door open for us. “You’re too showy.”

“And you’re not?” He looked me over. “Could that dress have any more sparkles on it?”

“What? I like sparkly things.”

“You look beautiful with or without sparkles.” He kissed my temple, and a warmth settled in my soul. *Are we a couple?*
“Let’s go.”

As he took my hand and led me down the steps to the waiting car, I had a brief moment of intuition. It was difficult to explain, but something big was on the horizon between us. Almost as if something had shifted and we could move forward.

“Get down!” someone screamed as a car screeched down the street.

“Cin!” Gio shoved me down and pushed me toward the side of the steps.

So much for my intuition.

I couldn't process what was happening until the snap of a loud bang lit up the street. *Firecrackers?* Gio drew his gun and pointed at the car that had stopped in front of the building. His security team ducked behind Gio's SUV and took aim at the car. It was then that I realized the pops were not firecrackers.

Conti yelled for Gio to take cover. The loud noise rattled through the crowded street. People screamed and ran away as gunfire was exchanged.

I tried to stand, but Gio turned and shoved me back down before three more shots were fired. He fell to the ground, inches from me, but I was too afraid to move. He was still. Too still.

“Gio,” I whispered. “Gio!”

CHAPTER

Eleven

Gio

WHEN THE CHAOS broke out my only mission was to get Cinzia to safety. As frantic people scurried away, I tried to assess the situation. The bullets came from a gray sedan parked directly in front of the penthouse. The windows were tinted, so I couldn't get an identification on the two shooters. One in the front passenger seat and the other in the back.

"Gio!" Conti yelled. "Get down."

I didn't want to take my eyes off the shooters, but I could feel Cinzia moving behind me. I turned and pushed her back into the corner by the steps of the building. A bullet blew by my ear, catching me off guard. I lost my footing and fell to the ground. I stayed still as my men took aim at the car. Several more rounds were fired before I got my bearings.

"Gio," Cin's soft voice called to me. "Gio."

I stayed low, making my way to her, and shielding her with my body.

"Thank God." She held me tight. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, but we have to get inside."

"No." She tensed against me. "We'll get shot."

"Trust me, remember?" I turned and gazed into her eyes. "I won't let anything happen to you."

“Gio.” Conti stood in front of us, covering me so I could get us back into the building. I tugged Cin up by her hand and then pointed my gun at the car.

“Run!” I told her before getting off two shots, shattering the back passenger window.

She yanked my hand, taking me up the steps with her. I opened the door and hurried her inside, shoving my gun in the back of my pants so that the horrified and frightened people in the lobby didn’t think I was a threat. I didn’t need anyone to confidently identify me as one of the shooters.

“The shooting has stopped.” I gazed out the doors. “The car took off.”

“Why were they shooting at you?”

“I don’t know.” Business had been quiet, and things were running according to schedule. Now that Romero and I had come to somewhat of a truce with Luciana’s family, we weren’t constantly dealing with threats.

“Does it have something to do with Papa?”

“I doubt it.”

“Gio,” Conti said. “We got the plates.”

“This was a botched and sloppy job.” I shook my head. “If I was the target, why didn’t they hit me?”

“Thank God they didn’t.” Conti pushed the button on the elevator as sirens sounded in the distance. “You have to get upstairs before the police get here.”

“Call Romero.” I ushered Cinzia onto the elevator. “He’ll get Rocco or Santino to handle the police.”

When we stepped into the elevator, Cin’s grip on my hand hadn’t eased up.

“Hey.” I held her close to me as the doors shut. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” She glanced down at herself, noticeably shivering. “I banged my knee, but I’m fine.”

“Sorry about your knee, but that’s not what I meant.”

“I guess I’m okay.” She took a deep breath and slowly let it out. “You’d think I’d be freaking out or something, but it doesn’t seem that foreign to me.”

“Because you grew up in this world.” As much as her father shielded her from the violence, she was aware of what went on around her.

“I’ve never been shot at before.”

“I have.” I shrugged. “Many times.”

“You need to find another line of work.”

“It’s too late for that.” When the doors opened, I guided her toward the penthouse. “We’re going to find out who did this.”

“Who are Rocco and Santino?”

When we reached my door, she trembled against my side. Her initial shock wore off and now she could process what had happened. I needed to prepare myself for a possible freak-out.

“My attorneys.” I opened the door and led her inside. “Well, Rocco is also my brother.”

“The one you recently found out you had?”

“Yes.” I took my suit jacket off and removed my gun from my waistband and set it on the foyer table.

“Tell me about that.”

“Why?” I took her hands in mine. “You’re freezing.”

“I’m not as used to being shot at as you are.” She rocked back and forth. “I need a distraction. Talk to me so I don’t lose it.”

I let go of her hands and walked to the gas fireplace and switched it on. I poured two glasses of vodka from the bar and brought them over to her. “Here.” I handed her one. “Drink this.”

She took a sip and then crinkled her adorable nose. “Can’t I have a glass of wine?” She tried to hand the glass back to me.

“I don’t like this.”

“Drink it,” I said.

“You’re so bossy.”

“It will steady your nerves.” I guided her to the sofa. “Sit with me.”

I finished my drink and set it on the coffee table before sitting down and pulling her into my lap.

“You have two?” She rested her head on my chest. “Brothers.”

“It took some getting used to, especially because Rocco was raised by the Torrios, a rival family, but we’ve grown to trust him. It was strange at first because it’s always been me and Romero, but I like having another brother.”

My father had an affair after Romero was born and before I came along, so that gave me another older brother. It was an adjustment, even more so for Romero, but Rocco was our brother in every sense of the word.

“It helps that he’s a lawyer too. For situations like tonight,” I said. “The cops like to harass us.”

“You really do get shot at a lot, huh?”

“Well, the last time we did, Romero was actually hit.” For as long as I lived, I would never forget that day. “It scared the shit out of me. The thought of losing my brother showed me a reality I knew existed but I didn’t want to believe it.” I brushed the hair from her face. “I felt that way again tonight.”

“Why?” She had stopped shaking during our conversation. Maybe she did need the distraction?

“Because I thought I could lose you.” I stroked her hair. “I don’t know if I could have lived with that pain.”

“I didn’t realize I meant that much to you.” She handed me her glass. “I’m done with this.”

I quickly finished what was left in her glass and then placed it next to my empty one.

“We’ve been friends for a long time,” I said. “We spent a lot of time together. Why would you think you didn’t mean anything to me?”

“I didn’t say *anything*.” She twisted in my lap, straddling me so we faced one another. “It’s just that we haven’t really been the way we used to be since I got here.”

“No, we haven’t.” I took her face in my hand, regretting how these past few days had gone. “That’s my fault.”

“I don’t want us to be distant.” She leaned into my lips, sweeping hers against mine. “I could have lost you tonight too.”

“You didn’t.”

“But if I did and we never...” She gazed down. “I can’t lose you.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“But you’re still not ready to tell me why you don’t want me.”

“I want you.” I tilted her face toward mine. “More than I’ve ever wanted anyone.”

“Show me.” She leaned into my mouth. “I don’t want to wait.”

“Cin.” I dropped my gaze to her lips. “I don’t want to wait either but...”

“No.” She pressed her mouth to mine, kissing me slowly, taking her time to torture me with the slow swirl of her tongue against mine. As she kissed me, I released her face from my hold and gripped her hips, steadying them. “Let me.”

She reached for the buttons on my shirt but I grabbed her hands.

“Why?” She kissed me again.

Romero barged into the penthouse. “Gio!”

“That’s why.” I gave her a quick hug before lifting her off my lap. I knew Romero would be here once he found out what

happened.

She huffed in frustration as I stood to meet Romero, Luciana, and Rocco.

“Hey.” I cleared my throat. “It’s been a fucking night.”

“Are you okay?” Romero hugged me. “You fucking scared me.”

“I’m fine.” I winked at Lu. “What are you doing here, beauty?”

“I needed to see for myself that you were alright.” She hugged me hard. “We need you.”

“Not a scratch on me.” I released her. “I’m good.”

“Gio.” Rocco placed his hand on my shoulder. “We’re going to find out who did this. Santino is downstairs handling the cops.”

“Thank you,” I said. “It’s nice having an attorney in the family.”

“It would be nicer if my little brother didn’t get killed five minutes after I found out he was my little brother,” Rocco said.

“It’s been more than five minutes.” I shrugged. “But I appreciate it.”

“The only person who is going to get killed is the scum who took a shot at Gio and Cin.” Romero motioned for Cin to join us. “How are you?”

“I’m okay.” She took my hand. “Gio was amazing.”

“You’re bleeding.” Luciana looked at Cin.

“Oh, I scraped my knee,” Cinzia replied. She pushed the hair from her face. “It’s nothing.”

“I didn’t realize you were bleeding.” I glanced at Romero. “I pushed her out of the way and she fell when the shooting started.”

“Lu,” Romero said. “Can you take her upstairs and clean her up?”

“Of course.” Luciana smiled at Cinzia. “Come on.”

“That’s not necessary.” Cin looked at me. “I want to stay with you.”

“We won’t be long.” Lu placed her hand on Cin’s shoulder. “I’m sure the guys need to have a conversation.”

“Go with Lu,” I said. “I’ll be up later.”

Cin didn’t move, but when I leaned down and kissed her cheek, she softened her stance.

“I’ll figure all of this out,” I whispered into her ear. “I promise.”

She nodded, lingering by my side for a moment longer before going upstairs with Luciana.

“You and Don Malatesta’s daughter?” Rocco asked. “I didn’t see that coming.”

“Why not?” I went to the bar and poured three vodkas.

“Word in Italy is her father is negotiating her future,” Rocco said. “I thought you knew that.”

“He does.” Romero took a glass from me. “He’s either too stupid or too crazy to leave her alone. I haven’t figured out which one yet.”

“It sounds complicated,” Rocco said.

I ignored this conversation because I couldn’t deal with Cin’s pending future right now, and I changed the subject by asking, “Who took a shot at me?”

“It’s one of Santoro’s people,” Romero said.

“Why does he even have people?” Rocco sipped his vodka as he took a seat on the couch. “He’s a nobody.”

“He has made a few friends,” Romero said. “We have to figure out who would go against us for him.”

“Conti said they got a plate.” I sat on the edge of the coffee table, facing my two brothers. “This was a botched job.”

“I don’t think they wanted to kill you,” Rocco said. “If they wanted to, they could have used automatic weapons. This

was a warning.”

“A warning for what?” I set my glass down on the table. “What are they trying to tell me?”

“There’s been some tension at the club with you and Paulie Santoro. This seems a little extreme for him to go after you over a woman he just met a few days ago, especially when he knows you have the backing of Malatesta.” Rocco wrapped his fingers around his glass. “Let me do some digging.”

“It feels off,” Romero said. “I don’t like this.”

“We should have capped him when we had the chance.” Why hadn’t I taken care of him already? “He could have killed Cin with a stray bullet. This is personal.”

Rocco and Romero stared at me with concern in their eyes.

“What?” I raised my hand. “How would you feel if someone took a shot at you with Lu standing next to you?”

“I would have shot them in the fucking head,” Romero shouted his frustration over me almost getting killed. “End of story.”

“I tried.” The windows were tinted, and it all happened so fast. “Maybe I did hit one of them.”

“Gio,” Rocco said. “How serious is this thing with you and the Don’s daughter?”

“It started before she got here, but I thought we were just teasing one another. I didn’t think... Well, it’s more serious than I thought.”

Rocco glanced at Romero.

“I’m not going to watch her marry someone she doesn’t want to marry.” I shrugged. “I’m not going to let her walk into that situation.”

“It’s not your choice,” Romero yelled. “You can’t tell Malatesta he can’t have his daughter back.”

“You said you would support me,” I reminded him.

“Well, now we have another problem. We need to protect you from whoever is trying to kill you.” Romero got up and poured himself another glass of vodka. “You’re going to have to go underground.”

“Seriously?” I shook my head. “Since when do we hide?”

“If it were just you, I’d say let’s draw them out and handle our shit, but you have to consider Cin.” Romero set the bottle on the table. “Malatesta is going to freak out when word gets out that she was shot at.”

“He has to hear it from one of you,” Rocco said. “If you really feel that strongly for her, and if you want there to be any possibility that you can be together, you have to fix this.”

“Rocco’s right,” Romero said. “I’ll handle Malatesta. You take care of Cin.”

“Is a safe house really necessary?” I asked.

“Malatesta is going to lose his shit when he finds out what happened. If you want to keep his trust, you’re going to have to prove you’re doing everything you can to keep her safe,” Rocco said. “Even then, he might not believe you.”

Romero and I may have been around the block a few times when it came to dealing with the cartel, but Rocco was more experienced when it came to the politics of the mafia families. Romero and I cut ourselves off and branched out on our own after our father died. Rocco was used to negotiating and navigating life as a mobster.

Rocco may have been at a crossroad when it came to understanding that he was biologically a Bilotti, but the Torrios raised him well. Antonio Torrio was heartless and feared by all of the families. Rocco was an asset Romero and I couldn’t deny. Rocco had Bilotti blood running through his veins, but he was created for this world because of the family he grew up with. That made him a threat most didn’t want to make an enemy of. Plus, he was smart and calculated with his fancy law degree.

“I trust Rocco,” I said.

“Good, because you’re going to do exactly what he says.” Romero finished his drink. “And you better make sure that little mafia princess of yours understands how important it is for her to listen to you.”

“I have her under control,” I said.

“Yeah, she just doesn’t know it.” Romero shook his head. “I told you not to fall for her.”

“Fuck off.” I ran my fingers through my hair. “Find out for sure who came at me tonight.”

“I will,” Romero said.

“They’re going to pay.”

CHAPTER

Twelve

Cinzia

I GAZED out at the afternoon autumn sun as it filled the sky with a positive energy. I needed all the light as I listened to my father for the third time today.

“Cinzia,” he said, raising his voice on the other end of the line. “Are you listening?”

“Yes, Papa, but I don’t know how many times I can tell you I’m fine before you believe me.”

“You were shot at.”

“I survived.”

“Stop acting as if it wasn’t a big deal. No one ever tried to shoot you under my watch.”

“I’m your daughter. I grew up this way. I’m not afraid of what happened last night.” That was the truth. “When the shooting started, I was scared, but then I remembered the guards and Gio were there to protect me.”

“It never should have happened.” He sighed. “I trusted Gio would keep you safe.”

“He did keep me safe. He did everything he could to make sure nothing bad happened to me.” Gio had been protective and brave. He never once lost his cool. “He got me to safety and even took a few shots at the people who were responsible for this.”

My father cursed in Italian.

“We’re in a safe place. His brother Rocco took us to a secure location.”

“Gio almost got you killed.” This time my father was angrier than the last two times I had spoken to him today. The reality of what had happened last night must have settled in and now he didn’t sound as sympathetic toward Gio as he had earlier today. “He will answer for that.”

“This wasn’t his fault, but I think it was mine.”

“I saw the pictures of you and that man at the club,” my father said. “What were you thinking?”

“I don’t know. I wanted Gio to pay attention to me and I acted out. I caused some trouble at his club and someone retaliated.”

Rocco and Gio discussed the possibility that Paulie may have been responsible for this botched attempt on Gio’s life when we were in the car on the way here. I pretended to be asleep, but I listened to their conversation.

“I’m extremely disappointed,” my father said. “You know better than to provoke a man.”

“I didn’t know it would cause this kind of trouble.”

“I want you to come home.”

“No.” I couldn’t leave Gio, but if I appeared too eager, my father would only demand I return to Italy. “I mean, it isn’t safe, right? You’re having issues with your business and Gio is having trouble here. Isn’t it better if I stay in this secure location and out of sight?”

“For now.”

I released the tense breath I held when I thought he would send for me. Appealing to his fears about my safety was a low blow, but I knew it would work. Whatever tactics kept me with Gio, I would use to my full advantage.

“As soon as tensions burn out, I will have you brought home.”

No rush.

“I have something planned for you. Something that will take your mind off what you think you want in the states.”

“What is it?”

“I’m finalizing the details but you, my little girl, serve an important purpose when it comes to restoring peace and keeping my reign secure.”

“What does that mean?” I asked. He had never involved me in his business before.

“Soon enough you’ll know. You are very valuable to me. You can help this family.”

“I would do anything you ask.”

Maybe if I was agreeable to what he needed from me, he would understand that I loved Gio and I wanted to be with him. Gio could have a place in my father’s organization and we could be together.

“I’m counting on your help.”

“Just don’t take what happened with the shooting out on Gio,” I said. “He is taking really good care of me.”

“Doesn’t look that way from where I’m standing.”

“Papa?”

“I can’t make any promises, but I have to go now. Don’t cause any more trouble for the Bilotti brothers. As angry as I am at them for putting you in danger, I don’t want them to get killed.”

“Neither do I.”

“Be good. I love you, sweet girl.”

“I love you too.” I ended the call and tossed the phone on the bed.

That was an odd conversation. What could I do for my father that would help my family? I didn’t want to think about it now. I checked myself in the mirror, smoothing out my hair

and focusing on the cute pink dress that looked awesome without a bra.

“Hmm...” I smirked. “Since I’m already not wearing a bra...” I reached under my dress and tugged down my lace thong and tossed it on the floor in the corner of the room. “I’m not going to need that.”

As I headed down the long hallway, my heart raced with anticipation. Whatever my father had planned for me gave me a feeling of urgency when it came to me and Gio. We had already wasted enough time. Either one of us could have been killed last night. Today, I was all about seizing the moment.

When I reached Gio’s room, I found him standing in front of the windows that overlooked a pond with a pretty fountain shooting out from it. His shirtless back was to me, boasting taut muscles and a tattoo of a smoking gun sprawled across his flesh. He had on a pair of faded blue jeans and his feet were bare.

“Hey.” I entered the room. “What are you up to?”

“Just thinking.”

When he turned to face me, I took in his tall, lean, muscular form covered in various symbols. I couldn’t help my gawking as my gaze traveled down to his unbuttoned jeans. A patch of black hair peeked out from above his zipper.

“About what?” I swallowed hard, trying not to let my dry throat trigger a cough.

“Last night.”

“That was crazy.”

“It shouldn’t have happened,” he said. “Romero and I are at peace with the other families. Business is going smoothly. It was so random.”

“Was it?” I stepped toward him, embracing the tingling between my legs. “I overheard Rocco’s theory last night.”

“I knew you were awake.” He took my chin in his firm grip. “What am I going to do with you?”

“I have a few ideas.” I traced my hands along his chest. “Do you want to hear them?”

“I don’t feel much like talking.” He lifted me up, and I wrapped my legs around his hips. “I have a few of my own ideas.”

“Show me.”

When he bit the corner of his bottom lip, my ovaries may have exploded. My nipples hardened as his lips grazed mine. He squeezed my backside in his strong grasp as he walked me over to the bed. I shifted my pelvis into the rough material of his jeans. When his erection rubbed against me, I squeaked.

He plopped me onto the bed and then took my face between his hands.

“I can’t stop thinking about what happened last night.” He roughly kissed my lips. “It could have ended in disaster.”

“But it didn’t.” I got up on my knees. “We’re okay, and we’re together.”

“I want to be with you.” His mouth said the words but the conflict in his eyes left me unsettled.

“Then be with me.” I removed his hands from my face and placed them on my breasts. “Do whatever you want with me, Gio. I’m yours.”

“But you’re not.” He kissed me again, and this time his mouth was rough and unforgiving. His stubble scratched my jaw while he fondled my breasts.

“You have to stop struggling.” I ran my fingers down his chest. “We both want this.”

“Just because we want it, doesn’t mean I should take it.”

“What does that mean?” I pushed against his chest. “I’m tired of all these cryptic conversations.”

“What are you talking about?” He sat down next to me. “What conversations?”

“What does it matter?” Why was he killing the mood? “You said you didn’t want to talk.”

“I changed my mind.” He turned my face and stared into my eyes. “You were on the phone with your father. What did he say?”

“A lot of nothing. Just like you.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “I’m tired of the men in my life acting as if they know what’s best for me. Let me make my own decisions. When will you be straight with me?”

“What did your father say that upset you?”

“It’s more like what he didn’t say.” I thought for a moment. “And your behavior is in sync with his. Every time we get close to being together, you back off and say it isn’t the right time or I’m not yours to take. I told you my mind’s made up, so if you have my consent, you must be under the impression that it’s my father’s permission you need.”

“Cin, we’re not having this conversation.” He got up and paced the bedroom. “I’m sorry I keep confusing you. I want nothing more than to be with you.”

“So you say.” I raised my hands in the air. “Your body says one thing, but then you turn it around. My father said that I could do something to help my family. That I was a valuable asset. Do you know what he meant?”

Gio’s jaw tightened as he shook his head.

“What are you not telling me?” I got up and blocked him from pacing. “What has he planned for me? Why did he say it would take my mind off you?”

“Because it will. You’ll have no choice but to forget me.”

“I will never forget you.” I pressed my palm to his cheek. “I want you to come back to Italy with me so we can be together. My father might be upset with you now, but once he calms down, he’ll see that you have feelings for me. He wants me to be happy. He’ll let us be together.”

“No.”

“Why are you giving up so easily? I would know if you weren’t attracted to me or didn’t want to be with me. This is

something else. If you know what my father is planning for me, you have to tell me. I deserve to know.”

“There is something you need to know. It will explain why I’ve been so apprehensive. Why I can’t give in to my desire.” He pulled me close to him. “If you were anyone else, I would have given in to this temptation, but because I know what’s at stake, I can’t do it.”

“What’s at stake? Just tell me.” My patience grew thin. I came in here to have sex with Gio. I wanted to give myself to him in every way and make him understand that I would be his forever. I could be the woman he needed by his side. “What don’t I know?”

“Cin.” He pressed his lips to mine. “If I could find a way to stop this, I would.”

“Stop what?” I whispered as my stomach churned with anxiety. “What do you mean?”

I didn’t like the way he looked at me. The darkness in his expression spewed vibes of desperation and forced a hopelessness from within me.

“Tell me, Gio,” I pleaded. “So I can fight this with you.”

“You would, my fearless princess.” He twisted his finger in my hair. “You would go to battle without knowing the consequences.”

“For you, I would do whatever it takes.” I kissed him, unleashing more than desire for him. In that kiss, I wanted him to feel all of the fight I had inside me. “That’s how much I want you.”

“I want you just as much, and I’m doing everything in my power to have you, but maybe I do need your help.”

“I’ll do anything for us.”

“I know what your father is going to ask you to do, and it infuriates me.” He tightened his hold on my hair. “Not just because I already consider you mine, but because as possessive as I know I will be with you, I will always give you a choice. Your father doesn’t have that same respect for you.”

“What do you mean? I know he can be merciless and do what it takes to protect me, but he sent me to you for a reason. He trusts you, that’s why I know when I tell him I want to be with you, he’ll understand.”

“Cin, he’s negotiating with another family in Italy.”

“I don’t get involved in his business dealings. What would these negotiations have to do with me? With us?”

“In order to save his territory and to make him an even stronger threat, he’s arranging for you to marry one of the Calabrese sons.”

“What?” The churning in my stomach forced the bile to scorch my throat. “No.”

“You are being offered up in an arranged marriage.”

CHAPTER

Thirteen

Gio

FUCK! I hated to tell her the truth about what her father had planned for her, but what choice did I have?

“That can’t be right,” Cin said. “You’re wrong.”

“I’m not.”

“You knew? This is what you’ve been hiding from me, why you said we can’t be together?”

“I suspected that was how he planned to get out of the impending mob war. He needs more territory, and if he joins forces with the Calabrese family, he’ll have a strong alliance. If you marry one of the sons, your father will unite two formidable families.”

“What about your family? He knows my heart belongs to you.”

“For him, this isn’t about your heart.” I had to be harsh to get her to understand the dilemma we were in. “The Bilotti family can’t help him save his territory in Italy. We can only strengthen the connection in the states, giving him power in both countries.”

“I won’t do it.” She sat on the bed and crossed her arms over her chest in an act of defiance. It was cute, but it wasn’t going to be effective when it came to her father and his arrangement.

“If this is truly what he’s planning, you won’t have a choice.”

“That’s *merda*, I’m a strong, independent woman.”

“It is pretty shitty, but you’re also a woman who always listens to her father. He has no reason to believe you won’t obey him this time.”

“No! There has to be a way out of this.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Why would you go against my father and help me? You know the consequences.”

“The risk is worth it.” I dropped down in front of her and rested my hands on her thighs. “I respect your father, and I know that in his business we have to make sacrifices. I don’t want to betray him, but I won’t watch you marry a man who knows nothing about you. A man you don’t want to marry.”

“Thank you.” She set her hands on top of mine. “I have wanted you for a long time. It started out as a school girl’s crush, but it’s so much more now. I acted out when I arrived here because I thought you weren’t interested in me.”

“I’m very interested in you, but I’m trying to keep the peace and make everyone happy.”

“You can’t make everyone happy.”

“I know.”

“We need to focus on us.”

“I’m going to get you out of this.” There had to be a way to free her of her father’s plans for her, and keep myself alive in the process.

“What is your plan?”

“Romero, Rocco, and I are running some options.”

“How much time do we have?”

“If the tensions are as high in Italy as we think they are, your father has probably set this deal in motion.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” She traced her thumb along my bottom lip. “Why would you push me away?”

“I didn’t do a very good job of pushing you away.” All I could think about was the night in the office at the club, and then again in the shower. “I want you, sweetheart, but I can’t do that to you. Not until we know I can get you out of this.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” She lowered her head, seeking out my lips. “Do you think I’ll leave you for this archaic arranged marriage?”

“No.” I twisted my fingers in the ends of her hair. “I’m afraid I’ll start a war to keep you from that arranged marriage.”

“We have to be together.”

“There’s something else.” I held the side of her face in my hand. “I’m not afraid you’re going to leave me, but if you are going to go through with what your father asks of you, I can’t be the one who takes your virginity.”

“Do you hear yourself?” She pushed my hand away and got off the bed. “It’s not up to you or my father who gets that. It certainly isn’t up to this man I’ve never met. How dare any of you think I would go through with such a horrible arrangement. As if I would give myself to a stranger.”

“Lu did it, and it worked out well for her.” *What am I saying?*

“Good for Lu, but I don’t want to marry a man I don’t know.” She headed for the door. “And if you think that about me, you’re not the man I thought you were.”

“Cin.” I chased after her, grabbed her arm and spun her around. “Don’t walk away from me.”

“Why?” She straightened her posture, displaying that fierce courage of hers.

“Because I want you with me, but I will give you a choice.”

“What is it?”

“Do you want to be mine?”

“I know who I’m destined to be with. I’ve known for years, Gio. You are my heart and soul.”

“That’s all I wanted to hear.” I tugged her to me and kissed her lips, pushing her against the wall. “As soon as you stepped off that plane and into my view, I knew I had to have you.”

“Now that I understand why you’ve been pushing me away, I’m relieved.” She rubbed her hand along my stomach and chest.

“You are?”

“I’m not happy, but it’s not because you don’t want me.”

“It was never that.” I kissed her neck. “I want you.”

“It’s your loyalty to my father that stopped you. “ She gripped my sides. “That should be rewarded.”

“What you’re suggesting could get me killed.” I pushed the straps of her dress down her shoulders as I kissed her throat. “But I don’t care. You’re worth it. If making love to you is the last thing I do on this earth, I’ll die happy.”

“No one is dying, and I’m not going to let anyone dictate who I can and can’t be with.”

“You’re very brave.”

“I want to stay loyal to my father too, but I will not be with another man. I won’t be sold off to a stranger.”

“I won’t let that happen.” I lifted her up and carried her over to the bed. “I promise.”

“I know how we can guarantee that I don’t have to marry him.”

“How?” I placed her on the center of the bed and climbed in next to her.

“If you take away the most important detail of the contract, what good would I be in an arranged marriage deal?”

She was right. No man who entered into an arrangement to take a wife for power and control, would want what another

man had touched. I rolled on top of her. “Tell me what you’re saying so I know you understand.”

“I’m saying you should make love to me.” She wrapped her legs around my waist. “What man who accepts a deal to get his wife would want a bride who isn’t pure?”

“If we do this, it makes you mine. It seals our fate. It sets off consequences that we won’t be able to stop. The consequences could be catastrophic.”

“You are my fate.” She tightened her hold on my hips with her legs, pushing me a little closer to insanity.

“I’ll be betraying your father.”

“He’s betraying me.” She took my hand and slid it under her dress. “Let’s not mention him any more tonight.”

“I can do that.” I pushed her onto the bed and settled in next to her. “I want you.”

“I’m yours.” She turned her head and kissed me. “Right now.”

“Always.” I moved my hand up her skirt as we kissed, pausing when I reached her bare skin. “Cin?”

“Hmm...” she hummed against my lips.

“Where are your panties?”

“I took them off before I came in here.”

“Why?” I smirked.

“Because I was determined to get what I wanted.” She sat up and tugged her dress over her head, revealing her glorious body to me. “And I wasn’t leaving until I got it.”

I admired her tenacity and boldness. I gazed over her flawlessly naked body, taking in her smooth, olive-colored skin and subtle, sexy curves. This offering was a gift I intended to savor for hours.

“You’re not leaving at all.” I lowered her onto the bed again, kissing her neck and breasts, working my lips down her stomach. “I’m never letting you go.”

When I dropped to the floor between her legs, she spread them apart, granting me access to her glistening pussy. I gripped her hips and yanked her toward my face, breathing in the scent of her arousal. Tasting her was a privilege. I dipped my tongue inside her hot folds, swirling it along her clit.

“Gio.” She rocked her head from side to side.

I flattened my tongue against her folds, licking as I pushed my fingers inside her heat, stretching her and getting her ready for what was to come. She lifted her leg, resting it on my shoulder, causing my fingers to disappear inside her. After a few moments, I removed my finger and tossed her other calf over my other shoulder so I could please her with my mouth and tongue. I moved her pelvis in time with my thrusts, creating a slickness that would serve me well in a few minutes.

She clawed the comforter beneath her as her legs tensed along the sides of my neck. I squeezed her ass cheeks as I licked and fucked her with my tongue. She writhed against me, moaning and arching her back. I tilted my hips forward, rubbing my cock against the bed, trying to find relief. But there was only one way to relieve the building sensation pulsing inside my balls.

“Gio,” she moaned. “I...”

I slipped my hand between her legs as I moved from between them, keeping a slow pace inside her with my fingers as she climaxed. I lowered my zipper and tugged my jeans down my hips.

She lifted up on her forearms, staring at me with a lustful gaze. Her pink nipples were stiff, and her skin glowed with the beauty of a goddess waiting for her god to satisfy her every need. I removed my jeans and then came toward her. Placing my hand on the side of her face, I looked into her eyes, searching for any apprehension. True to form, she was as determined as ever as she reached for me and covered her body with mine.

“I was going to ask if you’re sure.” I kissed her. “But I already know the answer.”

“This is all I’ve ever dreamed of.” She ran her hands along my back. “Don’t make me wait any longer.”

“I don’t want to wait, but I’m not prepared for this.” I motioned between us. “I don’t have a condom.”

I usually kept one in my wallet, but with all the commotion of the past few days, that was the last thing on my mind. I didn’t think I’d be taking things this far with her.

“You don’t need one.” She hitched her leg over my hip. “I’ve got it under control.”

“Of course you do.”

“Make love to me, my Gio.”

“Relax for me.” I kissed her throat, moving my lips to her breasts as I lifted her other leg and hooked it over my waist. “I’ll try not to hurt you.”

I had popped a few cherries in my time, but this was different. This was Cinzia. A girl who I watched grow into a gorgeous woman. A strong, courageous woman who was more determined than anyone I had ever met. She was brave, bold, and absolutely stunning. What she offered me could cost her everything, but she didn’t back down.

“Take a deep breath,” I said, reaching between us.

She did as I requested, allowing me to press my tip to her slit. She tensed and squeezed against my shoulder. When I pushed my pelvis forward, she tightened her hold around my legs. Her tight muscles forced me out, but I stood my ground, thrusting fast until I was inside her. She gripped my hips between the tight hold of her legs, but I was stronger.

“Do you want me to stop?” I asked.

“No,” she gritted out between her teeth. “Just do it.”

“You’re so tight.” I inched inside her hot core. “Oh, fuck...” I lost control of the slow pace and broke her barrier quicker than I had meant to.

“Gio,” she cried out.

“It’s okay, princess. I’m inside you now.”

“I know.” She gritted her teeth. “Why do you have to be so big?”

“Compliments will get you everywhere.” I thrust forward. “Close your eyes and focus on what I’m doing to you. How I make you feel.”

“Wet,” she moaned. “You make me wet.”

“A dirty talker. I like it.”

“You make my nipples tingle and my pussy pulse.” She clawed at my back. “You make me want to come all over your cock.”

“Fuck.” I kissed her. “If you keep that up, I’m going to come inside you right now.”

“Yes, that’s what I want.” She moved with me, making it easier to fuck her. “I need you to fill me with your seed.”

“Cin.” I sat back on my heels and pulled her into my lap. “I want you to feel all of me.”

“Yes.” She searched my eyes with a wild curiosity in hers. “Like this.” She pushed down on my shoulders and inched her way down my shaft.

“Like that.” I wrapped my arms around her, violently kissing her lips as I lifted my hips and slammed into her. I held her close, feeling her chest against mine as our lower bodies connected.

“Gio,” she whispered.

“Yes, baby.” I twisted my fingers in her hair as I thrust in and out of her. “Are you okay?”

“Mmm.” She ran her finger through my hair, opening her eyes and staring into mine. “This is the best I’ve ever been.” She licked her lips. “I’m yours.”

“Always.” I kissed her mouth, massaging my tongue against her as I rested her on the mattress, taking my time to move in and out of her. “Cin, I can’t...”

The warmth of her tight core clenching around me was too much to take. When she hitched her legs up and hooked them

over my back, I roared out my release, spurting my load deep inside her. As I climaxed, she grabbed my hips, thrashing beneath me with her own frantic orgasm.

“Stay inside me for a few minutes,” she whispered. “I want to feel what we did for as long as I can.”

“Whatever you want, my little Cin. My forbidden, reckless, irresistible Cin.”

When she dropped one leg onto the mattress, I stroked her inner thigh. As I gazed down at her, I took in her natural beauty. She wasn't wearing any makeup, her hair was a mess and sweaty from our intense activity. She shifted her hips, causing my cock to stir as she looked into my eyes. A wicked smile played on her lips.

“We're not done tonight, right?” She smirked.

“Not by a long shot.”

CHAPTER

Fourteen

Cinzia

IT HAD BEEN a week since we arrived at the safe house. There were no interruptions. Aside from the security team who kept their distance, it was just Gio and I getting to know one another.

“Hey.” He came into the bedroom, leaning down to kiss me. “Did you call your father today?”

“No.”

“You haven’t called him in a few days.” He sat and leaned against the headboard, motioning for me to sit between his legs. “He’s probably worried.”

“Has he called you?”

“Yes.”

“Is he angry with you?”

“Extremely.” He cuddled me in his arms. “Romero is handling him.”

“My father can’t be handled. We all know that.” I rested the back of my head on his chest. “I can’t talk to him right now. I’m too upset about this whole arranged marriage thing. If I speak to him, he’ll know I know. That could make him angrier than he already is. We don’t need that.”

“I’m going to get you out of that.”

“You better.” I was fully prepared to get myself out of it, but I hoped Gio could come up with a business plan to assist my father and stop this alliance with the Calabrese family. I wanted everything to work out for all of us. I wanted the true alliance to be between the Malatesta and Bilotti families.

“It’s a beautiful day,” Gio said. “The leaves are changing colors. I thought we could go on a hike through the trails and have a picnic? Switch it up a little?”

“That sounds nice.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Other than the fact that we’re hiding out, my father is selling me off to the highest bidder, and my life is completely on hold? Isn’t that enough?”

“Your life isn’t on hold.” He took my hand in his. “We’re going to get this sorted out.”

“When I came to America, I thought it was because you and I were going to be together.”

“We are together.”

“But I thought it was my father’s way of finally giving me some freedom to make my own choices. I thought he let me come here because he knew I wanted to be with you. That he accepted that I’m an adult. Perhaps a way of rewarding me for all of my loyalty.” I couldn’t have been more wrong. “I never expected him to arrange a marriage between me and a stranger.”

“You’ve sacrificed so much by being his daughter, haven’t you?”

“When I was younger, I didn’t realize the sacrifices I made for my family. It wasn’t until I was older and I realized that I wanted things. I wanted to go to college, I wanted friends, I wanted you.”

There were so many things I hadn’t experienced. Once my mother died, my father kept me in total isolation. My aunts said it was because he didn’t want to lose me too, but it was all about control. Any aspirations of me being free were

destroyed when he entered into this deal to marry me off. I refused to believe it was too late for me to have my own happily ever after. The one I made for myself. The one I had dreamed of since Gio first began teaching me English all those years ago.

“When I found out you were coming,” Gio said, “a part of me was thrilled at the possibilities of what could develop between us, but when I realized your dad sent you here because he was negotiating with the Calabrese family, I had to back off. I didn’t want to, and I’m not happy about the way I treated you, but I didn’t know what else to do.”

“You’re loyal to your family.”

“I’m loyal to your father too.”

“Even now?”

“I don’t accept what he’s doing to you. I’ll never accept him using you as a tool to save his territory, but if I can help him secure his business without sacrificing you then I will.”

“If you can’t?”

“What are you asking me?”

“Will you sacrifice me in the name of loyalty?” I turned to face him. “You won’t betray your brother. You’ll do what he asks of you.”

“He won’t ask me to give you up.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because we stand by one another no matter what.” He took my face between his hands, creating that delicious ache that formed between my legs when we were close. “That’s how we survive this brutal world. That’s how you and I have to survive. We have to stand by one another no matter the consequences. No matter what.”

“I can do that, Gio. I can face the consequences.” I climbed into his lap and straddled him. “As long as we’re together. As long as I know you’re on my side.”

“I’m always on your side.” He brought his lips to mine, barely touching them, but the charge of electricity that flowed between us was too powerful to ignore. “I’m going to make this right.”

“We’re going to make this right.” I leaned forward, pressing my mouth to his, seeking out his tongue with mine. “We could run away together.” I breathlessly spoke between kisses. “Just the two of us.”

“Shh.” He gripped my hips and rocked me into the erection straining against his jeans. “I want to fuck you right now.”

“Okay.” I raised my bottom, allowing him to glide my panties out from under my dress. I lifted his shirt over his head and tossed it on the floor, licking my lips when I gazed at his taut six-pack. “You’re really hot.”

“I’m glad you like what you see.”

“I have always liked this body.” I pressed my lips to the front of his shoulder. “I’ve always liked you.”

“Let’s take this off you.” He lifted my dress over my head, revealing my naked form to him. “What’s been the most arousing thing I’ve done to you since you came to America?” He trailed his fingers along my throat. “What can’t you stop thinking about?”

“Everything has been arousing.” It was hard to concentrate when he traced his finger around my nipple. “But if I had to pick one thing that I might like to explore a little further, it would be you tying me up like the night at the club when you used your tie.”

“I remember.”

“It was scary at first because I wasn’t sure how far you would take it.”

“How far did you want me to take it?” He caressed my skin with the tips of his fingers, setting off explosive charges. “Now that we’ve taken care of your first time, how far would you let me take it?”

“As far as you wanted.” I kissed him, touching his chest. “I might like relinquishing all the control to you. It would be sexy for you to take me while I’m tied up and at your mercy.” I was aroused just thinking about it. “You could do whatever you want to me.”

“Your trust in me drives me insane.” He glided his fingers along my inner thigh. “Knowing how far you’d let me go, opens up a world of sexual opportunities for us. There’s plenty I could show you.”

“Tie me up,” I whispered. “I want to start there.”

“Don’t move.”

I waited obediently as Gio went into the large walk-in closet across the room. My heart pounded in anticipation. He rummaged around for a few minutes before stepping out wearing nothing but his boxer briefs and holding two ties.

“You brought ties with you?”

“Well, I have to be prepared if I have to take a meeting or attend a funeral.” He climbed into the center of the king-sized bed with me. “You never know.”

“Spoken like a true gangster.” I held out my wrists. “I’m ready.”

“Your enthusiasm is inspiring.” He kissed me, taking his time exploring my mouth with his tongue. “Let me look at your pretty face because I won’t be seeing it for a little bit.”

“Why?”

“Get on your knees and face the headboard.” He nudged me to the top of the bed. “Let’s start here.”

He raised one of my arms, kissing from the back of my shoulder to my wrist, taking his time as he went. He wrapped the tie around my wrist a few times before securing it to the wrought iron headboard. He tugged my arm, making sure I couldn’t break free. It was tight but not enough to hurt me.

“Is that okay?” he asked.

“Yes.”

My breath caught in my throat when he took my other arm, kissing the length of it the same way he had the first one before stretching it up and securing it to the headboard. He took my hips in his hands and guided me up on my knees. Draping my hair to one side, he kissed the side of my neck as he cupped my breasts in his hands.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered into my ear.

“I always feel beautiful when I’m with you. I’m finally a woman.”

“You’ve been a woman in my eyes for quite some time.” He dragged his hand slowly down my stomach and between my legs. “It’s just more satisfying now that I know what it’s like to feel here.”

“Ah...” I closed my eyes and moved my hips in motion with his fingers. “You always know where to touch.”

“I like how vocal you are when I touch you.” He shifted his hips forward, allowing me to feel his erection against my backside. “You make my cock so hard when you tell me what you want.”

“Right now, it’s about what you want, my Gio.” I pushed against his length with my hips. “Take it.”

“You’re going to be the death of me.”

I couldn’t imagine ever being with anyone else. I would never let another man touch me, use my body for his pleasure, or let him please me. I saved myself for Gio. He was the only one who would ever have my mind, body, heart, and soul.

I looked over my shoulder when he moved away from me. I caught a glimpse of him just in time to see him remove his boxer briefs and free his impressive length.

“Mmm...” I moaned when he took my hips in his firm grasp and pushed his shaft along the crack of my backside. When he shifted his hips, his erection slipped between my legs and rubbed along my sex. As he thrust against my hot flesh, he slipped his fingers inside me and moved them in rhythm with his lower body.

I tugged on the restraints, shaking the headboard in my overstimulated state of mind.

“Oh, no, princess,” he murmured into my ear. “You’re at my mercy.”

“I want to have sex now.” I pushed my backside against him. “Please, untie me so I can touch you.”

“No.” He placed his hand on the small of my back, forcing me to arch my hips. “I want to fuck you like this.” He grabbed his erection and pushed inside me from behind.

“Ah!”

He caught me by the hip before I could plant my face into the headboard from the strength of him slamming into me.

“Oh, fuck, how could you possibly be tighter this way?”

“Because I’m made for you.”

“A perfect fit,” he replied.

My toes curled when he trailed his hand down my stomach and between my legs, taunting my clit as he pushed in and out of me.

“Harder,” I cried out, because I was almost there. The heat of our bodies created a steamy friction. His stiff shaft reached deep inside me until his balls slapped against my backside. After a few moments, he held me tight in his strong arms.

“I’m going to come,” he said breathlessly.

His words triggered my own chaotic and beautiful release as we simultaneously climaxed together. He continued to move inside me as I tumbled down from the high that only he could provide me. He kissed my shoulders as he untied each of my arms, rubbing my wrists and caressing where the ties had left indents. Once he freed me, I dropped down on my stomach.

“That was amazing.” I stretched my arms out as he massaged my back.

“You’re amazing.” He kissed between my shoulder blades, rubbing his stubble along my delicate flesh. “I never would

have thought you and I could be this fantastic together. It took me years to see you this way, but I'm glad I finally did."

"It was different for me. A teenage girl is allowed to have a crush on an older guy. That older guy can't be interested in that girl until she is legal." I sunk deeper into the bed. "Otherwise, it's creepy."

"So I'm off the hook for taking a minute to get it?"

"I can forgive you."

"That's very generous of you."

His magic hands soothed my tense muscles. "I'm going to fall asleep if you keep doing that," I murmured.

"Get your rest, because I intend on waking you up a few times throughout the night."

"Just like every other night."

"Are you complaining?"

"Never." I sighed. "I waited a long time for you, Gio Bilotti."

"I'm lucky you did."

"Hmm." I closed my eyes, slipping into a relaxed state. "I love you."

He stopped massaging me when I mumbled the words that I had said so many times in my mind. I didn't need to hear them back. Not tonight.

"Why did you stop?" I asked, truly letting him off the hook. "You have incredible hands."

"Sorry." He resumed his magic on my back and shoulders. "Thank you for getting me."

"Anytime, Gio."

CHAPTER

Fifteen

Gio

I STEPPED out onto the back patio, looking for Cinzia. She had gone for a walk around the property while I met with Conti to talk about security and possibly going back to the penthouse. Romero agreed that the threat had subsided for now. I could keep Cin safe and get back to business.

“She’s in the old stables.” Conti pointed to a red barn-like structure. “She goes there sometimes.”

“Thanks.” I walked across the property, gathering my thoughts. According to Romero, things seemed to have quieted down in Italy. Janero had united with the Calabrese family, which only meant one thing.

When I opened the barn doors, I found Cin lying on the ground, staring up at the ceiling, wearing a lacy white dress and a short denim jacket. She turned her head and smiled at me. There was a sparkle in her eyes that made me believe she was happy and secure when she was with me. I had to shatter that illusion because of the situation her father put her in. As much as I wanted to help her, I wasn’t sure I could pull it off in such a short amount of time.

“What are you doing?” I dropped down next to her. “I wouldn’t have thought you were the kind of girl who likes to roll in the hay.”

“If I’m doing the rolling with you, I am that kind of girl.” She sat up and kissed me. “I like it here. I imagine what it would be like to have horses.”

“I’m more of a city guy.”

“Maybe we can have a house like this one day. Out in the country with a pool and stables. We can raise a family.” When she placed her hand on her stomach, something inside me shifted. How could we plan a family when our future was so uncertain? “Someday.”

The hope in her eyes gutted me. Did she really want to carry my children? Would we have the opportunity to explore a future like that? I couldn’t think about that now. We had so much to deal with.

“Cin.” I took her hand. “We’re going to head back to the penthouse in a day or so.”

“What about the threat?”

“Rocco seems to have it under control. Paulie has been laying low. He knows Romero and I are coming for him. Whatever motivated him to go after me, proved to be a big mistake on his part.”

“Will we be safe at the penthouse?”

“Of course.” I picked a piece of hay out of her shiny, black locks. “There’s something else you need to know.”

“What?”

“It appears your father has struck a deal with the Calabrese family.” I opened and closed my fist, trying not to alert her to how keyed up I was over this situation. “They made their alliance known to the other families in Italy.”

“He gave me up in return?”

I nodded.

“No.” She shook her head. “I can’t marry a stranger. I can’t go back to Italy. Not after knowing what it’s like to be with you. We have to run.”

“We can’t do that.” I gripped her forearms, holding her steady. “Not yet.”

“What other options do we have?”

“My brothers and I are working on it.”

“You’re not working fast enough.” She got up and walked around the barn. “I can’t sit around and wait to be married off to a man I’ve never met. To a man who isn’t you!”

“Baby.” I got off the ground and then pulled her into an embrace. “I’m not going to let you marry another man. Your father will listen to reason once he realizes it isn’t what you want.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“We’ll run.”

“You’re not going to leave Romero.” She hugged me. “I wouldn’t expect you to.”

“It wouldn’t be forever.” I rubbed her back, knowing that I would do anything to protect her. “I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you with me.”

The wind kicked up outside as the barn doors shuddered against the frame. The autumn skies darkened as a light rain swept across the trees and onto the grass.

“It looks like we’re going to be stuck here until the storm passes.” She ran her finger along my jaw. “What should we do?”

“What else would we do?” I ran my hands up her thighs, lifting her dress. “Let’s get these off.” I tugged on her panties, gliding them down her legs. “That’s better.”

When I lifted her, she wrapped her legs around my waist as I walked us over to an old work table under a grimy window. At least no one would see us through there. After I set her down on it, she spread her legs, inviting me to step between them.

“I love how eager you are for me.” I unbuckled my belt. “How ready.”

“You’ve taught me more than how to speak English.” She pressed her toes against my cock, taunting me with the uncovered view between her legs. “I’m always ready for you.”

I unbuttoned my pants and lowered my zipper, reaching inside my boxers and grasping my length. “The storm isn’t the only thing raging.”

Moving toward her, I kissed her throat once I reached her. I trailed my hands up her ribcage and to her breasts, squeezing them and pushing them out of the top of her dress until I exposed her nipples.

“There are still so many things I want to do to you.” I swirled my tongue around her nipple before biting it.

“Ahh...” She squirmed. “I like when you’re rough.”

“I’ve noticed.”

I bit down again while I rolled and tweaked her other nipple. She bent her legs, bringing them closer to her body before dropping them on either side of her. I swiped my fingers along her slit, groaning when I found her arousal. I gazed down as she slithered her hand between her legs and dipped her fingers inside herself. She moved them around, coating them in her juices.

“That’s my job.” I gripped her wrist and brought her fingers to my lips. “Now I need a taste.” I sucked her wet fingers into my mouth, twirling my tongue around them. “Delicious.”

“I know where you can get more.”

“Are you asking me to fuck you with my tongue?”

“Just a kiss or two.” She licked her lips. “Then I want this inside me.” She grasped my dick, giving it a long, slow pull. “Don’t make me wait.”

“Never.” I kissed my way down her body, stopping when I got to her mound. Spreading her open with my fingers, I darted the tip of my tongue out and slowly circled it around her clit, giving her the kiss she requested.

“Gio.” She scratched at the wood beneath her. “Do that again.”

“I could kiss your pussy for hours.” As the rain pelted against the barn, a cool breeze swept over us. I indulged her with my tongue for a few minutes, but when her legs began to quiver, I knew she was close, and I wanted her to come while I was inside her.

I kissed her thighs while I took my cock in my grasp. When I stood, she scooted to the end of the table and hooked her legs around my hips. Inching close to her, I wrapped one arm around her waist and then guided my shaft inside her. Bracing my hands on the table, I propelled myself forward and sheathed myself inside her heat.

“Oh!” she screamed out when I was fully inside her. “I’m going to...”

“I know, baby.” I kissed her neck. “Come for me.”

As I took her with all the force in my body, she shuddered in my arms, coming harder than she ever had. The warmth of her orgasm radiated between us while the rain picked up in intensity. The barn grew darker and the storm became more violent. Something animalistic broke free as we fucked under the electrifying sky. She dug her fingers into my back as I held on tight to her back, making sure not to slam her into the window behind us.

“Cin,” I growled out, sucking on the side of her neck as my climax rolled through me. With one forceful thrust, I released inside her, filling her with my come and claiming her as mine. I let out a long exhale before burying my head into the crook of her neck.

“Wow.” She giggled. “That was hot.”

“You ain’t kidding, princess.” I stepped back, taking in her unkempt appearance. “You’re a mess.”

“Oh.” She tried to smooth out her hair. “I guess barn sex will do that to you.”

“You’re still the hottest woman I’ve ever seen.” I kissed her as the storm quieted down. “It looks like the sky tried to

keep up with us.”

“The storm added to the intensity. Did you feel it? I felt like we were doing it outside.”

“We practically were.” I gazed up and noticed all the leaks in the ceiling. “No wonder we’re wet.”

“When we get back we can take a shower.” She grinned. “I want to taste you next.”



We ran back to the house, wet from the misty rain and ruffled from our barn sex session. Conti stood in front of the patio doors, looking more somber than I would have liked. He stomped on his cigarette butt before looking at me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Romero and Rocco are here.”

“Really.” I felt my pants pocket. “Oh, I must have left my phone in the house.”

“They aren’t alone,” Conti said. “Don Malatesta is with them.”

“Oh,” Cin whispered. “My father is here?”

Conti nodded.

“Let’s go inside.” I took her hand and guided her into the house, noting her legs weren’t moving as quickly as they were a few minutes ago. “It’s going to be okay.” I couldn’t guarantee that, but I didn’t want her to know my doubts.

“You don’t know that.”

“I’ll make it okay.” I led her into the kitchen where Romero, Rocco, Janero, and two of his guys were waiting for us.

“Papa.” Cin let go of my hand and moved toward her father. “You’re here.”

“That’s what happens when you don’t return my calls. I show up.” He looked over her disheveled appearance and dirty white dress before hugging her. “What were you thinking, ignoring me?”

“I...”

“Never mind,” the Don said. “Why do you look like you’ve been playing in the dirt?”

“I didn’t expect you today,” I said to Romero.

“I tried to call you.” Romero glanced at Cin, and then looked back at me. “You didn’t answer. You must have been busy.”

“We waited out the storm in the barn, and I had left my phone in the house.” I moved toward Janero. “Don Malatesta, we weren’t expecting you in the states.” I extended my hand. “Welcome.”

Janero didn’t accept my hand, and judging from the way he stared at me, he had a pretty good idea what I had been doing with his daughter over the last few weeks.

He raised his hand and connected with my jaw faster than I had time to react. If he had been anyone else, he would be on the ground by now. Romero and Rocco would have backed me up, but given the hierarchy in this situation, none of us could react.

“Papa!” Cinzia placed her hand on my shoulder as Romero and Rocco blocked us. Janero’s men squared up in front of my brothers.

Janero held up his hand and halted his guards. “Gio had that coming, and he knows it.”

He was right. I had failed to protect his daughter when those men took a shot at us in front of the penthouse. Whether Janero would admit that he knew I had taken his daughter’s innocence, I was certain that the blow to my face had something to do with that. Even if he couldn’t believe that his little girl wasn’t so little anymore, he knew something was amiss.

“Janero,” Romero said. “With all due respect, if you ever hit my brother again, we’re going to have a serious problem.”

“Romero, you don’t want to battle with me over this.” Janero looked at me. “My daughter hasn’t returned my calls in over a week. Why do you suppose that is?”

“You can ask me the question.” Cinzia took my hand. “None of this is Gio’s fault. I provoked the man who came after us. I’m the one who hasn’t returned your calls. Gio encouraged me to call you, but I didn’t take his advice because I know what you have planned for me.”

“Do you?” Janero’s jaw tightened. “We’re not going to discuss that here.”

“Your father is right, Cin.” I wasn’t going to let her take the blame for anything that had happened these past few weeks. “It was my job to keep you safe. I should have made sure you were staying in contact with your father.”

“Gio, you’re not to blame.” She looked at her dad. “I gave Gio a problem from the moment I arrived. I acted like an entitled brat and Gio called me on it.”

“Gio should have had better control of you. Now I know he can’t handle you.” Janero motioned toward the back staircase in the kitchen. “Get your things. We’re leaving.”

“No!” She squeezed my hand. “I don’t want to leave Gio.”

The tensions hit me from every angle of the room. Romero was set to go after Janero’s men. Rocco tried to hold his tongue and not negotiate us out of this situation. The fury from Janero’s direction was red-hot and aimed at me. Cin and I were stuck in the middle, knowing we had to fight to stay together, but the odds were against us at this moment. We had nothing to bargain with.

“Gio hasn’t proven himself in my eyes,” Janero said. “I realize the two of you have formed a bond that started years ago. I appreciate that friendship, but now is not the time to explore it.”

“It’s too late,” Cinzia said. “I want to be with him.”

“That’s not what your family needs from you at this moment.” Janero glanced at his watch. “Both Romero and Gio understand that. Arguing with me and wasting my time won’t help any of us. I have somewhere to be.”

“Then you should go,” Cinzia said. “I’m fine here.”

“Christ,” Romero mumbled.

“Don Malatesta,” I said. “I can protect your daughter. My family is growing stronger. We can be an asset to you. There’s no need to sacrifice your daughter in the name of your territory.”

“Ah, Gio.” Janero shook his head. “I had such high hopes for you, but until you forget about my Cinzia, you are going to be useless to me. You know I have to do what must be done in order to protect my empire. Don’t make me regret the power I’ve already given you and your brother.”

“We’ve earned most of that power,” Romero said. “We can come up with a solution if you let us think this through.”

Romero was grasping, but he was trying to keep Cin with me.

“There will be other favors I’ll need from you and Gio.” Janero held out his hand for Cin. “If you care for your friend as much as you say you do, you won’t fight me on this. You’re leaving here with me one way or another. The Bilotti brothers know they can’t challenge me. Not when it comes to my family.”

“Are you saying you will hurt them?” Cin asked.

“Just go get your things,” Janero said. “No one has to get hurt.”

“This isn’t necessary.” I held Cin’s hand tighter, but in the end I would have to let go.

“No, none of it is necessary, but it is a matter of life and death. Don’t make me choose between my business and our friendship.” Janero looked over at my brother. “Romero, as head of your house, get your shit together.”

“Gio,” Romero said. “You know what has to be done.”

“No!” Cin let go of my hand, taking the decision from me. “I’ll go with you, Papa.”

“What?” I moved to stand in front of her, blocking her from her father. “Do you know what you’re agreeing to?”

“I do.” She placed her palm on my cheek. “You have to trust me now.”

CHAPTER

Sixteen

Cinzia

AFTER GATHERING my things and changing my clothes, my father's guards took my bags out to the car. I had to keep it together a little while longer. I wouldn't let Gio see me fall apart. We had come too far, even if he didn't realize this was all part of my plan.

"Romero, I'd like a few words with you outside while we let my daughter and your brother say goodbye." My father shook Gio's hand. "You'll see this is what's best for all of us, and your future will thrive along with mine."

I stepped onto the porch as Romero, Rocco, and my father headed to the car.

"I wish we were in the shower together." I tried to keep this horrible mood between us light. "Raincheck?"

"Why did you agree to leave?" Gio asked.

"Because we were getting nowhere with my father today. He is too determined, and I recognized the look in his eyes." He would destroy Romero and Gio over this. "I can salvage this."

"You need to let me handle this."

"We'll handle it together."

"You're leaving. How is that handling things together?"

“Both of us working from different angles has to be better than only one of us figuring it out.” If we didn’t come up with a way to stop what my father had already set in motion, the consequences would be steep. “Don’t brood.” I took his hand. “He would have hurt you.”

“I would have managed it.”

“You weren’t going to hit my father. You have too much respect for him to do that.” Gio was in a tough situation, and whether he liked it or not, I was the only one who could get him out of it right now. “I’ll text you later.”

“Cin.” He pulled me to his chest. “I’m not giving up on us.”

“I should hope not.” Not when I was willing to sacrifice so much.

“I’ll find a way out of this, or I’ll kidnap you and we’ll run.”

“I’ll be ready.” I stretched up on my toes and gently kissed his lips. “I’ll go anywhere with you. All you have to do is say the word.”

Romero and Rocco headed up the path toward the porch, indicating that it was time for me to leave.

“I better go.”

When I let go of Gio, he tugged me back to him and took my face in his hands. “There’s something you need to know.”

“What is it?” I whispered, too mesmerized by his gorgeous green eyes to think about walking away from him.

“I love you.”

“Way to make me wait for it, huh?”

“I should have said it sooner, but I...”

“It’s okay.” I caressed his jaw. “My heart already knew.”

“Be safe.” He pressed his lips to mine. Not exactly the searing kiss I had become used to these past few weeks, but that didn’t matter. The connection was more than enough. The

memory of this moment would carry me for as long as I needed it to.

“I love you too.” I let go of him, took a deep breath, and hurried down the steps. “Take care of him,” I said to Romero. “I’m coming back to him.”

“I believe that,” Romero said as he and Rocco joined Gio on the porch.

“I like her,” Rocco said.

I didn’t look back, because if I did, I wouldn’t be able to get into the car and do what had to be done. Once the driver opened the door, I got in next to my father.

“You made the right choice,” he said. “For your family.”

“You didn’t give me much of a choice.”

“I like Gio.” He clicked his seatbelt. “He’ll be well taken care of. He and Romero are an asset to me. I understand his sacrifice. He’ll be rewarded.”

“Then why can’t I be with him?”

“Because I have bigger plans for your future.”

“Like arranging a marriage for me with a stranger?”

“I wanted to be the one to tell you what I needed from you, but yes, since you already know, I do plan to have you marry Aldo Calabrese.”

“And if I refuse?” I asked.

“You won’t.”

He was right. I wouldn’t straight-up refuse, but I had plans for myself and they didn’t include Aldo Calabrese.

“When are we returning to Italy?” I needed to know how much time I had to convince my father that I belonged here with Gio.

“In a few days,” he said. “I have business to deal with here. I thought you could spend some time at a spa and relax.”

“Why did you bother sending me to Gio when you knew how I felt about him? Why would you let me get more

attached to him if you knew we couldn't be together?"

None of this made sense. My father wasn't the most attentive father. I had everything I could ever dream of, but not in the traditional sense. He may not have been very hands-on, but he always took my feelings into consideration. How could he expect me to marry someone I didn't love, especially when he knew I wanted to be with Gio?

"Once we're back in Italy, you can fill your time with planning a wedding," he said, ignoring my questions. "Your aunts and cousins will be so excited to help you."

"I've been thinking about my future," I said, trying to get him off the wedding and arranged marriage subject. "I want to become more involved with the children's charities. I'm old enough to sit on a board now. I want to fill my time with meaning."

"You have plenty of meaning."

"Papa, don't take everything away from me."

"I'm not taking anything from you." He patted my hand. "I'm providing you with a rich and full future. The Calabrese family are respected, and once we merge with them, we'll be unstoppable. You can sit on as many boards as you like. You'll be able to start your own charity, but maybe you'll be too busy."

"Too busy doing what?"

"Maybe you'll want to give me a grandchild or two."

"What?"

"I know it may be too soon, but the Calabrese family will expect it." He gazed out the window. "Sooner rather than later. It's how these things work. It's how alliances are made and words are kept. I don't expect you to understand all of this yet, but you will come to understand it. I have the utmost faith in you."

"I understand it." I thought about all the nights Gio and I spent together. I vowed never to be with another man, and I would keep that promise. "I can appreciate how an heir would

change things. How a child would secure a future empire.” *I’m counting on it.*

“Good girl.” He rested his head on the back of his seat. “I knew you would understand. The Calabrese family had three potential husbands for you. When I started the negotiations, I vetted them all very carefully, and I chose the middle brother because I felt he best suited you.”

“That was thoughtful of you.” A mafia dating game. How appropriate. *Poor Aldo won’t know what hit him.* “I’m sure you have my best interest at heart.” Hopefully, I would never make it back to Italy and I wouldn’t have to meet my intended spouse.

“Always.”

“Well, I can’t wait to get back to Italy to meet him.” I wasn’t getting on that plane. I would run with Gio before that could happen. “I’m sure it will be quite memorable.”

“Italy?” He smiled. “Oh, no, child. You won’t have to wait that long.”

“I don’t?”

“No, I thought it would be best to have Aldo accompany me to the states.”

“Where are we?” I asked as we pulled up to a resort-like villa.

“A friend of mine owns this property and has invited us to stay for a few days. It’s fully staffed, secluded, and has many luxuries. You’ll feel like you’re at home. It has a lovely spa with people to cater to your every need.”

I stared out the window at a group of men waiting in front of the massive stone house. “Who are they? Other guests?”

“No, we have the place all to ourselves.” When we stopped in front of the property, a man opened the door for my father. “They’re with us.”

“Don Malatesta, we’re so pleased to have you as our guest.” The man motioned for someone to come around and

open my door. “Please don’t hesitate to ask for anything you and your daughter might need while you’re with us.”

A tall, dark-haired man with intriguing blue eyes opened my door and extended his hand for me. I took it and allowed him to help me out of the car. The handsome stranger stared at me as if he knew me, but I didn’t recognize him.

“Cinzia.” My father came around and joined us. “I’d like you to meet Aldo Calabrese.”

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.” Aldo kissed my hand. “I feel like I already know you so well.”

“Hmm.” I removed my hand from his. “I know nothing about you.”

“You’ll have the opportunity to change that here,” my father said. “There will be plenty of opportunities for the two of you to get to know one another. I trust you’ll both do your best to make this work.”

“Of course, Janero.” Aldo smiled at me. “I’m sure Cinzia and I will get along just fine.”

“I’d like to go to my room and freshen up.” I had sex with Gio not two hours ago. His scent was still on me, and the pleasurable soreness he created between my legs would stay with me for hours. How would Aldo feel about that? “Is that acceptable?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” My father motioned for us to go into the resort.

“I wanted to make sure you hadn’t made any other *arrangements* for me today.” I walked in front of the two men. “Where is my room?”

“I can show you,” Aldo offered. “If that’s acceptable to your father.”

“It’s fine,” my dad said. “We’ll all meet for dinner in an hour. I need to speak with my security team.”

“Come on, Cin.” Aldo hooked his arm in mine.

Cin? No, that won’t work. I was only one man’s Cin.

“Cinzia,” I said. “I’d like for you to call me Cinzia.”

“Very well, *Cinzia*.” He smirked. “I’m sure I can come up with a special name for you once we get to know one another a little better.”

Don’t count on it.

CHAPTER

Seventeen

Gio

IN THE ALLEY behind the club, two of our guys kept watch while Romero and I roughed up a scared Paulie. We had been at it for thirty minutes, but I wasn't satisfied I had tortured him enough.

"Did you fucking take a shot at me?" I hit him with my gun. "In front of my home?"

Paulie spat blood from his mouth and onto my shoes but didn't answer.

"Enough of this." Romero cocked his gun and held it to Paulie's temple. "Who sent you after my brother?"

"I acted alone." He squeezed his eyes shut. "I'm sorry."

"You're fucking lying." I punched him in his gut. "You're not smart enough to act alone." Even if the job was so botched and he used his own car to pull it off, he didn't do this on his own. "Who sent you?"

"Look," Romero said as he shoved the gun in Paulie's side. "You were stupid to come after my brother. Whoever sent you, set you up. Maybe they paid you well or promised you something in return. I don't care. I just want a name."

"I can't. They'll kill me."

"What do you think we're going to do?" I asked. "You came after me. At least have a little dignity and tell me what I

want to know.”

“Please, I’ll tell you, but you have to let me go. I’ll leave town. I won’t come back. I won’t cause any problems for you.” His bruised and swollen eyes showed fear. “Just let me go.”

“Why would I believe you? How do I even know you’re giving up the right person?” Romero smacked him. “Don’t insult me.”

“I’m not.” Paulie held up his hands. “It has to do with the mafia princess.”

“Cinzia?” I asked. “What about her?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“What do you mean you don’t know?” I pressed my gun to his chest. “Tell me what you know.”

“Will you let me go?”

“I’ll let you go.” *After you’re dead.*

“Shortly after she came to New York, I was approached by a man to distract her from you,” he admitted. “That’s why I approached her at the club. I was paid for helping them. I had to be photographed with her so her father could see.”

“Why?” I asked.

“They were trying to discredit you. They wanted to show her dad that you weren’t as loyal as he thought. I wasn’t supposed to shoot at you. I was supposed to take the girl and keep her safe until they found her.”

“Who?” Romero asked. “Who hired you?”

“Some big family in Italy. They’re working with Malatesta,” he said. “They didn’t like Cinzia cozying up to you in America. They were afraid you were going to convince the Don not to make an alliance with them.”

I glanced at Romero, knowing we already had a name. *Calabrese.*

Romero nodded.

“You’ve been very helpful.” I pressed the gun to Paulie’s chest.

“Wait!” Paulie shouted as Romero held him still. “I didn’t give you a name. You can’t kill me.”

“You didn’t have to give me a name, you piece of useless shit.” I stared him in the eyes as I pulled the trigger, feeling the impact of the bullet piercing his chest. He fell to the ground, lying in a pool of his own tainted blood. “That was for taking a shot at me in front of my house while my girl was with me.”

“No honor.” Romero waved two of our guys over. “Take care of this. The cameras are disabled. Be quick about it.”

“Sure thing, boss,” Romero’s trusted head of security, Joey, said.

I shoved my gun inside the back of my pants as we headed into the club. Romero put his arm around me as we walked.

“I would have done it,” he said.

“That one was mine.”

Romero usually did the heavy lifting when it came to eliminating people. These days, we had people who did it for us, but when something was personal, we took care of it. Paulie taking a shot at me and Cin was about as personal as it could get for me. He deserved to die.

When we entered the back office, Rocco was waiting for us.

“Well?” He shut his laptop.

“It’s done.” Romero went to the table and poured three shots of vodka. “Paulie botched the hit all on his own. That’s why no one came to help him. He was only supposed to kidnap Cin to rattle Malatesta’s trust in Gio.”

“Calabrese?” Rocco asked.

“Yeah.” I took a shot of vodka. “I guess having Cin living with another man while her father arranged the marriage wasn’t traditional enough. They were afraid I was going to taint her.”

“If Calabrese was in negotiations with Malatesta and he was going to get Cinzia in the deal anyway, why risk kidnapping her?” Rocco chugged his shot of vodka. “It seems unnecessary.”

“Not if he was showing strength in his own family,” Romero said. “If I were promised a woman in an alliance, I would want to make sure she was with me and not another man. I’d want to keep an eye on her. I wouldn’t want her in another country doing whatever she wanted with Gio.”

“Cin could be in danger,” I said. She had told me all about her new fiancé through texting. “Once Aldo has her and this deal goes through, it’s going to be a lot harder for me to get to her.” Not to mention what could happen to her when he finds out she’s not a virgin. “I don’t want to do anything that could get her killed.”

“Her father will protect her until we can get to her,” Romero said.

“They’re staying at a resort in a secluded area in New Jersey,” Rocco said. “I had Malatesta tailed when he left the safe house. My guys have been hanging back, but Calabrese is there.”

“With Cin?” I slammed my glass on the table. “We have to go get her.”

“We’re working on it,” Romero said. “I needed confirmation from Paulie before we could go to Malatesta. Now I know Calabrese is responsible for the hit.”

“We don’t have any proof,” I said. “I killed Paulie. Why would Malatesta believe us?”

“We don’t need Paulie.” Rocco opened up his laptop. “I have something much more valuable.” He pointed to a map that meant nothing to me. “I have this.”

“What is it?” I studied the region on the screen. “Is that in Italy?”

“As you know, my father isn’t interested in running the family business anymore. Ever since my mother left and

Vincent is too injured to help run things, he's left most of the daily responsibilities to me."

When Antonio Torrio, the only father Rocco knew before he found out he shared a biological father with me and Romero, approached Romero with a deal to make an alliance, Antonio was a thriving member of the mafia community. He ran the city with his three sons; Vincent, Rocco, and Sandro. Once Antonio sent his niece Luciana in to spy on Romero, things took a turn Antonio could never had seen coming. Lu turned the tables on her family when she fell in love with Romero. When we discovered that Rocco was our biological brother, all hell broke loose, and things were never the same for Antonio. Most of the time, no one knew where he was or what he was doing, leaving Rocco to pick up the slack.

"Sandro is stepping up at the law firm, so that leaves me to run our other businesses," Rocco continued. "My father has a large untapped territory in Italy." He referred back to the map. "What if I negotiate with Janero? That would get Cin out of the arranged marriage."

"It could work," Romero said.

"If you tell Malatesta we know it was the Calabrese family who went after Gio, that will only add more ammunition. If we come to him with this territory as a show of good faith, he'll side with you and Gio."

"Is your father going to be on board with this?" I asked. "This is a huge family asset you'd be giving up."

"I'm not giving anything up that I need," Rocco said. "My father isn't interested and has left me to make the family decisions. Besides, isn't it time the Bilotti brothers formed their own alliance?"

"You would do this for us?" I asked.

"You're my brothers," Rocco said. "This might not have been the alliance my father intended when he arranged for the Torrios and Bilottis to unite, but it's the one we were meant to have. We're bound by blood."

“And nothing comes between brothers.” I poured another round. “To new alliances.”

“No matter the cost,” Romero said. “No matter the fight.”

CHAPTER

Eighteen

Cinzia

I GAZED down at my fresh, hot pink manicure and realized I couldn't handle one more spa treatment. My father and Aldo did everything they could this past week to make me happy and comfortable, but there was only one man who could do that for me.

Aldo wasn't as overbearing as I imagined him to be when we first met. He kept his distance, only joining me for meals that my father ate with us. I humored my father and went on several walks with Aldo, but my future husband didn't seem interested in conversation. Well, he liked to talk, but he wanted to do most of it. It gave me an opportunity to zone him out and think about the real future I would have with Gio.

"There you are." My father came into the sitting room of our suite. "I was looking for you."

"I'm just relaxing before dinner." I stretched out on the sofa. "It's been a long few days."

"Are you feeling well?"

"I'm off today." I sat up. "Nothing you need to worry about."

"Will you be up to traveling tomorrow?"

"Where are we going?" A queasy sensation settled in my stomach.

“Back home.”

“Oh.” Now that feeling was followed by the full-on urge to vomit. “So soon?”

“You haven’t been home in almost two months. I thought you’d want to get back to your family.”

“I suppose.”

“We’re having dinner downstairs overlooking that river you like,” he said. “Wear one of your favorite dresses.”

“What’s the occasion?”

“Aldo is going to make your engagement official tonight.”

“No.”

“What?”

“I’m not ready for that,” I said. “You know I don’t want this, I need more time to grasp the situation.” I needed more time to escape.

“This is your duty.” He patted my knee. “I thought you and Aldo were enjoying one another’s company.”

“It’s going to take more than a week.” I shook my head. “I want Gio.” I tried to stifle the tears that fell from my cheeks. I roughly wiped them away. *Why can’t I control my emotions?* “Please, don’t make me do this.”

“I had hoped it would be Gio, but the alliance I can make with the Calabrese family is stronger. In time, you’ll understand that. You’ll grow to accept your new husband.”

“What will happen if I don’t go through with this?” I wanted to help my father and maintain my family’s security but not by being forced to marry someone I didn’t know.

“The Calabrese family will probably side with the people that are trying to take my territory. I’ll be left vulnerable. I’ll lose everything I’ve worked so hard for.”

“What about me? What about what I’m losing?”

“You’ll forget about Gio. Just give it time. I’ve never asked you for much.”

“You may not have asked, but I’ve sacrificed my whole life for your business. I gave up my childhood, my education, and now Gio.”

“You have a good life.” His phone alerted him to a call. “I have to take this. Be ready for dinner.”

“Romero,” my father answered the call as he left the suite.

My own phone sang with the ringtone I had reserved for Gio. I quickly answered it.

“Hey, my girl, how are you holding up?”

“Um, well, I’m about to get engaged.”

“What? No.”

“We’re going back to Italy tomorrow. What am I supposed to do? It wasn’t supposed to get this far.”

“Romero is asking your father for a meeting as we speak.”

“What am I supposed to do about Aldo and leaving for Italy?” I asked.

“Don’t do anything drastic.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“Listen to me,” he said. “Aldo is the one who ordered that attempt on us.”

“What? Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Why would he do that?”

“He wanted me away from you,” Gio said.

“I have been in the company of a killer all week?”

“You’re always in the company of killers.”

“That’s not funny, and you know what I mean.” I hopped off the sofa. “I want to smack him.”

“Don’t do anything to provoke him. Is there any way to stay out of sight?”

“I’m told he plans on making our engagement official tonight. I’m not saying yes.”

“Baby, I’m going to get to you before they try to make you leave the country. I promise.”

“Gio, I have a way to make my father stop this. I’m just worried you’re not going to like it.” It was only fair that I ran my plan by him first. It concerned him, and he should be the one who heard it from me.

“I don’t need you to do anything,” he said with frustration in his voice. “You’ve endured enough. Let me handle this. My brothers and I have a bargaining chip of our own. One that your father won’t be able to resist.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.” He paused for a moment. “Romero just got off the phone with your dad. We’re coming to you. Hang tight.”

“Hurry up,” I said. “I need to see you.”

“I want to see you too, baby, and when I do I’m never letting you out of my sight.”

“Gio.” A tear rolled down my cheek. “I love you.”

“*Ti amo*, my brave girl. I love you too.”

He ended the call before I could tell him what I wanted to say. If he got here in time, maybe I wouldn’t have to use my ammunition. The information I held could get Gio killed if my father didn’t approve.

No one is dying today. I placed my hand on my unsettled stomach. Not if I had anything to say about it.



Two hours later, I sat by the window that overlooked a calming stream, but even the tranquil water couldn’t settle my stomach. Whatever Gio had planned, would it work in time? Would he get here before I had to turn down Aldo’s marriage proposal?

“How many children would you like to have?” Aldo asked as he handed me a glass of white wine.

“What?” I was mortified by his question.

“Relax.” He smiled as he took a drink from his wine glass. “I’m sure that’s an awkward question for someone as inexperienced as you are.”

Oh, God. “Ah, I haven’t thought about it.” I set my glass on the table next to my chair. “Have you?”

“Not until these arrangements came to my attention. I didn’t think I’d settle down for a few more years.”

“There’s no rush.” I rested my hands in my lap, trying not to fidget. “We don’t have to get married right away.”

“That’s not what I meant.” He pulled a chair close to me and took a seat. “Now that I’ve met you, I don’t want to wait. I want to get married as soon as we’re on Italian soil. I want everyone to know how lucky I am to have such an amazing woman by my side.”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

“We’ll rectify that once we’re married.”

“What if I don’t want children?”

“That’s nonsense.” He pushed my glass toward me, but I held up my hand and shook my head. I wasn’t in the mood for alcohol. “We’ll fill our house with lots of children. At least four.”

“Can we talk about something else?”

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

Too late.

“How are you two getting along?” My father joined us by the window.

“Fine,” Aldo answered. “Cinzia has a shy side.”

“Once she gets to know you, she’ll be fine. She was always that way as a child. She never had many friends, but

those she connected with all loved her.” My father smiled. “She’s so charming.”

“I noticed your English is very good,” Aldo said. “Did you have a private tutor?”

“You could say that.” I glanced up at my father. “A special friend of the family taught me.”

“My father insisted that my brothers and I learned fluent English at a young age. He said it would help us in our line of work.”

“He was right,” my father said. “Speaking of business, we’re having three more join us for dinner tonight.”

“Really?” Aldo drank more of his wine. “Who?”

“Rocco Torrio,” he said. “Do you know him?”

“I’ve met his father, but I haven’t had the pleasure of meeting Rocco.”

“He’s a formidable opponent and a wise ally to have now that he’s moving into his father’s position of authority,” my dad said as he looked at me. “His half-brothers will be joining us as well.”

I sighed an audible breath of relief. This could all be over tonight.

“His half-brothers?” Aldo asked.

“Romero and Gio Bilotti,” I said with a smile. “Have you heard of them?”

“Who hasn’t?” Aldo’s grip tightened around his glass. “You’ve been staying with Gio while you were in America. I’ve seen the two of you on social media.”

“I bet you did.” I licked my lips. “Gio is quite photogenic, isn’t he?”

My father cleared his throat, glaring at me.

“I’m grateful for Gio looking after you while you were in a foreign country, but we won’t be relying on him for such tasks

any longer, especially when it comes to my wife,” Aldo said. “Once we’re back home, I’m sure you’ll forget all about him.”

“Why would I do that?” I asked. “He’s my friend.”

“I’d consider it inappropriate for you to have a male friend.” He set his wine glass down. “You agree, don’t you, Janero?”

“My father doesn’t speak for me.” I realized the absurdity of that statement considering I was about to be whisked off by a man my father demanded I marry. “Neither will you.”

“My daughter can be quite sassy,” my dad said. “You’ll get used to her, but Cinzia, now is not the time for this battle.”

“Can we talk about another part of your business?” I asked my father, trying to stall until Gio arrived.

“Perhaps.” He sighed. “What do you want to discuss?”

“I was just wondering if you found out who fired at Gio and I in front of his house. It seems like that would be at the top of your list of priorities. Not a frivolous wedding.”

“There will be nothing frivolous about our wedding.” Aldo reached into his pocket and took out a velvet black box. “You don’t need to concern yourself with the family business.”

“I would think you would be interested in finding the weasel who tried to shoot me, considering you want to marry me.” I glanced at the door in the grand foyer of the resort, willing Gio to come through it before Aldo popped the question.

“The Bilotti brothers are famous for their enemies.” Aldo ran his finger along the box. “Someone is always after them. It probably had nothing to do with you.”

“Something tells me otherwise.” I continued to stare at the entrance. *Please, Gio.*

“Enough of this conversation,” my father said. “Aldo, if you have something to ask my daughter, do it now before our guests arrive, so we can celebrate at dinner and make new alliances.”

“I already have your father’s blessing.” Aldo slipped off his chair and dropped down on one knee in front of me. “We don’t know one another well.”

At all.

“But that will change in time.” He opened the box to reveal a rather stunning diamond that any woman would be delighted to wear. Just not this girl. I had other plans. “We will build a life together. One that includes travel, family, friends, and children of our own.”

How would you feel about someone else’s child? I placed my hand on my stomach as he took the ring from the box.

“Cinzia—” Aldo said.

“Wait!” I shook my head. “I can’t marry you. Not in good faith of that ridiculous contract you entered into with our fathers.”

“Why not?” Aldo looked up at my dad. “What’s going on?”

“Cinzia,” my father said, his voice raised.

As Rocco, Romero, and Gio came through the entrance, I locked my gaze with Gio’s.

“Why can’t you marry me?” Aldo demanded.

“Because I’m carrying a Bilotti heir.” I smiled at Gio. *I told you I’d take care of this.*

CHAPTER

Nineteen

Gio

“DID YOU KNOW THAT?” Romero asked.

“If I had, don’t you think I might have mentioned it?” I took a moment to compose myself. I couldn’t tear my gaze from Cin.

Is she telling the truth, or is this a ploy to get her out of wearing that shiny rock the bastard waved in her face?

“Looks like I arrived just in time.” I moved to stand behind the chair Cin sat in. “Am I interrupting something?” I placed my hand on her shoulder. “I’m Gio Bilotti.”

“You son-of-a bitch.” Aldo stood. “You violated my bride?”

Aldo’s men moved to stand with him when Rocco and Romero graced my sides. We weren’t allowed to bring our security team in. We also had to check our guns at the front door as a show of respect to Don Malatesta. We knew that could create a potential problem, but we were counting on Malatesta protecting us. We had something beneficial to him, so we didn’t think our presence would cause a problem. That might not be true now that Cin made her confession.

“Janero,” Romero said. “We didn’t come here to cause a problem.”

“No,” Janero said. “I’d say my daughter and your brother have done that all on their own.”

“I can take care of Gio.” Aldo took his gun out and pointed it at me.

“No!” Cin stood, trying to block me.

“Are you out of your mind?” I came around her chair and stood in front of her. Rocco and Romero boxed her out as I faced the barrel of Aldo’s gun.

“Aldo!” Janero said. “Put that away. My daughter is in the room.”

“The daughter you promised me who now stands here and tells me she’s pregnant with another man’s child.” He waved his gun at me. “I’m guessing she’s not a virgin.”

“Not anymore,” I said.

“Gio!” Rocco warned. “Shut up.”

“Have your guards escort your daughter from this room,” Aldo said. “We’ll take care of the rest.”

“I’m not going anywhere. You don’t get to tell my father to dismiss me.” Cin pushed between Romero and me so she could squeeze in next to me. “No one is going to hurt the father of my child.”

Why is she so defiant?

“Aldo,” Janero said. “Have your men stand down or it won’t end well for you. There will be no violence between these walls.”

“It’s not going to end well for you when my father and brothers find out about this betrayal,” Aldo said. “You hustled us.”

“Janero had no idea about my relationship with his daughter,” I said. “That’s on me. He arranged your deal in good faith.”

“You should die for your dishonor,” Aldo said. “You knew there was a deal in motion.”

“A deal I didn’t want,” Cinzia said. “I have nothing against you, but I don’t want to marry you. My father shouldn’t have used me as an incentive for your alliance.”

“It’s not up to you,” Aldo said. “We can still salvage this.”

“How?” I asked. “She doesn’t want to be with you, and she’s pregnant with my child. Do you think I’m going to sit back and not have a say in what happens to them?”

“Dead men don’t have much say,” Aldo said. “Janero, give me the word and I’ll finish this. We can go on with our agreement.”

“What do you suggest we do?” Janero asked. “Take out all three of them?”

“If I have to,” Aldo said. “I’d be doing our world a huge favor by wiping out Romero and his family. It would leave the east coast wide open for you.”

“Papa!” Cin yelled. “Make him stop.”

“With the three of them gone, I can still marry your daughter.” Aldo looked into my eyes. “We can do that tomorrow, and no one will suspect her child isn’t mine. Both of our families will prosper. It’s a win-win for us.”

“Unless I have something else to bring to the table,” I said. “Janero, you’re going to want to hear what my brother Rocco has to tell you.”

“I’m listening,” Janero said.

“Not until you call them off,” Romero said. “We’re not entering negotiations with a gun pointed in our faces. Let’s do this at the table like civilized men. The way you taught Gio and I all those years ago.”

“We’re not civilized men,” Aldo said. “Not all of us.”

“Aldo, stand down,” Janero said. “I’ve got it from here.”

Aldo held up his hand, and his guards backed down. “This isn’t over.” He placed his gun in his waistband. “I’ll tolerate you meeting with them, because I know whatever they have to

offer you won't be as lucrative as what my family has already given you."

"Don't be so sure." I took Cin's hand. "I'd sell my soul to be with her. Can you say the same?"

"Rocco and I will take the meeting," Romero said. "Gio, take Cin someplace private and don't leave her side."

"I'd like to request someone from the Bilotti security team stay with Gio," Rocco proposed. "It isn't you that I don't trust, Don Malatesta." Rocco glanced at Aldo and his men. "Romero and I would feel better if we knew that Gio had an ally while we're meeting."

"Hmm, Mr. Torrio," Janero said. "It looks as if you inherited much from your Bilotti heritage, but I can also see a lot of the father who raised you in your demeanor. That's interesting."

"Will you grant my request?" Rocco asked. "Then we can get on with what we have brought to the table."

"One member." Janero nodded at one of his men. "Who shall it be?"

"Conti," I said. "I want Conti with me."

"Very well," Janero said to his guard. "Bring Conti to Gio."

"This is ridiculous." Aldo sighed.

"No, Aldo," Janero said. "This is me showing respect to these two men who have been nothing but loyal to me since they were young. I have an obligation to hear them out. I also have a duty to protect them from any danger they may be in that I or my daughter may have inadvertently caused. I trust that nothing inappropriate will happen to my guests while they are here."

"You have my word," Aldo said.

As much as Aldo might be seething on the inside, Malatesta was the biggest player here and no one could defy his orders. No one except his daughter. She proved she could defy anyone.

Once Conti entered the room, Janero, Rocco, and Romero went into a private location to discuss the territory that Rocco was going to offer in exchange for Cin's freedom. I wanted to go with them, but being with Cin was more important.

Cin took my hand. "We can go to my suite."

She led the way up the lavish staircase in the lobby. Conti followed as we left Aldo and his men standing there with their dicks in their hands.

Cin and I entered the suite while Conti took his post outside the door. Once inside the room, Cin launched herself into my arms and held me tight.

"I missed you so much," she said. "I didn't think you'd ever get here."

"We had a lot going on." I held her close. "But not as much as you."

I lowered my lips to hers and kissed her with all the love and respect I felt for her. Before long, the kiss took over and we were groping one another and making our way to the couch. When she pushed me onto it, she ran her fingers through her hair and came toward me with that fuck-me look in her eyes.

"I really, really missed you." She straddled my lap and kissed my neck. "I missed your scent, your hands on my body, your mouth on mine."

"Are you really pregnant?" I gripped her shoulders and stared into her eyes, searching for the truth. How could I focus on anything else until I knew the answer?

"According to the pregnancy test I took last night, yes."

"Where did you get a pregnancy test?"

"It's the twenty-first century. The pharmacy delivers." She smirked. "Especially when I'm staying in a place where people will do anything to accommodate my father. I said I needed some things and the staff made it happen."

"But you said you were on the pill the first night we were together. When I didn't have a condom."

“No, I said I had it under control.”

I thought back to that night, recalling the conversation. “You got pregnant on purpose?”

“Well, I know we said you taking my innocence would be enough to get me out of this arranged marriage, but then I thought what if uniting with my father was enough for the Calabrese family and Aldo didn’t care if I had sex with you?”

“I guess I didn’t think it through.” My smart woman obviously had.

“If it was all about his family gaining power, he might have overlooked the fact that I wasn’t a virgin. I needed something stronger.”

“So you thought going a little extra was the answer.” This woman never ceased to amaze me. “You didn’t think to tell me what you were planning?”

“I didn’t want you to reject me again. I wanted to be with you.” I saw the uncertainty in her expression. As brave as she was, she could still be vulnerable, especially when she doubted my feelings for her. “Are you mad?”

“Mad? Not at all.” A little stunned that she went through with this plan. I never expected to become a father this fast, but I wasn’t mad.

“Good, because I already love my Bilotti poppy seed.” She hugged me. “As much as I love you.”

“Bilotti poppy seed?”

“That’s how big a four-week-old fetus is.”

“God, I love you.”

“So, tell me what your plan is,” she said. “You didn’t burst in here, stop my engagement, and think my dad was going to let you walk out of here with me? You had to know there was a possibility of a body bag.”

“I hoped it wouldn’t get that far, but when Aldo pulled his gun and I had no way to protect you, I thought I’d made a huge miscalculation.” I grabbed her hair and twisted it in my

fingers. “Which reminds me, don’t you ever get in between me and a loaded gun again. What the hell were you thinking?”

“That I can’t live without you, and if you were getting shot, so was I.”

“Now that makes me mad,” I raised my voice. “You have our child to protect. That has to be your priority now.” I brushed my lips along hers. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“There isn’t anything more important to me than our little family. I’m carrying your legacy in my belly. I’ll do anything to protect it.”

“I’ll protect us.” I released her hair. “I’ll never let anyone hurt either of you.”

“Tell me what Romero and Rocco are offering my father.”

“The details don’t matter, but Rocco has a huge untapped territory in Italy that his family was given years ago. It’s under Torrio rule, but if your father gets control of it, he won’t need the Calabrese alliance.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, if your father accepts the deal, you’re free.”

“I’m free either way, because I’m not marrying Aldo. I never was.”

“No, you weren’t, but now with my family’s help, your dad can continue to be the most powerful man in Italy. Now that you and I have made our own alliance.” I placed my hand on her flat stomach, imagining what it would look like in a few months when it’s full with my child. “The Malatesta and Bilotti families are connected forever.”

“See, I told you with both of us working from different angles we would get this done.” She settled in my lap and placed her head on my shoulder. “Aren’t you glad I was so persistent with you?”

“Is that what we’re calling your behavior?”

“I knew what I wanted, and I went for it.”

“I’ll never underestimate you again.”

“That would be wise of you,” she said.

There was a knock at the door, followed by Romero barging in. Cin slipped off my lap and sat next to me, taking my hand.

“Did it work?” I asked. “Did Janero accept the territory?”

“You both have to come with me,” Romero said. “Janero wants to see you.”

CHAPTER

Twenty

Cinzia

I HELD onto Gio's hand tighter than I ever had before as Romero led us into the secluded room where he and Rocco had taken the meeting with my father. Once we entered, Romero patted Gio's shoulder and winked at him before closing the door behind him, leaving Gio and me alone with my dad.

If my grip on Gio's hand was too uncomfortable for him, he didn't complain. As much as I wanted to stand up to my father, I was nervous. My trembling legs probably gave me away.

"Have a seat." My father pointed at the two chairs positioned across from him. "I'd like a word with you both."

"Papa, before you start placing blame, I need to say a few things." I wouldn't stand here and watch him berate Gio. None of this was his fault. He tried to stay away from me. "I won't have you insulting Gio or our relationship."

"Cinzia." My father pointed at the chairs again. "Sit."

I gazed into Gio's eyes, but I saw no worry or apprehension in them. Just his loving, calm, and protective aura that I'd fallen in love with so many years ago.

"To say I've been unhappy and disappointed with you is an understatement, Gio." My father's words were as harsh as I

thought they would be. “You shattered a trust that I’ve always had for you.”

“I accept your feelings,” Gio said. “But you have to know that I meant no disrespect. Your daughter has always been special to me. I tried to fight it, but her pull was too strong. I don’t claim to be a weak man, but I’m different with her.”

“I know that she can be persuasive.” My father’s gaze softened when he smiled at me. “Gio is not the only one who should shoulder the blame for the secrets you two have been keeping.”

“Gio had no idea I was pregnant,” I admitted. “That was all me.”

“Gio is the one who got you pregnant,” my father said. “And in doing so, he created a bond between our two families that can never be broken. I’ve always considered Gio and Romero part of my family.”

“We appreciate that,” Gio said. “I love your daughter more than I ever thought possible, and I would do anything for her.”

“I can see that.” My father stood and extended his hand for Gio’s. “The proposition your brothers brought to me this evening is acceptable.”

“Thank you.” Gio shook my dad’s hand, and in that gesture, all of my anxiety left my body. “I’m sure you’ll benefit greatly from the territory.”

“We’re all going to benefit from it.” My father touched my face. “The Bilotti family is considered a branch of the Malatesta family. We will grow stronger together.”

“Thank you.” I got up and hugged my dad. “I love him more than you’ll ever know.”

“Treat my daughter well, Gio, or no alliance will ever save you.” My father smirked. “That’s a promise.”

“I will treat her like the royalty she is.” Gio stood and put his arm around me. “That’s a promise, princess.”

“What about Aldo?” I asked. “Will he be a problem?”

“Aldo will be handled. You won’t have to worry about him,” my father assured us. “He went against my family when he tried to have Gio shot and you kidnapped. The Bilotti brothers saved me from a treacherous alliance, and the Calabrese family will have to answer for all their misdeeds.” He headed for the door. “But that isn’t for either of you to worry about.”

“My brothers and I will help in any way we can,” Gio said.

“Celebrate the revelation of my grandchild.” My father nodded. “Tomorrow, we’ll talk about wedding plans.”

“Papa! Gio hasn’t asked me to marry him.”

“He will.” My dad left the room.

“Sorry.” I rolled my eyes. “He has no filter.”

“You don’t have to have a filter when you’re the head of everything.” Gio took both my hands in his. “It’s been a wild night.”

“What?” I laughed. “We haven’t even started our night.”

“My little Cin, what am I going to do with you?”

“I have a few ideas.”

“So do I.” He dropped down on one knee, keeping one of my hands in his.

“Gio, what are you doing?” I put my hand over my mouth. “You don’t have to do this. My father wasn’t serious.”

“We both know he was.” He smiled at me with his perfectly white teeth and irresistible lips. “But that’s not why I’m doing this. I’m also not going to ask this question because you’re having our baby.”

“You’re not?”

“If you haven’t noticed, I tend to do what I want when I want.”

“That’s what I love most about you,” I said.

“There’s going to come a day when you ask people if they know who your husband is instead of who your father is.”

“Who do you think my husband will be?” I teased him.

“I *know* your husband will be me.”

“I’ll let you in on a little secret.” I gazed into his eyes. “I already knew that.”

“Yeah.” He smirked. “I know you did.”

“I’m glad you caught up.”

“I’ll admit I didn’t come here prepared to learn that I’m going to be a father, and I don’t have the ring that’s supposed to go with this proposal, but we can rectify that tomorrow.”

“I don’t need a ring.”

“Says my Versace girl.” He laughed. “I don’t believe you.”

“Okay, maybe just a little one. Seven or eight carats. Something subtle.” I shrugged. “Platinum setting with sparkly diamonds surrounding the big one.”

“You haven’t given it much thought, have you?”

“Are you kidding? It’s all I thought about since the moment you started teaching me English.”

“Is that why you asked me to say *will you marry me* in English at one of your first lessons?”

“You remember that?” I giggled, remembering how sexy I thought those words were coming out of his luscious lips. “I guess I wasn’t so subtle.”

“Not at all.”

“I was an awkward girl then.”

“There’s nothing awkward about you now.” He brought my knuckles to his mouth and grazed them along his lips. “Cinzia, mi vuoi sposare?”

“Si, but ask me in English.” The tears streamed down my face faster than I could wipe them. “Like you taught me.”

“Will you marry me?”

“Yes.” I knelt down and faced him. “With all of my heart and soul, you have me, Gio. I love you, and I know you’ll

make the most amazing husband.” I took his hand and placed it against my stomach. “Our little poppy seed loves you too, and you’re already a perfect dad. Protective, fierce, and loyal. You have so much to give our baby.”

“*We* have so much to give our baby.” His eyes filled with tears that I never thought I’d see from him.

“Your emotional side is very sexy.” I swiped my thumb under his eye and captured a tear.

“Don’t tell anyone about that.” He kissed my wet cheeks. “I love you.”



Gio

I stood in front of the mirror, staring at my reflection. I wasn’t a man of faith, but I said a silent prayer to anyone who would listen to help me be the husband and father that my wife and child deserved.

Within minutes, I would be standing at the ornate altar that Janero had carved for the ceremony and delivered to his Italian estate. I would stand before him, our families, and most of all my beautiful bride, and vow my life to her. She would do the same in return. In a few short months, we would welcome our first child into the world. Our future held so many possibilities.

Romero strolled in the room wearing his fine Italian tux, looking more like a model than a mob boss. “Are you ready?” he asked. “Luciana said the bridesmaids are making their way to the ceremony.”

“I’m ready.”

“Nervous? I’ll be by your side, the same way you always are for me.” He patted my back. “Rocco will be right there too.”

“I’m not nervous about marrying her. I just want to be a good husband.”

“I get it,” Romero said. “I wasn’t the best husband when I married Lu, but look at us now. If marriage has taught me one important lesson, it’s that you have to learn to compromise and give in even when you know you’re right.”

“You’re a true romantic.” I slipped on my jacket. “A real gem.”

“Lu thinks so, and Cinzia knows you are too.” He opened the door and motioned toward the hallway. “Come on, let’s get you hitched.”

As we made our way to the gardens of the estate, Rocco joined us.

“How are you holding up?” He placed his hand on my shoulder. “You ready to do this?”

“Yeah.” I took a deep breath. “I am. Thanks for being here.”

“Where else would I be?” Rocco smiled.

When the harp began to strum some classical music, my brothers and I walked out and took our place in front of the guests. Janero spared no expense for this wedding. Flowers, lights, ice sculptures, musicians, flowing champagne—you name it, we had it.

“There’s a lot of people here.” I gazed around, recognizing some faces as family and associates, but there were others who were new to me.

“You’re marrying the Don’s daughter. What did you expect?” Romero tapped his breast pocket. “Do you want my flask?”

“I’m good.”

As the classical music changed to the bridal march, the audience stood and turned their attention to the aisle where my bride would make her way to me. When she appeared in her white, silk dress that was custom designed for her, she looked like a true princess, even wearing a silver diamond-cut tiara on her head. The Malatesta family had acquired that crown years

ago from an Italian royal. Cin's mother wore it on her wedding day and she wanted to do the same to honor her.

Her gaze locked with mine as she walked arm and arm with her father, smiling at me from the distance. The fact that her belly was filled with my baby only enhanced her beauty. She glowed with happiness as she came toward me.

"She's gorgeous," Romero said. "You're very lucky."

"I know." I smiled at Cinzia as Janero led her to me.

Once they stood in front of me, Janero lifted Cin's veil and kissed her cheek. He took her hand and placed it in mine.

"Now you are truly my son," Janero said. "I hope you know what an honor it is to have you as part of my family."

"I'll cherish your daughter for the rest of my life." I looked into Cinzia's eyes. "You're stunning."

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you too."

As we stepped up to meet the minister, I didn't let go of her hand. I would never let go. Our fates were entangled in one another forever. Mafia royalty, now and always. Our lives were only beginning.

The End

If you'd like to see how Romero and Luciana got their start, check out *Ruthless Saints*. Sign up for Ella Jade's newsletter here:

<https://view.flodesk.com/pages/5eaf17b582272f0026fed03a>

About the Author

USA Today Bestselling author Ella Jade has been writing for as long as she can remember. As a child, she often had a notebook and pen with her, and now as an adult, the laptop is never far. The plots and dialogue have always played out in her head, but she never knew what to do with them. That all changed when she discovered the eBook industry. She started penning novels at a rapid pace and now she can't be stopped.

Ella resides in New Jersey with her husband, two boys, and two feisty Chihuahua writing companions. She can often be found creating sexy, domineering men and the strong women who know how to challenge them in and out of the bedroom. She hopes you'll get lost in her words.

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VOLUME

Two

THE ENFORCER'S CAPTOR BY OONA RYDA
AND CANDACE AYERS

The Enforcer's Captive

Kidnapped. Violated. Made to crave it.

My captor awakened dark desires I didn't know I had.

But freedom always comes at a price.

When he abducted me, I fought him every step of the way.

But my punishments morphed into pleasure under his expert touch.

My body betrayed me, arching into his twisted desires.

I began to crave his cruelty, ache for his stinging touch.

I tell myself it's all just an act to survive.

But my lies don't fool my racing heart.

In his arms, I find sick salvation. But if I stay too long, I may lose myself completely.

CHAPTER 1

Natalia

THE DINER IS BUSTLING TONIGHT,

filled to capacity with the usual mix of truckers, locals, and wanderers just passing through. I top off coffee mugs as I make my rounds, pausing to chat with regulars seated at the counter. The familiar buzz of dinner conversations mixed with clanks and scrapes of cutlery on cheap china feel like home to me. This is my refuge, my anchor amid the drowning emptiness that has defined my life for the past year.

Ever since Mom died, I feel untethered, set adrift on an ocean of uncertainty. She and I were close. Best friends. I've never had many friends. I scoff under my breath at that, not wanting to examine the fact that my mother was my closest and maybe my only friend.

The past year has been tough, but I'm okay. I mean, I work a lot but there's comfort in the routine. The same patrons, same greasy food, same elevator music piped through the sound system. It's monotonous, but there's also reassurance in the consistency. No sudden changes to upset the balance of my existence. Besides, with no savings and the mountain of Mom's medical bills to pay off, my only choice was to remain at the diner and pick up extra shifts whenever I can.

I feel the hair on the back of my neck stands on end.

He's here.

I don't even need to see him to know. I can sense his presence.

For the past week, he's come in every evening, always taking the corner booth that gives a full view of the diner. His eyes track me like a hawk, sending prickles down my spine with their intensity. I've managed to pawn him off on other servers so far. I know it's strange, but everything in me tells me to stay away from that man. My instincts scream danger.

It's not one specific thing, it's everything combined—the expensive watch, the scarred knuckles, the heavy silver ring embossed with a wolf's head, the black suit, the jagged scar slicing through his left eyebrow...but mostly it's the acute, predatory focus in his gaze.

Everything about him hints at connections I want no part of, and so far I've kept my distance, exchanging tables with Maggie or Ellen anytime he's seated in my section. If he notices, he doesn't seem to care, intent on watching me circle the room.

Tonight, luck is not on my side. The diner's packed with antsy kids, hungry patrons, and customers either impatient for meals, waving me down for refills, or waiting for their checks. This leaves me no chance to switch tables with another server. Taking a deep breath, I paste on a smile and approach his booth.

“Hello,” I say brightly, laying a napkin and silverware on the table. “I'm Natalia, I'll be taking care of you this evening. Can I get you started with something to drink?”

He doesn't return my smile. His eyes drift over me slowly, and my skin sprouts goosebumps as if traced by fingertips. When his gaze lifts to meet mine again, I feel pinned by their darkness.

“No food. Coffee. Black.” His voice matches the rest of him—smooth with a hint of a Russian accent and refined yet hard at the edges. He has an underlying air of sheer danger.

I give a quick nod and turn to escape the unsettling effect of his focus, but his next words stop me. “You've been avoiding me.”

A nervous laugh escapes my lips as I glance back. “No. No, of course not I...” I trail off at the intensified scrutiny of his expression, like he’s peeling back every layer of my lie. Heat crawls up my neck.

“My apologies for not properly attending to you sooner,” I amend stiffly. “I’ll bring your coffee right over.”

Before he can reply, I slip away quickly, feeling those eyes follow me across the room. What is his interest in me? From what the others tell me, he doesn’t say more than a few words each visit and has barely touched his food on previous nights, seemingly content just watching me work.

Unease twists my stomach as I prepare his coffee. There’s an almost possessive edge to his observation, and it triggers the instincts I’ve honed over years of my mother drilling into me to “keep your eyes open and trust no one, Natalia.”

Most patrons are harmless, and I’ve dealt with rude and entitled customers before. I know how to shut down inappropriate behavior quickly. But this guy’s different. He’s not rude or offensive. Just scary.

Squaring my shoulders, I return to the corner booth, turn his mug upright, and pour from the freshly brewed pot, forcing a smile. “Here you go. Let me know if you need anything else.”

He wraps a broad hand around the cup, and my eyes are drawn to his scarred knuckles. “What time are you finished?”

The blunt question catches me off guard and I jump a little. “I’m...not sure yet. It’s been busy tonight.” I search his stony features, looking for some clue as to his intent. Finding none, I harden my tone. “I need to check on my other customers. Excuse me.”

I turn sharply before he can respond, a small act of defiance. Let him read the hint and back off. Of course, the prickle on the back of my neck tells me his gaze remains locked on me as I make my rounds.

The next twenty minutes pass at a crawl. The crowd thins, though my watchful observer remains tucked away in his

corner. Maggie shoots me a sympathetic look.

“Still being eye-stalked by Secret Agent Smolder over there?” she asks quietly with a flick of her eyes toward the corner booth.

I glance over my shoulder at him, then quickly avert my gaze so he doesn't catch me staring.

“Ooh girl, he is tall, dark, and scary-hot. And he's checking you out. You know I'd have served him in a heartbeat—on my knees, on a mattress, in the back alley...” She waggles her penciled eyebrows suggestively and I laugh. Maggie usually swaps with me and takes his table.

“You were so busy tonight. I didn't feel right asking.” Heat crawls up my neck as I glance over again. “But he creeps me out.”

Maggie snorts, nudging my arm. “You're too nice, girl. Don't let him intimidate you, whatever his deal is. Hey, want me to play Sheriff Maggie and run the guy out of town?”

I give a small smile, cheered briefly by her protectiveness. “I think I've got it covered. But thank you.”

With an encouraging wink, she adds, “I wish he'd stare at me like that,” before she disappears into the kitchen, an exaggerated sway in her step.

I steel myself with a deep breath before approaching the corner booth. Time to firmly convey the message that I'm off limits. But when I arrive with the bill, ready to inform him we're closing, he's gone. His coffee cup is empty and a fifty-dollar bill lies beside it. The generous tip does nothing to ease the cold trickle of apprehension down my spine.

Stop it, I scold myself, stuffing the fifty into my apron pocket. You're being paranoid. He's likely just some recently divorced lonely businessman passing the evening hours here in a crowd rather than going home to whatever high-rise building around here he lives in. He'll probably meet some sexy executive soon and they'll start dating and he'll never step foot in this place again.

I try to shake off my unease as I finish my closing duties. The few solo diners remaining at the counter get the hint when I start shutting off lights and flipping chairs onto tables. Jose, the bored-looking young line cook gives a mock salute as he slips out the backdoor, leaving silence behind.

Still, I find myself rushing through the rest of closing duties, my nerves wound tighter than a cobra about to strike. As I usher the last two customers out the door, I switch the glowing “open” sign off, lock the door behind me, and practically leap into my Honda.

Only once the diner’s neon lights fade in the rearview mirror do I breathe easier.

The trailer park where I rent a thirty-year-old single-wide is only a few miles up the highway, tucked just out of sight of the main road. Home sweet home, for whatever that’s worth. At least it’s a roof over my head, which was a relief to find in those first few weeks after Mom’s funeral.

My headlights cut a feeble swath through the darkness as I pull into the dirt and gravel driveway. Something skitters under the trailer, probably that possum I keep hoping will get bored and move on to richer dumpsters.

With a jaw-cracking yawn, I slide my key into the perpetually sticking front door and shoulder it open. Pitch blackness greets me. The crappy wiring must have shorted again. With a sigh, I fish my phone from my purse and flick on the flashlight. I’ll deal with the breaker in the morning.

I kick off my sneakers and shrug out of my uniform, the grease smell a constant even after dozens of washings, then I slip on my worn flannel sleep shorts and a tank top before shuffling to the bathroom.

I splash water on my face and use a soapy rag to wipe away the sheen of diner grime. Staring at my reflection in the dim light, I press my fingertips to the shadows under my eyes. Twenty-two going on forty from stress and lack of sleep. Can’t afford to quit, though. My job is all that’s holding my life together right now.

After scrubbing the day away, I slide between cool sheets with a grateful sigh, turn off my phone light, and drift toward sleep.

Just as I slip into dreamland, a sharp crack shatters the silence. My eyes fly open and I startle hard. Breath frozen in my lungs, I stare blindly into the darkness. Please let it be that possum knocking over the trash again.

But even as the hopeful thought forms, the unmistakable sound of footsteps reaches my ears. No possum can sound like that.

Oh god. Someone's in my trailer.

Fear like a dumpload of cement pours into my veins, paralyzing me. No, this can't be happening. Not here. Who the hell would want to break into a crappy, rundown trailer?

A rustling sound spurs my frozen body into action. I sit straight upright in bed, scrambling for my phone with shaky hands.

Stay calm, call 911, get help—

Strong fingers seize my wrist before I can place the call, twisting sharply. A cry of pain bursts from my lips as I'm wrenched around.

The glow from the cellphone screen illuminates his face, all sharp angles and... Oh my god, it's him. My stalker from the diner. How can he... How does he... Why...?

"Please," I gasp out. "Just take what you want and go."

His hand clamps bruisingly over my mouth before I can say more. "Shhh. Not a word." His low voice holds no warmth, only icy menace.

I have no choice but to comply as his arm bands around my waist and he drags me forcibly toward the front door. I thrash weakly, bare feet scrambling for purchase on the cheap linoleum. But his iron grip doesn't relent, pulling me stumbling into the pitch-black night.

The scream builds in my throat, primal terror overwhelming me. If I let him force me into the car idling

nearby, I'm as good as dead.

With desperation-fueled strength, I twist sharply in his grasp. His hand slips enough for me to sink my teeth into the meat of his palm, biting down fiercely.

He grunts in pain and surprise, grip loosening enough for me to wriggle free. I run blindly, gravel digging into my bare soles. No plan except to escape this monster.

Before I make it two steps his fist knots in my hair, wrenching me back against him. I claw at his arm but he's immovable as granite.

"That was not wise." His voice holds tightly restrained fury now.

I open my mouth to scream, only for his hand to clamp down again even tighter. "Do not fight me. Understand?"

All I can do is nod weakly, lungs burning for air as black spots crowd my vision.

He says nothing else, just drags me to the waiting car and shoves me into the backseat. My temple cracks against the doorframe in an explosion of dizzying pain. I feel a pinprick on my neck moments before my vision darkens and oblivion sucks me under.

CHAPTER 2

Natalia

DISORIENTED, I try to stretch cramped muscles, only to find my wrists bound behind my back. There's tape over my mouth, sealing in the scream fighting for release.

It's not a nightmare. I'm in the trunk of a moving car. Every bump in the road jars my throbbing head. My stomach threatens to revolt, but I force down the bile.

Keep it together. Assess the situation. Blind panic won't help now.

What is going on? This guy must be some lunatic. A psycho. I can think of no other reason why anyone would want to kidnap me. Maybe he's a serial killer. Fresh fear spills through me, colder than the metal coffin encasing me.

Mom's voice whispers in my memory, "If they take you to a second location, you're as good as dead." She drummed basic self-defense into me from childhood. For the life of me, I can't remember what you're supposed to do when you find yourself bound and gagged in the back of a serial killer's trunk.

The car slows, turning onto what sounds like a gravel road. He's taking me to the second location. Which means I'm on borrowed time.

Determination seeps through my despair. I won't die like a lamb helplessly awaiting slaughter. When he opens the trunk, I'll be ready.

The engine cuts off and I hear the door opening and shutting then the pop of the trunk release. This may be my only chance.

Light spears the darkness as the trunk lid lifts. I squeeze my eyes shut against the glare.

Just wait. Just wait.

My captor leans in. His scent is an intoxicating mix of spice and musk, and I hate that he smells good. Large hands grip my shoulders to haul me out.

Now!

I twist violently, striking out with both feet toward the shadowed face looming over me.

My heels crack against his jaw in a satisfying jolt. He grunts, thrown off balance just long enough for me to jackknife my body and scramble madly out of the trunk. I hit the ground running. It's not easy to run fast when your hands are bound behind your back, but I do it. My bare feet burn as I race for moonlit trees in the distance

Almost there...you can make it...

An iron band loops around my waist, momentum plowing us both to the dirt. I kick and wiggle, but he has leverage in his size and strength and uses them to his advantage to flip me onto my back. No escape.

Fury burns through his eyes as he straddles my hips, pinning me effortlessly even when I buck and writhe beneath him. A trickle of blood leaks from the corner of his mouth where I landed a solid hit.

“Enough!” The command rings through the night air. Chest heaving, he glares down at me, our faces inches apart. “That was a very foolish stunt. Do you have any concept of the danger you’re in?”

My screams are muffled against the tape, but I try even though I'm pinned helplessly beneath him. Something dangerous flickers in his shadowed gaze at my show of spirit.

“Playtime is over.” His voice drops an octave. “You’re at my mercy now. So I suggest you reconsider fighting me any further. Next time, there will be punishment for your disobedience.”

He rises, dragging me up with him, his steel grip proving his point. But I meet his glare steadily, refusing to cower. Fuck him. I may be his captive but I won’t break easily.

For a moment, he simply studies my face, brow furrowed. Then, with a soft exhale that’s almost a laugh, he turns and drags me toward a looming cabin just visible in the moonlight.

He glances down at me a couple of times as we walk, then murmurs, “I have a feeling you’re going to be very entertaining.”

His ominous statement sends ice through my veins. But I lift my chin, managing to square my shoulders even with my wrists bound.

I have to survive this.

Fear slithers through me as he shoves me through the cabin door. My eyes dart around the dim space, searching desperately for an escape route.

The main room is small but well-appointed, with hardwood floors and rustic furniture. An open kitchen occupies one corner, while a hallway leads off to what are presumably bedrooms, maybe a bathroom. Sturdy, exposed wooden beams across the ceiling are somehow cozy.

If I weren’t here against my will, this might be a charming weekend retreat. But with the predator at my back, this shadowed interior takes on a sinister cast.

He prods me forward, pushing me toward the short hall. My toes curl against the cool wood floors, instincts screaming not to let him force me into a confined space where I’ll be even more vulnerable. I dig in my heels, bare feet slipping but still resisting his momentum.

His hands clamp down painfully on my shoulders as he gives me a little shake. “Enough. It’s time you learned who is in control here.”

The steel in his voice brooks no argument. Still, defiance rises in my throat. My, “Fuck you,” comes out as garbled grunts behind the tape. I won’t cower before this monster who ripped me from my home, from my bed.

In response, he applies bruising pressure just below my jawline, forcing my head up at an awkward angle. “Uh-uh, none of that,” he tuts in my ear. “Let’s keep things civil, shall we?”

I suppress a shudder at the sensation of his warm breath on my skin and cease struggling. Picking my battles is the wisest choice right now. Once the tape is off my mouth, there will be plenty of opportunities to make my feelings known.

Seemingly satisfied by my cooperation, he nudges me forward into a small bedroom. Floral bedding and lace curtains seem jarringly out of place compared to his sinister presence looming behind me. I flinch as he reaches around me to flick on a lamp atop the dresser, flooding the room with warm light. With the added illumination, I spot a door leading to an attached bathroom.

Gathering my courage, I turn to face him fully for the first time. He always crept me out, but I never really got a good assessing look at him before. Now that I can observe him clearly, I see what Maggie was talking about. He is handsome—for an older guy. My guess is he’s around his late thirties or early forties, maybe. His straight nose, square jaw, and full lips make his face classically handsome. His mouth is incredibly sexy. His eyes, though. His eyes are nearly black, and cruel. They seem to devour light rather than reflect it.

Currently, his sexy mouth is contorted in a sneer as he watches me. “Is the room to your liking, princess?” He gestures grandly as if he’s a host and I’m a guest. “I do hope you’ll find it comfortable during your stay,” he mocks.

Fresh anger rising, I unleash a torrent of muffled vitriol on him, straining against the tape over my mouth.

His smile only widens at my tirade. “Ah yes, how thoughtless of me to keep you muffled like that.” He steps closer, his thumb and forefinger millimeters from the edge of

the tape when he stops and his grin turns wicked. “Be still now. Unless you want this to hurt.”

I force myself to stand rigid and try not to flinch when he touches me. He murmurs something meant to soothe as if speaking to a skittish animal. The mocking pretense of care makes my skin crawl.

With agonizing slowness, he peels the tape from my flesh. I bite my tongue against crying out as it pulls painfully on my skin and yanks out some of my hair that was stuck to it. Finally, it rips free and I gasp at the stinging relief, working my dry mouth.

“Don’t make me regret that. I can easily replace it with another piece.” He brushes a strand of hair from my cheek and I jerk my head aside, fuming.

“Don’t touch me,” I snap through parched lips. “Don’t pretend you didn’t break into my trailer and steal me out of my bed. You’re a kidnapper. I’m not falling for your fake gentleness.”

All humor evaporates from his expression, eyes turning flinty. The affable mask slips as the predator lurks beneath surfaces.

“No? You prefer the trunk of my car instead?” He leans in, crowding me with his tall, muscled frame. “Perhaps another dose of sedative to keep you docile?”

I shuffle back until my shoulders hit the wall. “What the hell do you want? Why did you take me? What do you plan to do with me?” Frustration makes my voice shrill.

With a scoff, he leans against the door jamb, leveling a brooding look at me. “That is not your concern. You will remain here until I decide otherwise.”

“So I’m your prisoner, is that it?”

He cocks a brow, seemingly bored by my outrage. “Make this easy on yourself, *golubushka*. The doors are locked and you have no vehicle. Even if you managed to slip past me, we are miles from civilization out here. You would perish in the

wilderness.” His eyes rake over my thin nightclothes pointedly.

I’ve lived in this country since I was eight years old, but I was born in Russia and speak the language fluently. He called me “little dove.” The diminutive nickname combined with the intimacy in his gaze, makes my skin crawl. “I’d rather take my chances in the woods. Anything is better than being your captive plaything.”

In a startlingly quick movement, he closes the short distance between us, planting his hands on either side of my head. I shrink back against the wall, my pulse racing as he traps me effortlessly.

“Foolish girl. You have no concept of the danger you tempt.” His voice drops to a menacing growl that vibrates through me.

Refusing to let him intimidate me into silence, I lift my chin. “I’m not afraid of you.” The lie comes out more steadily than expected.

He searches my face intently, weighing my false bravado. Then he dips his head, breath hot and slightly minty against my cheek when he whispers, “Oh, but you should be.”

My stubborn defiance wavers at the whispered threat. Satisfied he’s rattled me, he draws back, all nonchalance again. He issues me a one-word command, “Rest,” before slipping from the room and shutting the door firmly behind him.

Alone, the gravity of the situation hits me, and the adrenaline—fueled by fear and rage—seeps away. I sink onto the edge of the bed, limbs like rubber, gulping air to hold off the sobs fighting to break free.

Don’t fall apart. Do not fall apart!

Do something. Anything. I focus on slowing my ragged breath and taking stock. His arrogant assumption that I’ll just calmly accept being held prisoner makes me bristle. I need to act while he still underestimates me.

Escape is priority one. I cross to the window over the bed and nudge the lace curtain aside, scanning for potential exits. My heart sinks. The cabin is built on a hill and the glass overlooks a rickety balcony with a twenty-foot drop to the ground below. Too risky to attempt bound and barefoot.

The thick wood door also appears secure, probably deadbolted from the outside. But maybe...

I hurry to the bathroom. There's a small window over the tub. The bathroom faces the front corner of the cabin, so there might not be such a steep drop-off. I bend at the waist and step over my zip-tied hands so they're cuffed in front rather than in back, then test the window. My pulse leaps when it slides open easily, letting in the crisp night air. But my excitement soon dies when I realize it's not large enough for me to fit through.

Escape is possible, but I'll need to leave the way I came—through the front door. I work quickly and quietly while he's gone from the room.

I hastily position the pillows under the bedspread so it looks as though I crawled under the covers and went to sleep. Then I lift the toilet tank lid free and smuggle it into the bedroom. The weight makes my bound wrists ache, but I manage.

With effort, I wedge myself between the dresser and wall, braced in position to swing my makeshift weapon.

Now to wait. That bastard's smug arrogance infuriates me. Does he really think he can just abduct a woman with no consequence? A chill runs through my blood when I realize he's probably done it before, and possibly succeeded. I wonder how many women he's abducted. Has he killed them all? Are there bodies buried around the grounds outside?

Well, I am not as helpless as I may appear. This predator chose the wrong prey to stalk.

Time creeps by. My legs cramp and my arms tremble from maintaining my position, but I force myself to focus past the discomfort. If I blow this, who knows when or if I'll get another chance, and timing is everything.

The door knob finally rattles and my pulse spikes. I only get one shot at this.

He strides in casually, leaving the door open behind him. He remains rooted in the center of the room, staring at the lump in the bed, clearly thinking it's me. Perfect.

With immense satisfaction, I snap the heavy tank lid forward using as much strength as I can muster. My aim proves true. The curved edge strikes him directly across the temple before he can react.

He staggers, stunned, and I bolt through the open door. My bare feet slap the polished wood as I race down the hall, aiming for the front door.

So close...just a few more...

A sound comes from behind me—a cross between a shout and a roar—a warcry. Too late, my mistake becomes clear. I failed to knock him fully unconscious. I should have hit him again while he was stunned.

Hands like steel clamps ensnare my waist hurling me to the ground. I twist and buck, but his superior weight traps me facedown on the hardwood.

“Devious little bitch,” he grates in my ear. I scream and flail at the floor, kicking frantically, but he's solid muscle and heavy as hell. With my wrists still bound, I'm fully at his mercy.

“That was impressive.” His voice drips fury tempered by lurking excitement as I struggle uselessly beneath him. “But now you've crossed a line, *golubushka*. And for that, you need to be punished.”

Punished? The promise of impending violence makes my vision blur with panic and despair. I'm at this psycho's mercy.

As he roughly hauls me up, I unleash the banshee scream that's been building inside me, high and piercing. Better to go out fighting than to surrender. I continue shrieking even as he clamps a hand over my mouth, muffling the sound.

We grapple in a crazed, twisting battle back down the hall.

Once again, I manage to sink my teeth into the hand covering my mouth, tasting iron, but he only responds by releasing me to backhand me brutally across the face. My cry cuts off as I reel from the blow. Before I can recover or flee, he's on me once more, face contorted in wild fury.

The last thought that flashes through my mind as he throws me on the bed is, "*Oh, shit!*" But I won't stop fighting him.

Not until I'm six feet under.

CHAPTER 3

Natalia

HE SLIDES a chair over next to the bed, and with seemingly no effort, I'm hauled up and draped face down over his lap. It happens too fast for me to even put up a fight, and the next thing I know my sleep shorts are yanked down to my calves bearing my ass to him.

I start to wiggle, but his arm wraps over my hip, pinning me in place. "What do you think you're doing?" I yell, as I thrash and twist attempting to get away from him.

His hold is like a steel vice, and it's clear I won't be going anywhere until he decides to let me go. "You tried to run from me. Twice. I warned you the first time, now you must be punished."

His hand strokes over my naked ass cheek tenderly, and to my mortification, it triggers a rush of moisture between my legs. "Don't you dare," I grind out through my teeth.

Then I try a different tactic—pleading.

"Please, I won't do it again. I promise I won't try to run again. Or hit you with anything." I'm lying through my teeth but I'll say anything right now. Anything to get him to let me go.

He squeezes my ass and I almost moan. Good god, what is wrong with me? I shiver, feeling his skin on mine. His touch is warm and rough and a small measure of desire flickers to life in me.

“What are you doing?” I demand, my heart racing in my chest.

“Teaching you a lesson.”

What the fuck?

His hand lifts off of my ass and then slams down onto my left cheek. The sound of his palm cracking against my bare skin echoes off the walls, and searing pain explodes across my backside. The pain only has a second to register before he lands another on the right side.

I jerk against his hold, a ragged gasp escaping my lips as the assault continues.

“Fucking...bastard...”

I’ve never been spanked before. My mother was strict, but never resorted to physical discipline. And my sexual experience is very limited. As in, I’ve had sex twice and both times were nothing to write home about.

His hand slides up and over my cheeks and then down the backs of my thighs.

My jaw clenches hard enough to ache as I process what’s going on.

Another blistering smack, then two more in quick succession—one on each cheek. I keep my teeth gritted, trying hard to swallow any sounds. Mostly because I’m not sure what will come out. I’m not sure how I’m feeling. Compared to all the ways he can hurt me—things he can do to me while I’m at his mercy—this doesn’t rate super high on the vicious brutality scale. It stings like a bitch, but it kind of feels...something else. I wouldn’t say *good*. Not exactly.

He leans over slightly and I flinch instinctively, anticipating another blow. Instead, his hand fists in my hair, wrenching my head back. His lips graze my ear.

“Do not call me bastard. “You will address me as ‘Sir’.” He speaks casually as if we’re simply making pleasant conversation rather than him assaulting the naked ass of a bound woman draped over his knee.

He unleashes a flurry of spanks, each one harder and more painful than the last. My entire body jolts with every slap, my bottom on fire from the relentless onslaught. His palm comes down on my inflamed skin over and over. I can feel every single slap deep in my core, radiating out into trembling feelings of helplessness and...pleasure.

What is wrong with me that I feel pleasure from this?

Every time he drives his open palm down upon my sensitive flesh with a sharp, stinging smack, an explosion of red-hot pain shoots through my body and ends with a tingling between my legs. He is unrelenting, leaving no part of my bottom untouched. I wince and whimper as the heat from every hard slap penetrates my core like wildfire, leaving scorching desire in its wake. Every agonizing strike sears through me as I try to arch and twist away from him to no avail. He punishes my exposed bottom until it glows ruby red beneath his fiery touch.

I'm too dazed to summon any real defiance.

With each strike, I become increasingly aware of his dominance and power. His absolute control over me.

"Say it," he orders.

Say what?

"I..uh..." *What is it he wants me to say?*

"How will you address me?" His hand rests right on the spot where the curve of my ass meets my thighs.

"Dickhead?"

His hand comes down hard, several times in succession, brutal stings, and I struggle to hold back tears. I don't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry. Unfortunately, I'm completely at his mercy, and there's nothing I can do about it. He has all the power in this situation.

I attempt to keep my emotions at bay by squeezing my eyelids shut, but he increases the force of his slaps until involuntary tears flow down my cheeks.

"S-sir," I manage to squeak out.

“Good girl.”

My body trembles uncontrollably, but I feel an odd fluttering in my chest at his praise.

“I am the boss. You will do as I say.” He rubs his calloused palm over my burning cheeks. “Do you understand?”

“Y-yes.” His hand freezes, and then I remember myself. “Yes, *sir*.”

“Good girl,” he answers.

Softly he caresses my hips, my lower back, the curve of my ass, and that tender spot at the top of my thighs.

My ass is sore and achy and burns like fire.

He glides his fingers up and down my ravaged skin. His touch is comforting and soothing, and I can’t help but crave more.

“Good girls get rewarded.” His murmur causes a strange sense of pride to rise in me as if his approval is important to me. My tears start to dry and I sniffle, trying to normalize my breathing and soothe both my emotional turmoil and the frenzied thudding of my heart against my rib cage.

As the pain of my punishment fades, something else takes its place. A sensation that’s different yet similar. Arousal.

I feel the moisture coating my inner thighs.

Oh my god. I’m turned on by lying bare-assed over a serial killer’s thighs while he blisters my butt, yet both of the nice boys I had perfectly sweet, very vanilla sex with left me cold and unsatisfied? How defective am I?

His fingers drift closer to my pussy, sending a tingle of anticipation up my spine. I inhale sharply, my teeth lightly biting down on my bottom lip.

He’s gonna know. He’s gonna know I’m drenched.

Do I care?

I squeeze my legs together attempting to keep him from finding out.

His fingertips are so soothing, though, my muscles loosen, and without realizing it, my legs spread slightly. His finger lightly brushes my inner thigh, gliding over the wetness there.

I stiffen. His fingers journey deeper, probing between my legs, over my inner folds where I'm soaked.

He chuckles a low, rumbling sound and my face heats in mortification.

I have no words.

His fingers move along the crease of my pussy, grazing my clit ever so slightly before receding. He repeats this over and over again until I'm lost in the blissful sensation.

It's a tease though. And before long, my clit is aching with need, throbbing in a way I've never experienced before. I didn't know such a heightened sense of awareness existed.

My craving is nearly unbearable. My nipples are so sensitive that the fabric of my tank top rubbing against them feels like a caress, which only increases the intensity of my desire.

Somewhere in the recesses of my mind, it dawns on me that I'm no longer fighting, no longer struggling, but I push that thought aside to examine later.

What is wrong with me? Why am I so worked up like this?

I'm entranced by his gentle strokes back and forth. His roughened fingertip sends sparks through me every time it grazes my clit.

The walls of my pussy clench and I release a series of keening little whimpers.

I need to come. I need it more than air, more than I need to breathe right now. His calloused fingertip begins circling my clit, still very gently.

Ohmygod, ohmygod...

My thighs widen, quivering as I hover right on the brink. My muscles are tight, crying for release. If he would just add a little pressure, just a little harder. Then he stops. Just stops.

My body is on fire, my ass cheeks throb, and the ache between my legs intensifies with every second that passes. I wriggle against his thigh trying to create friction, and I feel his rock-hard erection dig into my side.

“Beg for it.”

Huh? ... Beg? ... What?

“If you want to come, beg me for it,” he repeats in a low, sultry tone that is dangerously captivating.

Fuuuck.

“Uh...um...p-please. Please can I come?”

But he doesn't move. He remains still. *Argh!*

“*Sir*. Please can I come, *sir*?”

I spread my thighs wider hoping to urge him on, and it works because his light touch resumes, but he strokes only two more times before he pinches my clit—hard.

A sharp stinging pain like a red hot poker makes me cry out in agony before he releases my clit and a sizzle of electricity shoots through my veins like I just bit down on a live wire.

My core tightens and all the blood in my body rushes between my legs. My eyes roll back in my head. My mouth falls open. A wailing cry emerges from deep in my throat as the most intense orgasm of my life consumes me.

The pleasure is so intense I see stars. I lose control completely and feel as though I'm floating on a cloud up in the sky, my body shattered into a million tiny pieces.

My heart pounds as I try to process what is happening, but I have neither the mental nor the physical capacity at the moment to do anything but surrender to absolute bliss.

CHAPTER 4

Viktor

I RETURN to the safe house after the bare-knuckle sparring match, my fists still sore from the force of my blows. The skin is split. Dried blood stains my hands. I barely notice. My mind is occupied with thoughts of her. Natalia.

Stubborn. Defiant. Refusing to yield.

She doesn't know that I'm the only thing standing between her and a shallow grave.

Each defiant glare, every snarled curse, drives me to new extremes. I want—no, need—to dominate her. That insolent spirit sparks something inside me, a need to make her submit.

She's different.

I've played games with other women. High-priced call girls, girls from the club. But tonight, the sight of Natalia bound and helpless, draped over my knee, her naked ass at my mercy, stirred something foreign in me. A new compulsion. An urge to shelter rather than shatter. To protect rather than exploit.

And I went too far.

It was supposed to be a punishment and I meant to use my belt to deliver it, not my hand. I intended to teach her a lesson and to inflict only pain, not pleasure.

But when I saw the smooth globes of her plump, unmarred ass in my face coupled with the arousal drenching her glistening pussy lips, I lost control.

Lost fucking control. I've never lost control before.

I recall her body arching, her ass reddened with my palm prints quivering as I brought her to orgasm. The way she gasped and trembled at my touch. The little mewls she made. I knew she'd respond to me, despite her anger. I saw the telling flush on her cheeks, the curiosity and surprise in her eyes.

I left her sleeping hours ago, so worn out she could barely hold her eyes open.

I should end this. Kill her now. Exactly as I was supposed to.

Those were my orders from the pakhan himself—orders I fully intended to follow until I laid eyes on her a little over a week ago...

The sharp slap of fists against flesh and bone echoes through the empty warehouse, punctuated by grunts of pain. I observe dispassionately as two of my soldiers pummel a man tied to a chair, his face swelling beneath their blows.

Blood drips from their knuckles as I lean against a concrete pillar, arms folded. "Have you reconsidered being more forthcoming?" I ask calmly when they pause. "We can make this quick, or drag it out. The choice is yours."

The man spits out a bloody tooth before glaring up at me. "Go to hell!"

I shrug, keeping my tone polite. "Suit yourself."

At my signal, my guys resume their brutal rhythm. The man's bravado quickly dissolves into choked pleas for mercy. Amateur. He'll break soon—they all do under enough pressure. And I apply pressure extremely well.

My cell phone vibrates in my pocket. Few have this number—my pakhan, Boris Kozlov, is one. I step into the shadowed hallway to answer.

"Boss?"

"We have a situation requiring your attention." Boris's gravelly voice instantly sets me on edge.

I listen silently as he outlines the problem—an eyewitness to a Bratva hit. My jaw tightens. Sloppy, leaving a witness who can connect our brotherhood to one of the corpses probably now lying at the bottom of Lake Michigan.

“I’ll handle it,” I assure the pakhan. As the Bratva enforcer, it’s my job.

“See that you do.” The line goes dead. Boris never wastes words. I consider the task at hand, calculating logistics. My men will track the witness’s identity based on the info Boris transmits over a secure line. Once a name and location surfaces, eliminating said witness will be simple.

I tuck away the phone and adjust my jacket before striding back into the makeshift interrogation room. One sharp twist later, and the whimpering man slumps forward in the chair, a loose end tied off.

“Clean this up,” I order my men as I head for the door.

For once, as I climb into my sleek Porche 911, I feel a weariness settle over me. At just shy of my fortieth birthday, I’m not as quick to enjoy violence anymore, even when necessary. I’m not sure why. Perhaps the years have exacted their toll.

I don’t love killing civilians—those whose only crime is being in the wrong place at the wrong time, but I brush the troublesome sentiment aside, turning the key in the ignition.

I took an oath. The Bratva comes first.

Sentiment gets you killed in my world. I learned that lesson as a boy in the streets of Moscow, and later at my father’s side when he inducted me into the brotherhood.

Streetlights wash over the sleek car’s dashboard as I pull up to the iron gates leading to my estate. They open smoothly and I speed down the tree-lined drive.

Kill the witness, toss her body in the lake, and wipe my hands clean. That’s all this requires. Simple.

Simple. Or so I thought at the time. It should have been simple. Track the girl down, get her to a secluded location, and

eliminate the threat. Clean, clinical, detached. Instead, I allowed this waif of a girl—a diner waitress—to get under my skin. I barely recognize myself anymore. Since when do I hesitate before a kill?

I step out onto the back porch, lighting a cigarette and inhaling deeply. The nicotine rushes through my veins, easing my nerves. Out here, surrounded by the silent forest, my mind begins to clear. Emotions, especially tender ones, are liabilities in my world. If you let them cloud your judgment, you won't last long. My father forged me into a hardened instrument of the Bratva, one with no compassion and no misgivings. Emotions are for the weak, and the only devotion a made man can afford is to the brotherhood.

For some reason, Natalia unsettles me in a way I don't understand.

I scrub my forehead in frustration. This is foolishness. She is my captive, my plaything to use however I wish. She is merely a diversion to pass the time until I finish her.

But even as I think these things, I know it's a lie. From the first moment I saw her in that cheap diner, humming under her breath as she poured coffee, a hint of a smile on her pretty lips, I knew she was different. There is something about her that calls to a place deep within me, a place I didn't know existed.

I flick my cigarette butt onto the driveway and mutter a sharp curse, before going inside to pour myself a drink from the crystal decanter on the sideboard. The vodka burns going down, but it does nothing to quiet my thoughts. I sink into the leather armchair in the corner, resting my head in my hands.

What am I going to do with her? I am bound by my code of honor to eliminate any witness to our activities—no exceptions. But the thought of ending this girl's life now...I don't like it.

I take another long swallow of vodka, letting the alcohol warm my blood. I'll play with her, get my fill of her, and when I grow bored of her, as I do with all women, her time will come to an end. At least that way her last days might contain a few shreds of pleasure.

The thought sends an unexpected jolt of heat through my veins. I close my eyes, picturing her bound naked on the bed before me, golden hair spilling across the pillows, long limbs stretched taut against the restraints. I imagine the sounds she'll make as I inflict exquisite pain and pleasure upon that luscious body, her cries mixing with moans of ecstasy. My breath grows ragged as desire rises within me, hard and urgent.

Yes, that's what I'll do. I'll take my fill of her thoroughly and completely. I'll dominate and possess every inch of her, satisfy my dark desires, and indulge in every depraved act that enters my twisted mind.

After I've thoroughly used her, I will grant her the release of death. This is the only mercy I can offer. A few days of transcendent euphoria and then endless sleep. Much better than a bullet in some filthy alley.

I rise and head for her room, my steps heavy but determined.

I find her curled on the bed, her slender shoulders moving up and down rhythmically in sleep.

I circle the bed like a shark ready to reach out for a handful of her hair...and stop.

I drop my hand and step back, breathing hard. I don't know what makes me stop. I don't know what causes me to retreat to the doorway. I'm confused by my own actions.

I rake a hand through my hair, then, with colossal effort, I turn and leave the room, locking it securely behind me.

I make my way to the fireplace and drop onto the leather sofa. With a muttered curse, I unbutton my fly and grasp my aching cock.

My eyes close and my head drops back as details from her punishment assault me in vivid detail—the graceful arch of her lower back, the sweet swell of her ass, the glistening pink folds framed by milky white thighs, her rippling cries and breathy moans.

I have fucked countless women, some I pay to satisfy my twisted appetites. Yet it's *her* face, *her* body, *her* moans of

anguish transforming to cries of bliss that fill my mind as I stroke myself roughly.

It doesn't take long before I'm spilling over my fist with a bitten-off curse.

I slump back against the leather, feeling empty, hollow. What have I become? I planned to debase this girl. Instead, I am out here alone, jerking my own cock while she sleeps.

Everything is turned upside down.

I clean myself with a tissue and tuck my cock back into my pants. The alcohol is buzzing through my system now, casting a merciful haze over my thoughts. On unsteady legs, I make my way to bed.

This cannot continue. One way or another, I have to end it. End her.

CHAPTER 5

Natalia

WHEN I WAKE, shame grips me. It's a delayed reaction.

I betrayed myself by surrendering, by willingly letting my kidnapper bring me to orgasm. I could have fought. I should have fought.

However worked up and hungry for release I became, I didn't have to welcome him so willingly. Damn. What happened to my self-respect?

The worst part is that even now, I can't fully regret it. Some part of me has come alive sexually. It was a year ago that I lost my virginity, to a nameless, faceless guy I met at a bar just after my mother's funeral.

Which is more shocking—that I was a virgin until I was twenty-one, or that when I finally had my cherry popped, it was by a drunken one-night stand?

My only other sexual experience happened after closing the diner one night when I was lonely and missing my mom and ended up following a tourist back to his hotel room. I don't even remember his name.

My mother suffered from occasional paranoid delusions, and because of them, she kept me sheltered. It's understandable, I suppose, that after my father died, she kind of freaked out. We left Russia with little more than the clothes on our backs.

Before tonight, the only time I ever orgasmed was a solo job. And they were never anything like the... the earth-shaking, soul-deep—Oh, god. What the hell am I saying? Can I be more of an idiot? I have a soul-deep connection with a psychopath who kidnapped me and who's probably a serial killer?

When I emerge from the shower, the night clothes I took off are gone. Draped over the bed is a clean T-shirt and nothing else. It's huge, so it must be one of *his*, but it's better than walking around naked. There are no undergarments, or anything else for me to wear, so I slip it over my head. It falls to my knees.

I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do but when I try the door it's unlocked. I hear some rustling in the main part of the cabin, so I cautiously venture down the hallway toward a delicious aroma.

The small table is set, and my captor stands behind a kitchen island, sleeves rolled up, cooking tongs in hand, watching me.

I stop short, stunned. Okay, this is creepy-weird.

He watches me take everything in, clearly enjoying my reaction.

I remind myself that I can't let down my guard. I have to keep my wits about me enough to seize my first chance at escape.

He gestures to the small table near the fireplace. "Sit," he orders.

I see no benefit in arguing at this moment, especially if he's about to feed me. I'm starving, and if what he says is true, if we're miles from civilization, and if I manage to escape, I might have to brave it in the wilderness for a while, which means I'll need to keep my strength up.

He carries two plates over to the table and sets one in front of me. It's loaded down with a ribeye, baked potato, and steamed broccoli. I'm so famished I don't even wait for him to begin. I just dig in.

I'm a third of the way through my meal before I look up. He's staring at me, his eyes holding that now-familiar predatory gleam, but it is gentled by...tenderness?

Don't fool yourself into seeing redemption where none exists.

This guy can shift in an instant. I've seen Mr. Hyde, the monster who lurks in his depths. So what if he's got magic hands? So what if he can cook? It's probably all an act to get me to lower my guard so he can better control me.

"Enjoying your dinner, little dove?" He keeps his tone light, but there's a heat behind his gaze.

I lift my chin. "Are you a serial killer?"

He blinks, then barks out a laugh.

My eyes narrow. "Well, are you?"

He shrugs and takes a bite of bloody-rare steak.

"That's not a no."

He runs a hand down his face and then shoots me a pointed look. "I am a Bratva enforcer."

A Bratva enforcer. Which means he's probably had to kill people in his line of work. Probably several people. Which makes him a fucking serial killer.

"So, what are you doing with me? Why did you kidnap me? Are you planning to off me? Like a mob hit? Why? I have nothing to do with the Bratva."

His chest pulsates with silent laughter. He's laughing at me? He's fucking laughing? What a complete asshole.

"Slow down with the questions." His grin fades as I level him with an icy look. With a sigh, he says cryptically, "I think you know why. But, as long as I choose to keep you, you're safe."

I don't know why. Wait. *Keep me?* What the fuck does that mean?

“I’m not a possession. I’m a person. I don’t know what you mean by *keep me*. I don’t know you. I don’t even know your name.” I use extra emphasis when I tack on, “*sir*.”

He looks as though he’s contemplating his response. Then, after a long pause, he says, “Viktor. My name is Viktor Ivanov.” My blood runs cold when he says, “I was given the order to kill you because of what you saw.”

I search the depths of those dark eyes, looking for deceit. For the hint that he’s joking. But his sincerity seems genuine.

“What? Why? From who? What did I see? Who gave you the order?” My body begins to tremble and I hate the sting of tears in my eyes.

He exhales a slow breath.

“It’s not something we need to discuss at the moment. You need to trust that your life is in my hands. You must do everything I tell you. You are mine. I own you.”

I shudder as the weight of his words hangs heavy between us. I feel as though I’m going to hyperventilate. I have so many questions I want answers to, but I’m on the verge of a panic attack. My mind won’t slow down. I’m shaking like a leaf. Viktor stands, rounds the table, scoops me up, and carries me, cradled in his arms, back into my prison room.

He sets me on my feet in the middle of the room and abruptly steps back, tone clinical. “Disrobe.”

I stare at him, stunned by his demand. I’m not sure what to do. Deny him submission, or play along and yield to his demands. I’ll do whichever gives me the best chance of survival. Silently I weigh the cost of refusal but see no advantage. Right now, submission is probably my best bet. Still, it’s hard to willingly render myself vulnerable in front of this monster.

“No.” My voice emerges steady, though my pulse jackhammers in my veins.

Viktor’s smile holds no warmth. “Last chance. Disrobe.”

When I stand unmoving, fists balled at my sides, he sighs, as though disappointed by a disobedient child.

“Very well.” Before I can react he rips the thin shirt down the middle leaving me bare and exposed. I gasp, instinctively covering my breasts with my arms.

Roughly he pries my arms away, letting his gaze rake over me. I burn with mingled shame and arousal as those glacial eyes devour every inch of newly exposed flesh.

“Exquisite.”

I flex and unflex my fingers as he runs his hands over me like a farmer appraising livestock. His intimate touches are designed to humiliate and debase.

When he moves behind me, tracing my spine with one long finger, I flinch away. He grasps my hair and wrenches my head back, his breath hot on my neck.

“You will not evade me, Natalia. I will have you in any manner I choose.”

Despite my anger, heat blooms within me at his words, his nearness. As much as I despise it, I can't seem to banish my desire when it comes to him. It's as though my body recognizes something in him that my mind recoils from.

His hands resume their leisurely exploration. He touches me possessively, as though I'm his. His plaything. Rage simmers beneath my skin but I force myself to remain motionless, trying so hard not to react. Denying him any visible reaction is the only form of defiance I can afford.

Unable to endure his invasive stare, I squeeze my eyes shut, further humiliated when a single tear escapes, tracing a path down my cheek.

His thumb brushes the tear away gently.

“Exquisite,” he repeats softly.

Startled, my eyes fly open and I meet his gaze. For an instant, I glimpse something unexpected there—but it's gone so quickly, I can't identify it, and his expression hardens once more.

I stand frozen while he studies every curve and hollow of my naked body. A slight tremor grips me.

At last, he steps back, fully clothed while I'm utterly exposed.

His eyes seem even darker now as he orders, "On the bed. Face down."

What? Is he fucking kidding me?!

When I hesitate, his hand cracks across my ass so hard I stagger, butt cheek burning.

"Do not test me further." His tone brooks no argument.

I comply, perversely grateful for the chance to hide my shameful arousal. The mattress dips beneath his weight as he settles beside me. I flinch when his fingers graze my shoulder.

"Hush," he murmurs, tracing abstract patterns on my skin. Despite myself, I relax fractionally at his unexpectedly gentle touch.

Slowly, methodically, he explores every inch of my bare back, my sides, even the sensitive swell of my stinging rear. I grit my teeth against the rising tide of unwelcome pleasure, determined not to let him know how affected I am.

But, of course, he discovers for himself when his fingers dip between my legs and he feels my slickness. And to make it worse, I can't restrain a choked moan.

He gives a satisfied hum at the evidence of my desire.

I clench my jaw, silently cursing my traitorous body. I will not surrender fully, not even if he wrings climax after shameful climax from me. Because fuck him.

Sensing my continued resistance, Viktor doubles his efforts, his skillful caresses slowly dismantling my defenses. Each gasp and stifled whimper that inadvertently emerges from me feels like defeat. He conquers my flesh with ease, but my mind remains my own.

Viktor flips me over so that I'm on my back, and I can feel his hot breath on my skin as he leans close. His teeth and

tongue trail a scorching path from my breasts to my stomach, and finally between my legs. He sucks my flesh, bites down sharply, laves tender licks, and peppers sharp nips all over my neck, shoulders, collarbone, breasts, and stomach. It's as though he's devouring me. And then he moves between my legs. With the same teeth and tongue action, he draws out a litany of soft cries from me as pleasure and pain mix inextricably together.

My hips thrust against his face of their own accord as the sensations become too intense for me to control. I'm trembling now, both in anticipation of the next glorious wave of sensation and also in fear of what will happen when it subsides.

This is a cruel game my captor is playing, taking perverse pleasure in testing my limits.

How much pain can I endure before crying out? How much pleasure? How long can I resist responding to his touch? My body betrays me even as I steel my will, arching and gasping at the cruel ecstasy he inflicts.

When his fingers, teeth, and tongue finally wring a helpless orgasm from me, I smother my cries in a pillow, denying him the satisfaction of my vocal submission.

Afterward, I lie drained, my skin slick with sweat as Viktor lounges beside me, casually stroking my hair. I avoid his gaze, eyes squeezed shut.

“Look at me, *golubushka*.”

The quiet authority in his tone compels obedience. Reluctantly I open my eyes. His clever fingers tilt my chin up until our gazes lock.

“That was only the beginning,” he says softly. “You will learn to find pleasure in whatever I wish to do to you. Your body already understands this, even if your mind resists.”

I clench my jaw, refusing to respond, but I can't deny the lingering hum his touch ignites. Much as I wish otherwise, he's awakened something dark and ravenous within me, a side of myself I never knew existed, and I wish it didn't.

CHAPTER 6

Viktor

ONE OF MY SOLDIERS, Dmitri, is waiting when I arrive at the warehouse we use as headquarters. His broad, tattooed face is grim.

“It’s getting worse, Viktor,” he growls.

My reply is to grunt.

It looks as though our peace with the Chaldean mob has come to an end. Their new leader, Adnan Badawi, is out to make a name for himself by taking aggressive moves in our territory. A shipment was stolen from us a week ago and last night Purgatory, one of our clubs, was burned to the fucking ground.

It’s blatant provocation from the young godfather, a challenge to our control here. I curse under my breath. Besides his audacity, the club earned good money for us. It can’t go unpunished. We have to retaliate and strike fast.

Dmitri spits on the floor. “I bet the boss is pissed.”

Understatement. Our pakhan is gonna want blood from this Chaldean prick. Rightfully so.

“He upstairs?” I ask tersely.

“Ayup. Expecting you.” Dmitri gives me a grim nod before stalking off.

I mount the metal stairs, bracing myself. Boris has led our brotherhood for fifteen years. He is as ruthless as he is cunning. Crossing him is unwise.

I hope he doesn't bring up Natalia, but I know better. The pakhan is shrewd.

At the top of the stairs, I push through the door into Boris's sprawling office. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlook the warehouse below on one side of the office and the lively city on the other. Boris stands with his back to me, hands folded behind him.

I cross my arms, saying nothing. He knows I'm here, so I merely await orders.

After a full three minutes of silence, Boris turns, scowling. He is shorter than me by several inches, stocky and balding with a paunch that hangs over his belt, but his presence looms larger than his physical form. His bottomless eyes hold volcanic heat.

"Viktor. I have a job for you." His smile doesn't reach his cold grey eyes.

I incline my head slightly. "Of course, boss."

His smile vanishes. "That Chaldean fuck has overstepped for the last time. Last week, one of our storehouses by the docks was hit. Lost thousands in product, and two of our men. And now Purgatory?"

My jaw tightens, but I keep my tone neutral. "Retaliation is in order, I take it?"

"Swift and fucking severe." Boris slams his fist down on his desk. "I want you to take charge of our response personally. And make it hurt."

"It will be done."

I already have an idea of where to strike first. Badawi is fond of the underground casinos where he conducts his backroom business. Torching one or two should send a message about fucking with the brotherhood.

"Good." Boris turns back to the window overlooking downtown Chicago. Hands clasped behind his back, he is silent for a moment before continuing. "And the other matter. Have you carried out your orders regarding the witness?"

He means Natalia. Everything in me goes still. Somehow I keep my voice steady. “Not yet. But soon.”

“Soon!” Boris spins, leveling me with a menacing glower. “Soon? The girl knows too much. The longer she lives, the greater risk she poses should anyone learn of her.”

I spread my hands innocently. “They won’t. I have her contained. She poses no threat. No one can get near her—”

“Don’t be naive!” Boris’s eyes blaze. “Think, Viktor! She’s running around a loose cannon, a threat to our organization. All it takes is for her to go spilling what she knows to law enforcement—or worse. If our enemies get a hold of her... If Badawi captures her, he’ll extract every secret she possesses right down to the make and model of her vibrator. She’s a loose end. Get rid of her.”

His words chill me, but I don’t let him see it. My tone is placating. “I can have her eliminated today.”

I don’t like to lie to Boris, and my words are true. I *can* have her eliminated, should I so choose.

“Yes. Today.” Boris exhales, visibly regaining control. “Take care of this personally, Viktor. Leave no trace behind.”

Everything in me recoils at the thought. “As you command, pakhan.” The words nearly stick in my throat.

Boris searches my face, then nods. “Go then.”

I leave, my hands itching with the urge to wring Boris’s fat neck. But I proceed out of the warehouse as normal, allowing no hint of my turmoil to show. Inside, my thoughts swirl in desperation.

I’m not ready to kill Natalia. Not yet.

Refusal, however, can mean my own death for insubordination. And Boris will simply order another to kill her in my place.

What the fuck is wrong with me? First I get myself pussy whipped by a fucking mark and then I lie to my pakhan.

Fuck!

I return to the safe house at dawn and the first thing I do is pour myself a tumbler of vodka and swallow it back before pouring another. The burn of the alcohol in my throat feels good. I've become weak. Compromised by this young slip of a woman—this captive who should mean nothing.

I drain the glass and hurl it across the room. It shatters satisfyingly. Natalia has gotten under my skin and I despise this loss of control.

Why don't I just put a bullet through her skull?

Never have I hesitated to kill. As a boy, I watched my father murder enemies without flinching. I've felt their blood splatter on my face, yet I never looked away. I successfully severed all emotion.

Until now. This small but feisty woman has awakened something in me, dug up some long-buried protective instinct, and I can't shed it no matter how hard I try.

The thought of harming her still troubles me, but not as much as I'm troubled by this newfound... weakness.

I could order Dmitri to complete the task in my stead. My hands curl into fists at the thought. Imagining her at another man's mercy fills me with an unfamiliar jealous rage.

No, she's mine. I'll decide her fate. Tomorrow I will end this. No more games.

Tonight, I'll have my fun with her. I'll rut her like an animal until I'm raw and spent.

Once I fuck her brains out, this unnatural fixation will fade. I am certain of it. She'll become just another conquered plaything. A used toy. A bright star that lost its luster.

By tomorrow, I'll be rid of her, one way or another. I'll hand her off to my men if I have to. They'll dispose of her.

My jaw tightens against the hot wave rising in me at the thought of her dead, her vibrant energy wiped out. But it's the only solution now. I've indulged in this diversion long enough.

I don't bother with pretense when I unbolt the door and enter her room, and the thud of the door hitting the wall as I

enter echoes through the cabin.

She's sitting on the edge of the bed with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders since I left her without any clothes. Her spine stiffens when I enter and her wide eyes dart around as though someone in the shadows might save her. Her slender fingers worry the hem of the blanket. Her chest rises and falls too quickly, breath coming in panicked gasps.

Good. Let her be afraid.

My eyes rake over her. What is this power she has over me?

"On your knees," I say, my voice low and even despite the anger simmering beneath the surface.

She jolts at the sound as her eyes snap to mine.

I take one measured step toward her, then another. Her eyes—wide and luminous—never waver from mine.

My cock is as hard as iron, my body primed for violence... or sex. She must die by morning. There can be no other outcome.

Wordlessly, I seize her arm and pull her to me. She struggles but my greater strength prevails.

I grip her chin hard, forcing her eyes to mine. I'm stunned by what I see. The naked longing in her eyes steals my breath.

I clamp my mouth over hers. She jerks in surprise but doesn't pull away. My kiss is vicious, brutal, there's not an ounce of tenderness in it as my tongue plunges greedily into her mouth, yet she melts against me with a muffled moan.

I expect her to continue to struggle, but she clings to me, her soft curves pressed to my hard body. The kiss is raw and carnal, teeth clicking, my mouth greedily devouring.

When I break it off, her cheeks are flushed and her lips are swollen from my assault. The triumph that blazes through me is bitter and pungent. I've breached the little dove's defenses with a single kiss.

I pull my pistol from my shoulder holster and level it at her head.

“On your fucking knees,” I command again.

She hesitates only a moment before complying. Her lips tighten, eyes burning with rage even as she sinks to the floor.

I grin wickedly, reveling in her submission, however unwilling.

“You know what I want. Do it.”

Haltingly, she reaches for my belt. I shift my stance.

She slowly unbuckles my belt and unzips my pants, hands trembling. I let her fumble, enjoying her discomfort and fear as I keep my gun pointed at her temple.

My aching rigid cock springs free, and her eyes widen at the sight of it jutting toward her lips, a bead of pre-cum on the flushed tip.

“Suck me.”

Hesitantly, she wraps her fingers around my length and takes me into her mouth. I inhale sharply when her warm, velvety mouth envelops the tip of my cock.

Focus, I reprimand myself. This is about power and control. I tighten my grip on the gun, my resolve strengthening. As she works me with her lips and tongue, I bury my hands in her hair, guiding her pace. She sucks timidly at first, then with increasing confidence. I grit my teeth against the mounting pressure, determined to prolong this torture.

As I watch her lips glide wetly and noisily along my length, I feel strange emotions surfacing. Panic claws at me and roughly I wind her long hair around my fist, forcing myself deeper into her throat until she gags. The gun barrel kisses her cheek in warning—do not fight me, do not defy me.

She continues her ministrations, tears gathering on her lashes. I revel in her degradation. A sadistic haze clouds my mind, even as unfamiliar pangs of guilt twist my gut.

Suddenly, this doesn't feel like Viktory at all. I wrench her head back by her hair, pulling her off me. "Who do you belong to?"

When she refuses to answer, I slowly draw my belt from the loops with a soft hiss. Her eyes widen and dart toward the door. I see the calculations running behind those lovely eyes, the urge to flee this room, to take a chance.

Wisely she remains frozen, paralyzed by fear and something she doesn't understand yet. I see it, though—the primal part of her that longs to surrender completely.

I wrap the belt loosely around her slender neck, watching her pulse flutter against the leather. Slowly, inexorably, I tighten the makeshift collar, watching her eyes gradually glaze and dilate.

"Who do you belong to?" I demand again softly.

She shudders, eyes sliding closed. Still resisting. I give the belt a warning tug and her eyes fly open, pupils blown with fearful arousal. I repeat the question, infusing my voice with quiet command.

"Y-you," she rasps finally. "I belong to you." The admission clearly pains her, but the words come nonetheless.

"Yes," I hum, loosening the belt just slightly. "You are mine now. Never forget that."

I step behind her, trailing fingers down the delicate curve of her neck.

"Stand and spread your legs wide," I order. "Let me see what is mine."

A violent tremor runs through her. For a moment she pauses, wrapping her arms around herself. But my patience is at an end. With ruthless force, I pull her up, turn her to face the bed, and shove her face down until her cheek presses the mattress.

I pause to caress the still-reddened skin of her ass, admiring the exquisite marks of possession.

Helpless. Vulnerable. Mine.

She gasps as I force her legs wide, baring the glistening folds of her sex. She won't admit it, but she loves this.

I position my cock at her entrance, pausing there.

"I am going to fuck you," I rasp.

A shudder runs through her. She nods jerkily.

In one thrust, I plunge roughly into her heat, not allowing her body time to adjust to my substantial length and girth. A broken cry escapes her lips.

She is impossibly tight, scaldingly hot. I withdraw before driving in again, deeper.

I know it hurts. It must, yet she arches into me wantonly. I establish a merciless pace, pounding into her relentlessly. She takes each powerful stroke, takes everything I give. The sounds of my pelvis slapping her ass cheeks and her little exhaled grunt with every thrust reverberate around the room.

Release crashes through me, the intensity unimaginable as I spill myself inside her with a guttural shout.

Distantly I hear her frantic cries as she climaxes around me.

Fuck. She's fucking perfect.

I drop the belt, return my gun to its holster, and step back, breathing hard as she collapses forward, shaking and dazed.

I tuck myself back into my trousers and rake a hand through my hair.

Then, I turn and leave the room, locking the door securely behind me.

I'm not sure who just fucked whom.



When I return a short while later, she's huddled on the bed in a fetal position.

She stirs but does not look up, curling into herself when I come to stand over her, gazing down.

“Get up,” I say.

She unfurls slowly, unable to disguise the wince of pain as she moves. She keeps her head bowed, long blonde hair veiling her face like a curtain.

“Put these on,” I say more harshly than I intend, tossing a pair of my sweatpants and an old T-shirt on the bed beside her.

“Why?” she whispers raggedly. Her voice holds no defiance now, only resignation.

I close my eyes. “Just get dressed,” I repeat wearily. “We’re leaving this place.”

She complies wordlessly, painstakingly pulling on the clothes I gave her. She drowns in the oversized clothes, but they are warm and provide more coverage than her flimsy night clothes did.

When she’s ready, I motion her forward, then turn her and bind her slender wrists behind her back. She stiffens but remains still, head bowed in submission. The fight seems to have finally gone out of her. I try to tell myself this makes things easier as I lead her silently out to the car.

She moves slowly, and I find myself gripping her elbow in support. I open the back door and help her into the seat, leaning over her to buckle the seatbelt. A hint of the sweet, warm scent of her sex envelops me and I inhale it greedily despite myself.

Our eyes catch and hold for a charged moment, faces just inches apart. Her eyes are slightly haunted but mostly reflect a sort of quiet satiation. While mine, I know, are full of turmoil.

I straighten abruptly, round the car, slide behind the wheel, and start the engine. As I pull onto the deserted dirt road, I catch her gaze in the rearview mirror. Resigned. She doesn’t ask where we’re going. She doesn’t struggle.

Is it because she knows she’ll end up back in the trunk, or have I fucked the fight out of her?

The drive passes in silence. I focus on the road ahead.

I don't know what I'm doing. I'm acting irrationally, impulsively following dangerous fantasies born of exhaustion and too much vodka.

There is no happy ending here. Yet I pursue it anyway.

My hands tighten on the wheel as I pull up to the wrought iron gates of my estate.

As we travel up the long drive lined with manicured hedges and stately oak trees, I sneak a glance at my captive. She takes in the sprawling mansion with a mix of interest and confusion.

I park in front of the marble steps and exit the vehicle.

When I swing open her door, she's as still as a statue, making no attempt to get out. I reach out and brush a golden strand of hair from her cheek and she finally reacts, jerking in surprise, but does not pull away.

"Where are we," she whispers.

An unfamiliar ache swells in my chest. "My home."

I see the disbelief in her eyes, the fear that this is just the prelude to fresh torments. Deliberately, I snip the binds from her slender wrists, massaging feeling back into the abraded skin. Then I open the door and lift her carefully out, cradling her against my chest for the briefest moment before setting her on her feet.

The fight seems to have drained from her completely and she sways unsteadily. I retain a supportive grip under her elbow as I guide her toward the house.

We climb the steps and the ornate front door swings open.

Marta, who heads my housekeeping staff, startles slightly at the sight of my disheveled companion but masks it swiftly and discreetly averts her gaze.

"Welcome home, Mr. Ivanov," she murmurs in her musical Spanish accent.

Nodding to Marta, I guide Natalia into the grand foyer of my estate. Her steps falter as she takes in the soaring ceilings, marble floors, and ornate furnishings. For a moment, I see a flicker of wonder in her eyes before it is replaced by wariness.

Her gaze darts around nervously, past priceless works of art and hand-carved mahogany furniture, no doubt looking for exits or assessing the layout. I suppress a grim smile. She will find no easy escape from this place.

“Please prepare the Jasmine Suite for my guest,” I tell Marta. “And tend to her needs.”

I turn to Natalia. “This is Marta. She will help you get settled.”

The housekeeper gives a gracious nod but Natalia only stares numbly ahead.

“Natalia has had a difficult journey,” I say softly. Marta’s knowing eyes flit to Natalia’s tired face and she gives an almost imperceptible nod. I add, “Please provide her with suitable clothing and toiletries. And she is to have full access to the library and entertainment room.”

Marta nods. “Of course, sir.”

I turn back to Natalia. “If you need anything, tell Marta.”

Natalia studies me for a long moment, confusion mingling with distrust in her lovely eyes. I fight the urge to stroke her cheek.

Marta approaches cautiously and touches Natalia’s arm. “Come, child. Let’s get you comfortable.”

After only a slight hesitation, Natalia allows herself to be led away. But at the foot of the grand staircase, she pauses and turns back, questions swirling in her eyes.

I offer nothing but a stony look.

I watch until she disappears from view, then I make my way to my study, pour myself a shot of vodka, and sink into the leather desk chair.

I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing.

CHAPTER 7

Natalia

I CRAWL out of the massive four-poster bed and make my way to the ensuite bathroom. As I wait for the shower to heat up, I inspect my body. My ass is still pink and I have hickeys and bite marks all over from last night. I lightly trace my fingers over the tender spots, wincing.

Last night. It was barbaric. It was depraved. It was sadistic. How could I possibly have become so aroused by that kind of thing?

And why has he brought me here to his home? I'd think this was some sort of mind game, but I'm beginning to get a line on my captor. I saw worry and then determination etched on his features.

As long as I choose to keep you, you're safe.

I suppose I'll just have to see how this plays out, stay on my toes, and pivot if and when I need to.

The warm water soothes my sore muscles as I step into the spacious marble shower. I take my time, trying to clear my head. By the time I'm done, the bathroom is filled with steam.

After drying off, I wrap myself in a plush robe and return to the bedroom. A pretty sundress in a soft floral print has been laid out on the bed for me. I frown. I should be annoyed that Viktor seems to think he can dress me like some kind of doll, but I'm not. If I'm being honest, I like it.

The dress fits perfectly. I towel dry my hair and run a brush through it until it falls in soft waves around my

shoulders. I can't help but glance in the mirror again before leaving the room. The sucker bites on my neck stand out starkly above the feminine neckline, and I expect he intentionally chose a dress that would allow them to show. I shift my hair to cover them. No need to broadcast what happened between us to the rest of Viktor's household staff, although they probably already know.

As if on cue, there's a light knock at the door. I open it cautiously to find Marta wearing a warm smile.

"Good morning dear, I'm so pleased to see you up and about. You must be famished, come down to the kitchen and I'll fix you up a nice breakfast."

My stomach growls at the mention of food. I realize I haven't eaten anything since lunch yesterday. I follow her eagerly down the grand staircase and through a maze of hallways until we reach the kitchen.

It's a huge, state-of-the-art space with gleaming steel appliances and white marble countertops. Marta busies herself whipping up crepes, fresh fruit, and strong coffee. I sit at the large island and dig in ravenously when she slides the plate in front of me.

Between mouthfuls, I chat with Marta. She's been working for Viktor for eleven years. She's very kind and motherly. Under different circumstances, I could see us being friends.

My mind wanders as I sip my second cup of coffee. Is Viktor already up and about somewhere in this huge house? What will he expect of me today? The thought of being alone with him again makes my pulse quicken.

As if reading my mind, Marta says gently, "Try not to worry too much, dear. Mr. Ivanov isn't as frightening as he seems once you get to know him." Then, after she considers her words for a moment, she adds, "Oh, he can be a formidable enemy, don't get me wrong, but he can also be quite thoughtful and charming when he wants to be." She winks. "Don't tell him I said so though."

I want to ask her if he brings all his victims here. How many others has she had to tend to? But I just nod silently. We clearly have two different views of the man. She must see Dr. Jekyll. I've encountered Mr. Hyde.

After breakfast, Marta shows me around the main areas of the mansion: the home theater, gym, library, and various sitting rooms. My head spins trying to take it all in. I've never been inside such an extravagant home before. Clearly being a high-ranking member of the Bratva pays extremely well.

Marta chatters away as we walk, filling me in on the day-to-day operations of the large household staff and all the lavish parties Viktor hosts here. I stay alert, looking for any chances to get away or find a phone, but there are always other staff members hovering nearby, and a large burly guard is a few paces behind us at all times. Viktor must have put a bodyguard on me. Of course, he doesn't trust I won't attempt to escape should the chance present itself.

Eventually, we end up back at my bedroom. Marta tells me Viktor left instructions that I'm to remain here in the suite until he summons me later. With an encouraging pat on my shoulder, she bustles away to attend to her other duties.

I pace the room restlessly after she leaves. The opulent surroundings that seemed so out of place this morning now feel like just another form of captivity.

I settle on the sofa and aimlessly flip through the TV channels, but nothing holds my attention. My mind keeps wandering back to last night with Viktor. The way he dominated me so completely, yet seemed to know exactly how to touch me to draw out intense pleasure.

I'm not naive; I know men like him are often cruel sociopaths. But some rebellious part of me can't help fantasizing about the passion he has leashed inside him. What would it take to shatter that iron self-control? What would it feel like to experience that raw passion, uncontained and running wild?

A shiver runs through me and I force the thoughts away. I can't forget this man is a dangerous criminal who's holding me

prisoner. Letting myself be seduced by him would only end in disaster.

When the shadows grow long across the plush carpet, boredom finally drives me to explore the bookshelves lining one wall. The selection seems random, everything from Russian classics to smutty romance novels. I settle on an Agatha Christie mystery and soon lose myself in the twists and turns of the fictional crime story, a welcome distraction.

Another knock at the door eventually interrupts my reading. Marta waits for me to open the door, even though it's unlocked. She's holding a garment bag draped over her arm and wearing a big smile on her face.

"Mr. Ivanov is expecting you for dinner," she says, then adds brightly, "I've brought you something lovely to wear."

She motions me over to the bed where she lays the garment bag before unzipping it to reveal a stunning shimmery red evening gown. She opens another box that holds matching shoes and jewelry. Did Viktor choose this outfit for me, or did Marta? The dress is Givenchy and the shoes are Louboutin. I've never seen an outfit this expensive before, much less worn one. I am speechless.

Marta finally takes pity on my stunned silence. "Come on, let's get you ready."

She fusses over me like a mother hen, helping me into the dress before seating me at the dressing table to do my makeup.

I stare at my reflection in the ornate mirror as Marta expertly arranges my hair into softly curled strands that tumble over my shoulders. The woman gazing back at me looks like a stranger.

Clad in an elegant designer gown that clings seductively to my curves and subtle makeup that enhances my features, I feel like an imposter playing dress-up.

"You look beautiful, dear," Marta says warmly, giving my shoulders an encouraging squeeze.

With a final spritz of Chanel perfume to my wrists and décolletage, Marta declares me ready. My pulse kicks up, my

stomach fluttering with anxiety as she leads me down to the formal dining room where Viktor is already seated at the head of a long table.

The table is set for two, laid out with fine china, crystal goblets, flickering candles, cloth napkins, and gleaming cutlery.

A vase of pale roses perfumes the air.

He stands when I enter, the appreciation in his eyes sending warmth through me as he takes in my appearance.

“You look exquisite,” he murmurs, his eyes smoldering with barely restrained desire.

I wet my lips uncertainly.

He gestures for me to come forward as he rounds the table and pulls out the chair to his right in a wordless invitation. Feeling like I’ve entered a dream, I sit and allow him to push in my chair. He pours us both wine before taking his own seat.

Looks like I’m getting Dr. Jekyll tonight.

For long moments we simply study each other awkwardly across the intimate space. The candles cast a soft glow over Viktor’s harsh features, gentling them. Although he’s wearing a bespoke three-piece suit, he looks almost relaxed, the tension missing from his broad frame.

Two young women serve us pan-seared salmon with dill, wild rice studded with almonds, and roasted asparagus.

The food is delicious and we begin the meal in silence, stealing glances when we think the other isn’t looking. The awareness of what has passed between us hangs tangibly in the air, and tension builds until I feel I might vibrate out of my skin.

At last, Viktor breaks the strained silence. “I thought perhaps tonight we might get to know each other better.” He pauses, considering his next words before he speaks. “Tell me about where you come from. Your family.”

I bristle instinctively at the intrusion into my privacy, the reminder of his current control over me and my life. But the

earnest interest in his eyes gives me pause.

I take a bracing sip of wine before beginning hesitantly. “I was born in Moscow. But moved here when I was eight years old.”

Viktor’s mouth curves, and what he says next catches me off guard. “Tell me about your childhood.”

“What do you want to know?” I ask.

“Anything. Everything.” Viktor leans forward intently.

I take a slow breath, centering myself. “My mother and I came here to the States after my father died. He...”

Even now, remembering Papa’s death squeezes my heart. I close my eyes, seeing it vividly like it happened yesterday. Papa bellowing at me to run. The black car screeching to a halt, the smiling gunman taking aim as I screamed. Sudden thunder, Papa’s body jerking...red blooming on his chest as he fell.

“My father was murdered,” I blurt out.

A muscle in Viktor’s jaw ticks and it’s then I realize I’ve just revealed the most impactful memory of my life to this man. How is it he can strip me raw so easily?

Sensing my sudden tension, Viktor reaches across the table, covering my hand lightly with his own. It’s...strange, but I don’t hate it.

“You are a strong woman.” His solemn tone seems sincere. I force myself to relax as Viktor’s expression warms and he brushes his thumb over my knuckles in a soothing rhythm.

I smile wryly. “I had to be, to survive my mother.”

Viktor lifts an eyebrow and I go on, “I guess because of my father’s murder, she became paranoid, always looking over her shoulder, overprotective of me. You’ve heard of helicopter moms? My mother put them to shame. We took new names when we came here and lived very quietly. She kept me close, homeschooled me. I wasn’t allowed friends or any activities. It was as though she was always afraid something might happen to me.”

“Yet you work as a waitress.”

I nod ruefully. “Mother was hit by a car a little over a year ago. She was in a coma for several weeks before she passed. That left a lot of medical bills. I was lucky to find a job at the diner, and I’ve been slowly paying them off.” I pause gathering my thoughts. “After she passed...well, let’s just say I was woefully unprepared for the real world. I’ve been struggling to make my own way ever since.”

Viktor squeezes my hand. “I’m beginning to understand your spirit now. You are a survivor.”

I give a small shrug, both pleased and embarrassed. “Maybe. Though just surviving doesn’t feel like much of an accomplishment.”

“It can be.” Viktor’s eyes hold a warmth I haven’t seen in them before. “That would depend on the obstacles.” He studies me contemplatively for several minutes. “I believe it was your inner strength that drew me in the moment I saw you. And that inner strength is what sustains you even now.”

His words resonate deep within me. They touch a piece of my soul left wounded and wanting from those lonely years with only my fearful, broken mother for company.

Does Viktor see that vulnerable girl as strong, as a survivor?

Before I can stop myself I bring my hand on top of his and run a finger across his scarred knuckles. Then, realizing what I’ve done, I pull my hand away like I’ve just touched a hot stove.

Viktor’s dark eyes bore into me.

“I understand unconventional childhoods and how the death of a parent can change the trajectory of your life,” he says, refilling our wine glasses.” My mother died when I was four. My father was never a kind man, but her death changed him. He became even colder, more cynical. More brutal.”

I take a sip of my wine, studying him over the rim. I try to picture a young Viktor motherless and raised by a cruel, emotionless father. Maybe it’s the stress of the past couple

days. Maybe it's the wine, but before I can filter my thoughts, I blurt out, "I suppose that explains how you became a serial killer."

CHAPTER 8

Viktor

NATALIA STARES at me wide-eyed after calling me a serial killer. I could punish her for that, but I'm too amused by her impertinence. I don't think she meant to say that aloud.

"You're right," I concede after a moment. "I do kill people." Quite a lot of people, in fact. "Which, I suppose by definition makes me a serial killer."

Natalia opens her mouth to respond, but I hold up a hand to stop her.

"Just to be clear, however, I do not kill for enjoyment or for some sick thrill. The men I kill are criminals. They know exactly what they signed up for when they entered this life."

I watch Natalia carefully, looking for any tells in her body language. She seems to relax marginally at my explanation, though her gaze remains wary.

"So you only kill...bad guys?" she asks hesitantly.

I nod. "Bad men who do bad things. None of them are innocent."

My words are somewhat true, I do mostly eliminate low-life criminals or made men. Mostly. The order to eliminate Natalia was an exception. She's not a member of the criminal underground. She didn't sign up for this life. Perhaps that's another reason I've gone against the orders of my pakhan. Not only have I failed to take her out, but I've moved her to my estate where I can have her guarded around the clock. I'm not

sure if she realizes yet that I've granted her a reprieve. I just don't know how I'm going to manage to explain it to Boris.

"What about their families?" Natalia asks. "The children of the men you kill? Surely they're not criminals and they didn't...sign up to lose a parent?"

I frown, irritation prickling at me. "It is...regrettable," I say slowly. "But necessary. There is great risk in going against the Bratva."

Natalia shakes her head, clearly unconvinced by my justifications. I decide to change the subject.

"Tell me," I say, holding her gaze intently. "How did your father die?"

Pain flashes across Natalia's face and she drops her eyes. She already told me he was murdered. watching her reaction, I regret making her relive it. But the words are out now, so I wait silently as she composes herself.

"We were in the park. In Moscow," she says quietly. "My parents and I, just spending the afternoon together. I was on the swings."

"I looked up and saw..." She looks up at me again, eyes glistening. "He was shot down in front of me. I saw him fall. There was so much blood..." she trails off, blinking rapidly.

Shot down.

A park in Moscow.

She was eight, so fifteen years ago.

Something about those details niggles at my brain, like a half-remembered fragment of a dream upon waking. But the connection eludes me.

"Your father. He was Bratva?"

She startles at my question. "No! I mean, I don't know. Mother never spoke of it." She looks away. "We fled soon after he died, within days. She never said as much, but I think she needed to get far away from everything that triggered any memory of that horrible day."

“You said you were there. You witnessed his death?”

She nods.

After a pause, I ask carefully, “You saw what happened. The man, the one who shot your father...could identify him?”

She frowns, thrown by the question. “I was only eight, and I’ve tried to forget. But yes, his face has haunted me for fifteen years. I’d know him if I ever saw him again. Why? Why would you ask me that?”

“Don’t be troubled, *golubushka*.” I shrug. “Just making conversation.”

We finish the rest of our meal in silence. Natalia is clearly still affected by the memories I dredged up. She keeps her gaze down and moves the rest of her food around her plate listlessly.

Finally, she looks up at me again. “I’m very tired. May I be excused now?” she asks stiffly, almost sarcastically. “I don’t know the proper protocol for a prisoner when asking something of her jailer.”

There’s that inner strength and survivor spirit.

I should punish her for the insolent tone, but tonight was more challenging for her than I meant it to be, so I decide not to. After the conversation about witnessing her father’s murder, I can understand her brashness. I will let it go this time.

“You may be dismissed,” I tell her evenly. “In the future, you need only ask, and I will decide if it is to be permitted or not.”

Natalia nods, but then surprises me by asking, “What about going outside? Can I go out sometime? I hate being cooped up indoors.”

I consider for a moment. Letting her outside does introduce a slightly elevated risk. But the estate grounds are heavily guarded and secured. I suspect confining her to the house is only making her more eager to escape. Perhaps some supervised time outdoors would alleviate that urge.

“Very well,” I concede. “You may go outside in the gardens as long as you’re accompanied by a guard.”

With that, Natalia nods and rises gracefully from her chair.

Just as she reaches the door, I say, “Natalia, what was your father’s name?”

She looks down at her feet. “Aleksandr,” she says, her voice just above a whisper. “His name was Aleksandr Federov.”

And it’s as if some of the missing pieces of a puzzle suddenly fall into place.



I sit in the leather armchair of my home office finishing off another glass of vodka as I contemplate the name Natalia gave me at dinner—Aleksandr Fedorov. The name rings familiar in my mind, an echo from the past. Fedorov. He was a powerful pakhan of the Bratva, the one they called “The Bear” for his ferocity, his cunning. He was gunned down in cold blood fifteen years ago by Bratva enemies.

I was just a young vor at the time, still learning the ways of the brotherhood, when Fedorov was killed. It was shocking, even to me who had grown up immersed in violence and death. I also know Federov had no children. No heirs.

So what game is Natalia playing?

She must be lying. But how does she know that name? How does she know about Aleksandr Fedorov being executed in a mob hit fifteen years ago? Maybe her mother knew and spoke about Federov. Perhaps Natalia thinks that claiming her father was a powerful pakhan will win her favor or sway me from my duty. My duty. Does she still think I’m going to kill her?

That thought leaves a bitter taste in my mouth as I glare into the empty vodka glass.

When I chose not to kill her that first night, when I chose instead to slake my lust, that was when it all went sideways. And here she remains, unraveling my world one thread at a time like an intruder sneaking through the barricades that fortify my heart.

I pound my fist on the arm of the chair in frustration and reach again for the vodka bottle, pouring myself another glass. The alcohol is not enough to dampen the conflict raging inside me.

She puts everything at risk—the organization, my position within it, my loyalty to my pakhan and the brothers. But there is a part of me, a part I tried to silence, that recoils at the thought of living the rest of my life knowing hers has been snuffed out.

This dark, dangerous, and cruel underworld of violence and sin has been my home since birth. I've never known the kind of light she brings to the world.

I slam back another vodka, the fiery liquid fueling the tumult of emotions swirling inside me, and I pour yet another. Natalia has been under my care for little more than a week, yet she has cracked apart my soul in ways no one else ever has. Everything I thought I knew, everything I thought I wanted, she has challenged. The money, the power, the brotherhood—it all seems empty now. Only with her here in my life do I feel the hollowness inside me start to fill. A dangerous, terrifying notion.

My empty glass slips from my hands. I lean forward to pick it up off the thick, plush carpet and roll it between my palms before pouring another.

Such a heavy burden, this conflict between duty and desire. If I spare Natalia's life, I am betraying Boris and the Bratva. But if I take her life, I will be ending the one bright light that has pierced through the heavy shroud of darkness surrounding me.

Pfft! I say "if" as though I haven't already made the decision.

With a sigh, I drain my glass and rub a hand over my face. The choice has already been made. The moment I brought her here to my estate, I knew would not kill Natalia. If I'm honest, I knew long before.

My loyalty to the Bratva is strong, but this new loyalty I feel to Natalia runs deeper still.

Leaning back in my chair, I tap the keyboard to wake my computer. The multiple displays flicker to life, showing various security feeds from around the house. I click through them absently, seeking one view in particular. There—the Jasmine Suite. The sight of Natalia in the large four-poster bed makes my pulse quicken. I enlarge the feed, taking in every detail.

She's asleep on her side, facing away from the hidden camera. Her back rises and falls gently with each breath. Golden hair splays across the pillows in messy disarray. The sheet clings to the curve of her hip.

My fingers twitch with the urge to caress her skin, to trail my hands down the alluring arch of her spine, grip those flared hips as I take her hard from behind...

A groan rumbles in my chest and I shift in my chair. I ache to go to her, bury myself in her softness for a few blissful hours.

Instead, I reach again for the vodka, hoping to drown the thorny tangle of emotions choking me.

I don't deserve light and kindness, beauty and passion. Not after the horrors I've inflicted, the stains on my soul.

I swirl the remaining vodka, staring sightlessly into its crystalline depths. I know this with grim certainty—my feelings for her may destroy me. She is a weakness that can be exploited.

Resolution settles over my liquor-soaked mind. There will be consequences, but I feel bound to her as tightly as any wedding vows could forge.

Before I fully comprehend what I am doing, I rise unsteadily and leave my office. My shoulder slams into the

doorjamb on the way out. Fuck.

Weaving down the halls, I make my way through my home. The haze of alcohol fuels my steps but cannot be blamed for this madness. The need to go to her is primal and undeniable.

At her door I halt, wavering on the precipice. I should turn back. Instead, I quietly turn the handle and step inside.

Natalia's eyes fly open as I stride toward the bed. She scrambles into a sitting position, pulling the sheet up to cover herself.

"Natalia..." I trail off weakly, unable to tear my gaze from her. So proud, her delicate jaw held high.

"Viktor, what—"

Slowly I approach her as one might a skittish deer, and gently I take her shoulders in my hands, feeling her tremble. Our eyes lock and an unspoken understanding passes between us. Loneliness. Longing. Need.

With care, I lower myself next to her and draw her into my embrace. She resists only a moment before melting against me. Her hair is loose and smells of oranges and I bury my face in the silken strands, breathing her in like she's oxygen to a drowning man.

I keep her wrapped in my embrace for long moments, the only sounds are her soft sigh and the thunder of my heartbeat in my ears. Eventually, she lifts her face to peer up at me. Unable to resist, I cup her face and gently brush feather-light kisses over her forehead, her temples, the delicate shell of her ear, and her lips.

Her plump lips are impossibly soft beneath mine and a low sound rumbles in my chest. She makes a quivering sound, angling her head to grant me access. My veins hum with desire but I keep my movements unhurried, my touches light and reverent. I want—need—to show her this tenderness.

As my lips glide along the graceful column of her neck she arches into me with a shuddering sigh. I smile against her heated skin, nipping and suckling until I drag a gasp from her.

Her nightgown has slipped off one creamy shoulder and I trail open-mouthed kisses down to the swell of her breast.

Her fingers tangle almost painfully in my hair, urging me on. I lavish attention on the pebbled peak of one breast then the other, my hands molding and caressing her responsive flesh. Her head falls back, lips parted around panting breaths.

Slowly I peel off her nightgown, worshiping every inch of silken skin revealed with my hands and mouth until she is trembling and breathless beneath me. Her fingers fumble at my shirt buttons and I lean back to shrug out of my clothes before pressing the warm length of my naked body to hers.

We both moan at the contact. Her arms come around me as I settle between her slender thighs. I take her mouth again and her hips rise instinctively to cradle my aching cock. Our kiss is a heated tangle of lips, teeth, and tongues.

She is so perfect beneath me. Our bodies seem made to fit together. She clings to me urgently, nails raking down my back.

“Please,” she whimpers against my lips, her body undulating restlessly against mine.

The shreds of my control unravel. Bracing myself above her, I look into her lust-glazed eyes and see my own wild longing reflected there. Agonizingly slowly I ease inside her tight silken heat.

We both cry out sharply. I pause, trembling with the monumental effort of holding back until I am fully seated within her, our bodies joined. Her thighs clench around my hips, heels digging into my ass urgently.

“Please,” she moans again, arching into me helplessly. “I need...”

With a ragged groan I begin to move, slowly at first but quickly losing any semblance of restraint. Her nails rake down my back, urging me on as our bodies strain together. My thrusts come harder, faster, her broken cries urging me towards ecstasy.

She meets my every movement with equal abandon, shattering me. We climb higher, clawing and clutching each other desperately until finally the coil of bliss inside me erupts with blinding force.

When I distantly feel her body spasm and clench around mine, I bury my release deep inside her with a gritted shout. For endless moments we remain suspended together in sublime oblivion.

Slowly I come back to earth, my arms supporting my weight above her. With utmost care I ease onto my side, slipping from her body but pulling her tightly against me. She clings to me, face pressed into my chest as our breathing slows.

I stroke her hair, her back, overwhelmed by what just occurred. My analytical mind wants to chalk it up to drunken weakness, but my heart knows this was inevitable. Fighting my feelings for her was always a losing battle. I press a kiss to her forehead and hug her even closer, wanting to meld us into one unbreakable whole.

She lifts her face to meet my gaze, cheeks flushed. But despite our passionate intimacy, there's uncertainty in her gaze.

My chest clenches.

“Natalia,” I murmur, giving voice to my troubled thoughts. “You are a grave threat to me, I think.”

Her lips part on a tremulous breath. Slowly, wonderingly, she lays a hand along my jaw.

When I look at her, she is regarding me curiously. I brush a finger down her cheek. “I believe you may have bewitched me, *golubushka*.”

A small, satisfied smile tugs at her lips, and I find myself smiling back.

I will keep her safe and face whatever consequences come.

CHAPTER 9

Natalia

MY GUARD, Timur, falls into step behind me as I make my way out a set of French doors to the patio. Stone paths cut through neatly manicured gardens bursting with vibrant flowers. Graceful willow trees and trickling fountains complete the idyllic scene. Hard to believe this beauty exists on the grounds of a ruthless Bratva enforcer.

It's been four days since I've seen Viktor. Four days, and as much as I loathe to admit it, I miss him. I miss the searing heat of his gaze, the possessive grip of his hands, the way he feels moving inside me.

I scowl. Falling for my captor? Definitely a sign of Stockholm Syndrome. But the heart wants what it wants, traitorous thing.

I meander slowly, inhaling the sweet floral scents, trailing my fingers over the velvety petals. Timur keeps his distance, allowing me the illusion of solitude even as his watchful presence reminds me I'm never truly alone here.

Eventually, my wandering leads me to an arched wooden arbor tucked into a far corner of the gardens. Honeysuckle vines twist over the structure, the pendulous blooms filling the small enclosure with fragrance. This is my favorite place, and I duck inside and settle on a stone bench, hidden from view. Timur remains hovering just outside, granting me privacy while still keeping guard.

Surrounded by sun-warmed blossoms, I close my eyes and tip my face up, soaking in the tranquility. My mind drifts back

to that night with Viktor, our last time together. The tenderness in his touch, the emotion shimmering in those dark eyes... what was that?

We connected on a deep level that night. It scares me.

I've never felt such an intimate bond before. Viktor tore down my walls, leaving me exposed and vulnerable and I should hate him for it. So why does it make me ache for his return?

How starved am I for affection? But the real question is: Is he as starved for connection as I am?

I must be suffering from Stockholm Syndrome if some part of me wants to stay in this pretty cage with my captor.

No, I can't afford to sympathize with him. He's a monster who kidnapped me, hurt me, keeps me imprisoned here away from my normal life. Well, to be fair, I don't think he's really a monster. And I don't hate this gorgeous home or these gorgeous grounds. They're far more pleasant than the rundown trailer I call home. And I'll never be able to afford the kind of clothes he's bought me working as a waitress. Most of the clothes in my closet at home are from the second-hand thrift store. I also can't deny the sex with Viktor is amazing, whether it's dominating and rough or tender and caring.

But isn't a gilded cage still a cage?

I turn my face skyward. How is it I find myself looking forward to Viktor's strong embrace, his kisses, even his punishments? I think about the hard lines of his body and the way he groans when he finds his release. Heat coils low in my belly at the memories.

I am falling for Viktor despite everything, and the realization leaves me reeling. He electrifies me, challenges and excites me in ways I've never known.

But what future can there be for us while I'm a captive, a prisoner?

The sound of footsteps on the path pulls me from my reverie. I turn to see Marta walking toward me, a big smile on her face. In her sixties, she has a matronly air about her. Since

I arrived here, she's been a lifeline, providing friendship and motherly warmth I didn't even realize I'd been craving.

"Hello, Natalia," she greets me. "You look radiant today, as always. I thought I would bring you some tea." She offers the delicate porcelain cup and saucer she carries. The scent of mint and honey wafts up as I accept it.

"You're too good to me, Marta," I say, taking a careful sip of the hot tea.

She pats my shoulder affectionately. "Nonsense, dear. I'm happy to make sure you're comfortable and enjoying your time here."

I'm not sure how to respond to that. Enjoying my time here? As a prisoner? She must know I'm not free to leave. I study Marta's kind face. What must she think of my relationship with Viktor? Is she reporting back to him, I wonder? Spying on me? I sigh, setting the tea aside. Even the simple joy of a nice cup of tea must be marred by mistrust and suspicion.

I work up the courage to ask the question on my mind, because what have I got to lose? "Marta, how many others have there been?"

Her brow furrows and she looks at me questioningly. "Others?"

"Other women. How many other women has Viktor brought here and...*kept*?"

"Oh, no." She shakes her head. Then she looks around to ensure Timur isn't within hearing range and lowers her voice. "You don't understand. There have been no others. Mr. Ivanov has never brought a woman home. You are very special to him. I see it in his eyes. I have worked for him for a long time, and I have *never* seen him act the way he does with you. The way he looks at you. I know you think you are a captive and he is the captor, but I believe it is the other way around."

I don't even know what to say to that. I'm in shock.

Marta pats the back of my arm soothingly. "Enjoy your tea." She gives my hand a quick squeeze before bustling off

along the garden path.

Does Marta honestly think I have some sort of power over Viktor? Can there be any truth to that, or is she seeing what she wants to see?

As I raise my cup to take another sip of mint tea, a loud sound pierces the air. It takes a second before it registers in my brain—a gunshot.

I whirl around in time to see Timur's bulky frame crumple to the ground. Blood spreads across the back of his grey suit as he lays sprawled out on the grass.

Bile scorches my throat. My teacup falls from my hand and shatters on the stone below. I choke back a sob, clutching the bench beneath me. What's happening?

My eyes widen when I see a figure dressed all in black striding toward me. A man. Like some sort of ninja from the movies, his head is covered by a balaclava.

Run. Run.

When I finally get my feet to move, it's too late. The intruder is already upon me, wrapping one arm around my waist while the other presses a cloth over my nose and mouth.

I struggle for only a moment before the world around me goes black.



Ropes cut into my wrists, rubbing them raw as I struggle against my bindings. The burlap sack over my head reeks of some kind of chemical, making me dizzy. All I can see is inky blackness, but my other senses strain, trying to gather any clues as to where I've been taken. The rumble of a truck engine vibrates through the cold metal floor beneath me. The air feels damp and carries the stench of fish. I must be near the docks.

Fear rises in my chest, icy fingers squeezing my lungs as the truck lurches to a stop, nearly sending me tumbling across

the floor. Male voices shout. They're speaking Russian, but their words are too muffled for me to decipher what they're saying. The metal doors creak open and rough hands grab me, yanking me to my feet. I kick and struggle, but their grip only tightens. They half-lead, half-drag me across uneven ground. My toes bang against the steps as they force me up a ramp.

A metal door screeches open and the sack is ripped off my head. I'm blinded for a moment, eyes watering against the sudden light. As my vision adjusts, I take in my new surroundings. I'm in a warehouse. Dusty windows near the ceiling let in thin streams of sunlight. Crates and rusty oil drums line the walls. The fishy aroma outside mixes with the iron odor of dried blood within these walls. My gut twists in fear.

"Well, well. What do we have here?" A figure steps out from the shadows. He has a shark-like smile and cold, grey eyes.

I recognize him instantly. My father's murderer.

I look around, but we're alone. Where did everyone else go?

The man slowly circles me, looking me up and down like a lion sizing up his prey.

"So you're the little whore who's managed to defrost Viktor's frozen heart. I can see why." He reaches out and strokes my hair. I flinch away, glaring at him defiantly. His lips quirk in amusement.

"A feisty one," he says in Russian. "I've been looking for you for a long time, but your mother hid you well."

He steps closer, trailing his fingers down my cheek. Revulsion rises in my throat, but I force myself not to recoil this time. I won't give him the satisfaction.

"Tell me, little one, have you confessed all your secrets to Viktor yet?" When I don't answer, he grips my jaw, nails digging into my skin.

"I asked you a question," he growls through clenched teeth.

I wrench my head away. “Go to hell,” I snap.

His eyes flash dangerously. In one quick movement, his hand cracks my cheek. Pain explodes across my face. I cry out despite myself, tears springing to my eyes.

He clicks his tongue. “Such language from such a pretty girl. I can see Viktor hasn’t taught you any manners.”

He twists his fingers through my hair and yanks my head back roughly, forcing me to meet his sinister gaze.

“You will die regardless. Answer my questions honestly and I’ll make it quick. What have you told Viktor about your father’s death, and have you told anyone else about what you saw fifteen years ago?”

The moment I answer, he’s going to kill me. He’s admitted as much. As I contemplate what the consequences might be for spitting in his face, I hear a cell phone vibrate.

He pulls his cell out of his pocket and stares at the screen. His face falls.

Tucking the phone back in, he seizes my arm and drags me across the warehouse. I struggle against his bruising grip, but he’s strong. We pass through a grimy kitchen and into a back room. Inside is nothing but a soiled mattress on the floor and a broken toilet in the corner. He hurls me down onto the mattress and cuffs my hands to a pipe along the wall.

As he’s leaving, he pauses in the doorway. “Make yourself comfortable. You might be here a while.” His laugh sends a chill down my spine before the door slams shut behind him.

Alone in the dim room, my fear overwhelms me. Tears leak from my eyes and I let them fall, too exhausted to hold them back.

Viktor said I was his. He said he owned me. Does that mean he will come for me? I have to believe it does because that belief is the only thing that will get me through this. I can’t lose faith. I have to believe in Viktor. Believe that he’ll find me.

You belong to Viktor Ivanov, I remind myself fiercely.

I repeat those words like a mantra, using them to push back against the dark thoughts trying to creep in.

Such a strange, unexpected thing to have flourished between us. He was supposed to be my enemy, my captor. And yet he's become my unlikely salvation. My protector.

He'll find me. He has to.

I cling to that hope with everything in me.

CHAPTER 10

Viktor

A COLD RAGE simmers inside me as I stare down at Timur's lifeless body sprawled on the grass. Natalia is gone. Taken from right under my nose, on the grounds of my own estate. Un-fucking-forgivable.

I kneel and press two fingers to Timur's neck, just to be certain, but I already know it's hopeless. The pool of blood soaking into the dirt makes that clear. Gently, I close his vacant eyes. He was loyal and didn't deserve this end.

"Find out how the fuck this happened," I bark at Dmitri. "I want the security footage scoured and every guard who was stationed nearby interrogated. Someone must have seen something."

Dmitri nods grimly. "We'll get to the bottom of it, boss."

I straighten and rake a hand through my hair, barely restraining the urge to put my fist through something. Rage wars with icy fear inside me. Whoever took Natalia was bold enough to breach my estate's security right under the noses of my men. Which means they are either extremely reckless or extremely confident. Neither option bodes well.

Most chilling is that this was clearly a targeted abduction. They came for Natalia specifically. I dismissed Boris's warning that she posed a threat if our enemies learned of her presence here. And now my arrogance has put her directly in harm's way.

"Ready my car," I tell Alexei, one of my most trusted vory. "I'm going to conduct my own search. Starting with Badawi."

That upstart Chaldean motherfucker has been encroaching on our territory for weeks, growing increasingly brazen. If he's taken Natalia...

Alexei catches my arm as I turn to leave. "Viktor. We'll get her back, but you can't go off half-cocked. We need information and a plan."

I shake him off roughly. "I don't need a fucking plan. I need my woman back before whoever took her decides she's disposable."

The thought of Natalia being hurt, or worse, guts me. Fuck!

"We don't even know for certain who's responsible," Alexei argues.

My laugh is brittle and mirthless. "Oh, I think we can make an educated guess. Badawi wants a war, he's about to fucking get one."

Alexei grabs me again, frustration etched on his blunt features. "Just wait, damn it. Dmitri's already contacting our informants, trying to get a lead. We'll find her. But charging in right now will only get you killed." He meets my furious gaze unflinchingly. "Natalia needs you alive, brother. So keep your shit together."

I bristle at his brashness, but ultimately concede his point. He's right, my rage won't help matters. With immense effort I leash my fury. For now.

Alexei claps my shoulder. "We'll scour the city, shake down every contact we have. Stay by the phone. The second we get any whisper of her location, we move."

I nod. The wait will be agony, but I know my men won't rest until she's found.

After Alexei leaves, I find myself wandering the gardens, retracing the steps Natalia took just hours ago. I settle on the stone bench in the secluded arbor, imagining her here in this very spot earlier today. So close, yet unreachable now.

With her gone, the bleak emptiness returns full force. How quickly she became vital to me. Her inner light banished the cold darkness that's shrouded my soul for so long. Without her, the world seems colorless and dim.

But I cannot lose hope. She needs me to stay strong. To find her.

A crushing weight settles on my shoulders. What if she's already dead? Like a coward, I've been avoiding that grim possibility, but I can't deny it's likely whoever took her wants her silenced permanently.

The thought shreds what's left of my composure. A guttural sound rips from my chest. In a burst of violence, I grab the stone bench and hurl it sideways. It crashes to the ground, cracking into pieces.

Falling to my knees, I press my forehead into the grass, ragged breaths tearing through my lungs. God help them if Natalia is harmed. I will paint the streets with blood.

An hour later, I get a call from Dmitri.

“What is it? Have you learned anything?”

“We have,” Dmitri barks through the phone. “And it's not good.”



The warehouse door crashes open under the force of my boot. I stalk inside, gun drawn, Dmitri, Alexei, and three other vory follow close behind. My fury is a living thing, pulsing through my veins, fueling my steps. I will slaughter anyone who stands between me and Natalia.

Her abduction from my own home, under my protection, is unforgivable.

I knew. When Natalia told me her father's name was Alexandr Federov, I didn't want to believe it, but deep inside, I knew the reason Boris wanted Natalia dead was not because she was an eyewitness to a recent crime, but because she was a

witness to a crime that occurred fifteen years ago—the execution of the pakhan by another member of the Bratva.

Treason. Betrayal. There is no forgiveness in the brotherhood for such a crime. Boris knew that if Natalia were to ID him, not only was his reign finished, he'd be sentenced to a brutally torturous death.

Now, scanning the familiar grim interior of one of Boris's storehouses, I am ready to scorch the earth.

My men fan out, quickly clearing each room. But the place is deserted. Somehow he must have caught wind of our approach and fled. Coward. Boris won't evade me for long.

A gunshot rings through the cavernous space.

“Viktor!” Dmitri's shout draws me down a dingy hallway. He's kneeling beside the crumpled form of a large man—Igor, Boris's cousin and one of his top henchmen. Dmitri rolls him over roughly. The man's shirt is soaked with blood from the gaping exit wound in his chest, but he still clings to life by a fraying thread.

I crouch beside him. “Where is she?” My tone is deadly calm despite the fury raging inside me.

The man grits his bloodstained teeth. “Go...fuck... yourself...” he forces out.

My expression doesn't change. I press the muzzle of my pistol to his shattered knee and pull the trigger.

His agonized scream echoes off the concrete walls. Music to my ears.

When he finally quiets, panting raggedly, I repeat, “The girl. Where?”

The man squeezes his eyes shut. I grind the gun barrel into his mangled knee, eliciting another hoarse cry.

“Enough,” he gasps wetly. “S-storage. Back storage room.” He slumps in defeat.

I straighten and stride through a grimy kitchen heading to the back. Behind a cracked door, I find a filthy mattress in the

corner and discarded restraints hanging from an exposed pipe. Bile rises in my throat. My Natalia was kept here like an animal.

I spot a rust-colored handprint smeared on the wall. Is it blood? Hers? Blind rage whites out my vision for a moment. When it clears, I turn on my heel and stalk back down the hall. Igor's eyes widen at my expression. I aim my pistol between them and pull the trigger. A red mist hangs in the air.

“Burn it down,” I growl to Dmitri. “All of it.”

As the first greedy tongues of flame lick up the walls, I climb back into the SUV. Natalia is still out there. Boris has her. And I swear on all I hold dear, I will rain down hellfire on that traitorous bastard for daring to lay a finger on her.

We descend on the downtown hotel Boris owns like feral beasts, guns blazing. Boris's guards stationed outside his penthouse suite are dead before they hit the plush carpet. I take dark satisfaction in the shocked look frozen on one man's face, a neat round hole dead center in his forehead.

Alexei kicks the door in and we pour inside. More of Boris's thugs fall in a hail of gunfire. My ears ring from the deafening shots in the confined space. I press on, a man possessed. She's here. I feel it.

“Well, well, Viktor. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

I whirl, gun leveled between Boris's smug eyes as he strolls casually from the bedroom, straightening his cufflinks. It's taking every ounce of tenuous control not to empty my clip into his face right now.

“Enough games,” I snarl, stalking toward him. “Where is Natalia?”

Boris lifts his hands innocently, backing away. “Now Viktor, I have no idea what you're talking—”

My fist crashes into his jaw, snapping his head to the side. Boris stumbles, clutching his face. When he looks back at me, his eyes are blazing.

“You’ve forgotten your place, boy,” he spits blood onto the carpet. “That little cunt has made you weak.”

With a feral roar, I backhand him hard across the face. Boris drops to one knee. I grab a handful of his hair, shoving the barrel of my gun under his chin, forcing his head up. His eyes show the first flicker of fear. Good.

“Last chance before I decorate the walls with your brains.” My voice is deadly calm. “Where is Natalia?”

Boris’s throat bobs as he swallows. He raises one hand slowly, pointing toward a closed door at the end of the hall.

I pull him to his feet and shove him ahead of me toward the door. Dmitri and Alexei keep their guns trained on him. Boris’s hand shakes slightly as he turns the knob. Inside, I see only sumptuous furnishings and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the glittering skyline. No Natalia.

I seize Boris by the neck, shoving him against the wall. “You lied to me, you piece of—”

“No, wait!” he chokes out frantically.

He points toward the windows. I follow his gaze downward. My heart stutters.

Far below, Natalia is perched precariously on a narrow ledge outside the window. Her wrists are still bound. She’s gagged and blindfolded. A rope around her neck tethers her to the building. A fall from this height down to the hotel courtyard below would be fatal.

I drop Boris and race to the window, clawing it open.

“Natalia!”

At the sound of my voice, her head whips toward me. Muffled, frantic cries come from behind the gag. Blindly she inches toward my voice.

“Be still, sweet girl,” I call as gently as I can through my panic. “I’m coming for you.”

I turn on Boris, murder in my eyes. He’s still crumpled on the floor, cradling his throat.

“Dmitri, get her in safely,” I snarl, never taking my eyes from the cowering man before me.

As my loyal vor works to secure Natalia, I stalk forward and haul Boris up by his ridiculous silk shirt. Behind me, I hear her cries fade to whimpers as Dmitri pulls her back inside.

When Natalia is safely away from the ledge, I turn the full force of my rage on the trembling man in my grip. Boris’s face is swollen and bloody, stark fear in his eyes. The all-powerful leader of our brotherhood reduced to a quivering coward.

“Please, Viktor,” he begs, pathetic. “It was just business, nothing personal—”

“This is personal,” I snarl. “You took what is most precious to me. And for that, you will suffer before you die.”

I slam my fist into his face again and again until he slumps, dazed. I drop him limply to the floor before kicking him brutally in the ribs. Bones snap satisfyingly under my boot.

Boris rolls to his back, coughing up blood as he stares at me pleadingly. I crouch beside him, gripping his throat in my gloved hand tightly. He gags, face purpling.

“Your last mistake was forgetting one thing, old man,” I growl, squeezing tighter. His eyes bulge in panic.

I lean down close, our faces inches apart. “She is mine. And I protect what is mine.”

With that, I twist sharply. The crack of his neck snapping echoes in the silence. His bulging eyes stare sightlessly at the ceiling. It is finished. And I’m disappointed in myself. I wanted to make him suffer more, longer—perhaps for days. Or weeks.

Panting, I straighten slowly. Dmitri waits by the door, solemn understanding in his eyes as he nods. Natalia is safe. I roll my shoulders, steadying my breath before I turn to her.

She’s curled in a corner, still bound and blindfolded, sobbing. With measured steps, I approach and crouch before

her. Gently I remove the gag, then the blindfold. Her teary eyes stare up at me. Relief floods those depths, but I see lingering fear.

I smooth back her disheveled hair. “Shhh. You’re safe now, *golubushka*.”

Keeping my movements slow, I cut away the ropes at her wrists and ankles. She launches herself into my arms and I wrap her in a crushing embrace. Her slim body trembles against me. I bury my face in her hair, breathing her in, reassuring myself she’s here and unharmed.

After long moments, I lean back to study her face critically, checking for any sign of severe injury. Seeing only emerging bruises and raw wrists, I exhale and draw her close again.

“I was so afraid,” she finally whispers shakily into my neck.

“I know. I’ve got you now.”

I scoop her up easily and carry her past Dmitri and the others waiting stoically over Boris’s body. She hides her face in my shoulder as I stride toward the door. No one hinders our departure.

Finally outside, I gently set Natalia down and wrap my suit jacket around her shoulders. Her face is still pale, eyes haunted. I scoop her into my arms again and carry her to the waiting SUV.

Safe. Mine. Always.

The city lights streak by as I focus grimly on the road ahead while holding Natalia on my lap. My knuckles ache where they split against Boris’s face, but I barely feel it. Natalia is quiet, leaning into me.

When we turn at last through the iron gates of the estate, relief courses through me. I carry Natalia straight upstairs, but instead of the Jasmine Suite, I take her to my room and place her on my bed, where she’ll be sleeping from now on. *Our* bed.

I deposit her gently amid the pillows and blankets and stroke back her tangled hair.

“Don’t leave me, Viktor.” She clutches my hand, panic lacing her voice.

“Rest now, sweet girl. You’re home. I’m not going anywhere.”

Those lovely eyes hold mine for a long moment before fluttering closed in utter exhaustion. I remain by her side, watching the steady rise and fall of her breathing as she sleeps. Never again will I allow her to be taken from me.

CHAPTER 11

Natalia

I WAKE SLOWLY, cocooned in soft blankets that smell faintly of Viktor. For a blissful moment, I forget the horrors of the past days. Then it all comes flooding back—the abduction, Boris’s cruelty, dangling helplessly outside the penthouse window on a ledge... A shudder wracks my body at the memories.

Strong arms wrap around me from behind and I jolt before relaxing into Viktor’s embrace. His solid warmth and spicy, masculine scent surround me. I’m safe.

“Shhh, I’ve got you,” Viktor murmurs against my hair.

His calloused fingers trail soothingly along my arm and I cling to him, the lingering fear dissipating. We lay silently as moonlight light filters through the curtains. I’ve never felt more cherished than in this moment, more protected.

Eventually he shifts onto his back, positioning me so I’m draped over his bare chest. His heart thuds steadily beneath my palm. I trace the jagged scars and Bratva tattoos marking his skin.

“What will happen now?” I ask quietly.

His hand strokes my back lazily. “Now that Boris is dead, I will take his place as pakhan.” His tone holds no triumph, only weary resignation.

I prop my chin on his chest to study his solemn face. Does he even want leadership over the brotherhood, given all it has cost him?

“Will you be in danger?”

Viktor’s mouth quirks. “I’m Bratva, little one. I’m always in some danger.” At my frown, he smooths my hair back. “Don’t worry. Any remaining allies of Boris will fall in line or face the consequences. My position is secure.”

I consider his words, my nerves sparking uneasily again. Viktor notices my tension and shifts us so we’re face to face on the pillows.

“You’re safe, Natalia. I swear to you, nothing will harm you as long as I draw breath.” His gaze bores into mine intently and I nod, believing him.

“I’m more concerned about you,” I say after a moment.

Confusion flickers over his rugged features. “Me?”

Propping myself up on one elbow, I trace the furrows in his brow softly. “Will you be happy? Ruling the Bratva?” You could walk away from this violent world, my eyes plead silently. If you wanted to.

Something vulnerable passes through his eyes at the question, there and gone in an instant. He looks away with a strained exhale.

“I am Bratva,” he says simply, as though that explains everything. And I suppose it does. The brotherhood is his blood, his identity. The thought fills me with quiet sorrow.

Sensing my mood, Viktor draws me back down against his chest and kisses the top of my head. “Do not be troubled, Natalia. All will be well.”

I cling to him, wishing I could shield this complicated, ruthless, harsh-yet-tender man from the cruel realities of his world. But the die has been cast, it seems.

We say nothing more as I drift off to sleep, lulled by his steady heartbeat beneath my ear. I’ve never felt so cherished. So adored. Viktor makes me feel precious, irreplaceable. Loved.

The unbidden thought startles me fully awake again. Love? Impossible. We barely know each other.

And yet...hasn't our forced proximity, our trauma, the fear and danger we've experienced accelerated that intimacy? We've seen the truest, rawest parts of one another. I've glimpsed the deeply buried nooks of his soul he shows no one else. Just as he's unearthed my darkest shame and secret longing.

What we've endured together in a short time surpasses the superficial bonds of most relationships. Still, love seems too dangerous a word to speak aloud.

Viktor's arms tighten around me, sensing my inner turmoil. I force my thoughts away from impossible dreams back to our current reality.

"What now?" I ask again softly.

Viktor exhales, his breath ruffling my hair. "Now, we begin our new life together." He tilts my chin up, his expression solemn. "If you wish it, Natalia, you may remain here with me. But you must do it of your own free will. With the threat against you eliminated, you can walk away. Your mother's medical bills have been paid and your debt is clear. "

"Wait." I sit up. "You paid off my debt?"

"I paid off your debt and deposited five hundred thousand dollars in your bank account. If you need more, it can be arranged."

"Y-you what?" That's a half a million dollars. "Why would you do that?"

"Because you are mine," he says, as though no other explanation is needed. "You may leave freely and I will not stop you. The choice is yours."

My heartbeat quickens at the offer. But the thought of leaving Viktor's side brings only a hollow ache. I search his stoic face and see a glimmer of fear in his eyes that I might choose to walk away from him.

Slowly, I bring my hand to his cheek. "I'd rather stay with you."

The joy and relief that floods his expression steals my breath. His arms crush me close and his mouth claims mine in a searing kiss that brands my soul. I pour all my heart into it, twining myself around him.

When we finally break apart, panting, his eyes blaze with possessive intensity. “You are mine, Natalia,” he rasps. “Now and forever. This I vow to you.”

Emotion swells in my chest, too powerful for words. I simply nod, sealing my promise with another kiss.



Viktor

Moonlight casts a silvery glow over Natalia’s bare skin as she dozes beside me. Propped on one elbow, I marvel that she’s real. That fate saw fit to deliver this perfect creature into my brutal hands.

I may wash away the blood, but my hands will never be clean. Not after the lives I’ve taken, the pain I’ve inflicted in service to the Bratva.

And now, by some undeserved miracle, Natalia has not only endured my cruelty but chosen to remain willingly by my side. I’d scoff at the impossibility if her warm little body wasn’t pressed trustingly against mine.

Unable to resist, I trail my fingers along the alluring curve from her hip to waist, swept up by fierce adoration. She stirs with a soft hum, blinking up at me drowsily.

“Can’t sleep?” she murmurs.

I kiss her shoulder. “Just thinking.”

She rolls to face me, blonde hair spilling over the pillows. Her fingers drift up to comb through my hair and I nuzzle into her touch like a tamed beast. No one else could ease the savagery inside me. Only her.

“What’s troubling you?” She searches my face.

I smile wryly, brushing a knuckle over her plump bottom lip. “Wondering how I came to deserve you.”

Her eyes soften and she presses closer, her lithe body conforming to mine exquisitely. “I could say the same about you.”

The look in her eyes silences my doubts. She truly sees me as her hero, her savior. Unworthy as I am.

I kiss her tenderly, then growl against her lips, “You make me want things I have no right to dream of.” A home. A family.

Her fingertips trace my jaw as she gazes at me solemnly. “Our dreams are only limited by what we allow ourselves to hope for.”

Something fractures inside me at her words—the ruthless barriers guarding my heart. And I find myself clinging to this newfound hope she’s awakened in me.

Natalia sees my naked vulnerability and kisses me sweetly. “Just hold me,” she whispers.

I gather her close, marveling that she fits so perfectly against me, soft to my hard edges. Her hands skim over my back and shoulders as if she too is reassuring herself this is real.

We trade leisurely kisses, simply enjoying the sensual slide of lips and tongues unhurriedly. She is an intoxicant, her taste and scent sinking into my blood. I could get drunk off her.

My cock stiffens against her belly but for once I’m in no rush. Tonight I want to worship every inch of her unhurriedly.

I kiss lower, lavishing attention on her graceful neck as she tips her head back with a sigh, granting me access. Her fingernails scrape deliciously along my scalp.

“Viktor...” she breathes, already shivering with need.

“I’ve got you, little dove.” My lips and tongue blazon a scorching trail down to her breasts and she arches into me eagerly. I could spend hours worshipping her breasts, but

continue downward, nibbling along her ribcage and the indentation of her navel.

Her thighs fall open for me wantonly as I settle between them, my breath hot on her slick folds. Natalia moans, her spine bowing when my tongue finally caresses her swelling clit.

I draw out her pleasure ruthlessly with long laps and teasing flicks until she is writhing and gasping. Only when she's mindless with need do I ease two thick fingers into her snug channel, crooking them just so.

Her sharp cry and the clamp of inner muscles herald her climax and I gently coax her through every pulse and tremor. Natalia shudders, thighs clamped around my shoulders as ecstasy cascades through her. So absolutely gorgeous.

Eventually, I pepper kisses up her body, gathering her limp form close as her arms drape around me. I smile against her temple, privately delighted to have undone her so thoroughly.

When Natalia finally catches her breath, she frames my face in her hands, kissing me deeply. I groan into her mouth, my cock now throbbing almost painfully.

Wrapping her hand around my length, she guides me between her slick folds. We both exhale shakily as I sink into her welcoming heat. No matter how many times I take her, that first slow glide into her tight pussy threatens my control.

"You feel incredible," I grit out, withdrawing slowly before surging forward again. She whimpers, nails biting into my shoulders.

I keep my thrusts measured but deep, rolling my hips against her as we move together unhurriedly. Her ankles lock at the small of my back, holding me close.

We trade open-mouthed kisses, sharing breath. She clutches me tightly. "More, Viktor, please..."

Even now, I crave her pleas. Gripping her thigh, I lift it higher and drive into her at a new angle. Her sharp cry tells me I've found the sweet spot inside and I concentrate my efforts there, pistoning into her relentlessly.

“Yes, yes. Oh, god, don’t stop!” she gasps, writhing beneath me. I bury my groans in her neck, focused only on the slick clasp of her around my cock and her broken cries of ecstasy.

When I feel her inner walls start to flutter, I slide my hand between us and circle her throbbing clit with rough fingers. Natalia’s whole body goes taut as a bowstring, mouth open in a silent scream as she shatters again in my arms. The waves of her climax milk my own from me with equal force.

I spill inside her with a low cry, pleasure spearing through me. Distantly I feel her inner muscles still rippling and contracting around me, drawing out every ounce of my release.

Breathing hard, I remain braced above her on my arms, not wanting to crush her slight body with my full weight just yet. After long moments I ease us onto our sides, face to face.

Natalia’s eyes are drowsy and sated. Her skin glows with perspiration. She looks thoroughly ravished and a primal satisfaction fills me. I will never tire of watching her come undone for me. This beautiful woman belongs to me alone.

Smiling, Natalia trails her fingers over my chest idly.

“If this is how you help me get back to sleep,” I tease, “I should have insomnia more often.” I chuckle and kiss her forehead.

“I’ll tire you out anytime you wish,” she grins.

I kiss her forehead, and for long moments we simply lie there in silence.

“You see, *golubushka*,” I finally murmur. “I own you, yet you own me as well.”

She snuggles closer with a contented sigh and her breathing gradually slows and evens out as slumber reclaims her. I hold her late into the night, keeping watch over her as she sleeps.

Tomorrow I officially take command of the Bratva and a new fight for dominance will begin as old alliances shift. But

tonight, only Natalia matters.

She is my light now. My redemption. And I will destroy any who try to extinguish my light. With that grim promise, I eventually join her in sleep.

The End



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VOLUME

Three

RING OF TRUTH BY DEBORAH GARLAND

Ring of Truth

**I left my abusive boyfriend with the clothes on my back
and his baby in belly, only to be abducted by his identical
twin brother.**

Pregnant and on the run from enemies around every corner, I'm swept away by my abusive boyfriend's cold and calculating identical twin.

Forced to be his nanny while we wait for my baby to be born, I do everything I can to contact the outside world.

From his first touch, holding me down, sparks fly between us. After months of feeling nothing, my hormones wake up. He loves my curves and my swollen belly looks amazing in his hands.

Every night I wait for him to slip into my bed and ease this ache of loneliness and sexual craving.

But my baby is evidence of his brother's crime and when he shows up to end us both, a war between twin brothers breaks out. A war that can bring the dangers of home to our doorstep.

With that house divided, I can escape, but I've fallen for the good twin.

Or is he?

CHAPTER

One

ANASTASIA KOSLOV – *Two and a half years earlier*

“You are to marry him and *that is it*, Anastasia,” Papa barks, his cold, blue eyes ripe with bloodlust thinking of how my arranged marriage will benefit him here in Astoria. “You are twenty-one. I promised your mother I would wait until now.”

I should be grateful he didn’t sell me at age ten like other Bratva bosses back in Russia. I was born in the homeland, but Papa moved us—Mother, my brothers, and I—here to the U.S. when we were younger.

“You also promised her I could choose my husband.”

I didn’t go to college. My father kept me as his showpiece, parading me around at fundraisers in fancy dresses and high heels. Now I know why.

“*I am pakhan, and you will marry who I tell you to.*” Papa turns back to his desk, stopping to stare at the photos of my brothers.

Alexovich and Sasha enshrine the walls of his dark-paneled office that smell of Turkish cigarette smoke. They were gunned down on a train ten years ago. After they were killed, Mother overdosed, leaving me with Papa.

“When *am* I getting married?” I clench my stomach, afraid I’ll vomit all over the new gown he bought me for my

birthday. I had a wonderful party tonight, not realizing it doubled as a secret pageant for the highest bidder.

Papa lifts his chin, satisfied with my compliance. “One month.”

He and Mother got married at eighteen in an arranged marriage by their fathers, who were business partners in Russia. I’d heard they were never in love. Now he’s repeating his father’s sins by giving me away to the new Boston pakhan.

“Luka Gideon needs time to plan for this magnificent celebration in Boston.”

Luka probably needs time because Boston is buried under several feet of snow thanks to a rare March blizzard.

Papa advances on me. “I trust you are a virgin.”

I hide my nervous swallow. “Of course, Papa.”

He gives me freedom, so long as my guards are with me. I get wild at the club sometimes. I wonder if telling my father that one night I let a stranger to take my virtue in the bathroom would make him call off the deal or kill me.

“One more thing, Anastasia.” Papa sears me with a deadly glare. “You are not to mention this arrangement to anyone. This is my chance to seize power over the Italians and the Irish.” His upper lip curls with disdain, mentioning the Irish.

I’m more afraid of them than the Italians. The new Irish mob boss is a tortured and cruel man. Not to mention their enforcer killed a priest. Now Papa is planning this massive power grab to attack them.

“I can’t even tell Katya?” Keeping this secret will weigh on me. I tell her everything.

Saying her name wipes the evil grin off his face. “*Nyet.*” He never loved my half-sister, born of his mistress, who dropped her off here when Katya was twelve.

“She’ll find out.” I cross my arms, thinking of how the staff whispers behind his back.

He lays a hand on my shoulder. “I love *you*, Anastasia. This is best for you, my Bratva princess.”

Nodding, I let him peck me on the forehead. “*Da*, Papa.” I smile until he turns around, then my frown deepens as reality sinks in.

He’s forcing me to marry a man just like him. A man who will cheat on me the way he did Mother. And she killed herself. *Nyet, spasibo...*

Time, I have time. To leave.

That’s my plan and a week later, thanks to my skilled maneuvering, I find myself in a garden at The Orchid, freezing my ass off waiting for my salvation. The Winter Festival is Papa’s favorite gala *and* the Italians.

“It’s about time,” I snap at the tall man sauntering toward me.

“I am not the one in trouble, *mia cara*.” Dante Caruso, the Cosa Nostra underboss, says. He listened patiently yesterday when I told him my father planned to align with the Boston Bratva making Papa much stronger than the Italians and the Irish combined.

“Well, do you have it?”

From his expensive black tux, he pulls out a brown envelope. “These are untraceable.” He agreed to help me leave town by giving me money, a new phone, and a fake ID.

I go to snatch the envelope, but he pulls back. “What?”

“If you leave, you can never come back. Your father will kill you for your disloyalty.”

A heavy truth that I’ve considered. I swallow, but keep my head held high. “My leaving and ruining that Boston alliance benefits you.”

“It certainly does.” He drops the envelope and takes out a pack of unfiltered cigarettes.

I have no choice but to bend down and pick it up. It’s not as heavy as I thought. After digging through the envelope, I

look up at his oily forehead filled with harsh lines. “There’s not enough money in here.”

He closes his lips around a cigarette. “Suck my cock first, *mia cara*, and I will give you more.”

“Eat shit, Caruso.” I spin to walk away but gasp when he yanks my hair and forces me to stop.

The hair on the back of my neck prickles as he leans in close. “If I see you in Astoria again, I will have you killed.”

He thinks I’ll tell Papa he helped me, which I will if I get dragged back here and forced down that aisle. I’ll snitch like a starving rat. Which is not too off from what I feel like right now.

“No problem.” I shove Dante’s grimy hands off me.

How a sweet girl like his niece, Isabella, came from his loins astonishes me.

“You leaving is going to make life a living hell around here.” He flicks his cigarette to the frozen ground and pulverizes it with a shoe heel.

“I trust you and your don have the proper army to protect yourselves.” I leave Dante Caruso in his cloud of cigarette smoke and join the gala, shaking the whole time.

Papa *will* look for me, but he’ll never find me.

I make a last-ditch effort to reason with him. When that ends in a bitter argument, I storm away from his office.

After he takes off in that rusty Town Car with Maksim, his enforcer, for what I know will be hours, I decide it’s time to leave. I have a small window of opportunity that will vanish when the guards return. They follow him to the end of the road and leave the gate unmanned for around ten minutes, ensuring he doesn’t get ambushed on the main road.

“What are you doing?” Katya asks me from my open door.

“I’m leaving,” I choke out, shoving clothes into a suitcase. “I hate him.”

“Who? Who do you hate?”

I turn my back to her and continue packing, considering if it's worth burdening my little sister with information that, if she doesn't keep quiet about, could harm her.

I glance over my shoulder. "Papa."

"What did he do?" she asks, her eyes drifting out my window where workers are finally getting rid of that awful, smelly tent Papa had put up for my 21st birthday party a week ago.

Katya doesn't take my back to her as a hint that I don't want to talk. Her heavy sigh kills me, though. I wipe away what I know are mascara tracks down my cheek and turn around. It's so real. I'm running away from home.

"He's making me get married."

Katya doesn't look surprised. She's been here long enough to know arranged marriages are part of our world. I understand, too. But the man Papa chose... No. He's too evil.

My sister glances at the suitcase and my hurried packing as understanding dawns on her face. Closing the bedroom door, she says, "Who does he want you to marry?"

"A monster," is all I say, hoping she won't press me. "*Why, Papa?*" I mumble in Russian.

I speak the language he's so proud of, but I don't have an accent. That will help me stay hidden in the real world.

"In English, Stasia. I'm trying to help you." Papa didn't make Katya learn Russian.

"Luka Gideon, the pakhan in Boston." I sniff, figuring she's going to find out. "Papa wants to form an alliance in exchange for more *bratoks* so he can crush the Irish and the Italians."

Ugh, that slimeball, Dante Caruso... I hope my father starts a war and kills him first. Asking me to suck his dick like I'm a whore.

"Oh," Katya says, sounding worried for our enemies.

“Oh?” I repeat with my hands on my hips. “The man is twice my age!”

“Forty-two isn’t that old.”

Like it matters. I don’t want to get married. I don’t want to be anyone’s pawn or prisoner. “The blood under his fingernails is older than me.”

“Papa kills people, too.”

“Yeah, so? He’ll never murder me.” Only, I’m not sure anymore.

“I doubt your husband would murder you.”

“No. But he can hurt me.” I sit on the edge of my bed and whine out loud, “How can Papa do this to me?”

“Perhaps you can ask someone for help instead of leaving.”

“Like who?” I play dumb because I already have.

“The Irish. Their enforcer, Lachlan, seemed—”

My heart jumps into my throat. “You stay away from him, Katya. He killed *a priest*.”

“What?” she shrieks. “If he killed a priest, why isn’t he in jail?”

I roll my eyes, feeling how sore they are from crying. “Did you just get here yesterday? No one in the brotherhood, the mafia, or the Irish *mob* goes to jail around here.”

“Maybe he had a good reason to kill the priest.”

“Anyone who would risk the damnation of his soul won’t sympathize with a Bratva princess.”

“I guess you’re right.”

I shake my head and think about the Irish Enforcer, who, if nothing else, is loyal to his family. The O’Rourkes are vicious, but they have a shred of honor.

“I’d marry *Lachlan O’Rourke* before that Boston monster Papa is selling me to. I’m out of here.”

“Where are you going?” Katya cries out.

I steer her to my bed and finger the long braid, noticing how blonde her hair is now. Like mine, but her eyes are warm brown.

“I can’t tell you. It’s not that I don’t trust you, but believe me, it’s safer if you don’t know. Papa’s people have a way of knowing if someone is lying and getting information out of them. Especially women.” I kiss her forehead, and she pulls me in for a hug.

“How can you leave? Do you have money?” she asks.

I don’t want her to worry about me, but she can’t know that scum Dante Caruso helped me. “I have some money. Enough. Papa doesn’t hide his extra cash very well, and there’s so much of it, he doesn’t even realize it’s gone. I have enough to live on for a while. I’ll figure out how to get more when I’m settled somewhere.”

“Take me with you, please?” She grabs hold of my wrist. The desperation in her eyes stuns me.

“Katya, I can’t take you with me. Yulia will look after you.” I uncurl her fingers from my wrist and stand. “You just made the Dean’s List at East Side Performing Arts, for crying out loud. Papa didn’t let me go to college. I’m so proud of you. Keep dancing, *mladshaya sestra*.” I call her *little sister* in Russian to strengthen our bond.

“I will keep dancing.” She hugs me again. “Will you write me?”

“I can’t.” I shake my head. “Papa checks the mail.”

“Wait here.” Katya dashes into the hallway.

Hating having to say goodbye, I grab my suitcase and swing it off the bed. This is a good time to leave. The worry in Katya’s eyes might make me back down, or delay. Then I’ll be stuck.

I take one last look around my bedroom. This is it. Sadness hurts my heart, but I draw on the last ounces of my strength. I need to run, start a new life, and live on my own, away from

everyone and everything I've ever known. I slide open my window to climb out, but Katya returns and gasps in the doorway.

“Are you crazy?” she hisses, yanking me back inside. “You’re leaving in the middle of the day?”

“Papa is across town at a meeting, and guards are watching from the main road for an ambush.” I check the time on my watch. Shit, I only have ten minutes. “It’s supposed to snow tonight, and I can’t take a chance on being stuck in a blizzard. I’ll be fine.”

“Wait. Don’t bring your suitcase. Papa will think you left on your own. In fact...” She glances around. “We have to make it look like someone took you.”

I still. “You want him to think someone kidnapped me?”

She shrugs adorably, like this is all a game. “This way, if he finds you, he won’t punish you.”

I pull her into my arms. “Oh my God, that’s brilliant.” I open my suitcase and empty it. While I hate not having my favorite clothes, if it will throw Papa off, make him chase an invisible perpetrator and forgive me if I have to come home, it’s worth it.

Katya knocks over some furniture to make it look like a struggle. Even breaks my mirror. “Here, take this.” She shoves a piece of paper at me. “Students have mailboxes on campus. This is mine. You can write to me there. Papa doesn’t know about it. No one does. Send me your address, and I’ll try to mail you some of your clothes.”

I take the paper from her and put it inside my coat pocket. Dante’s envelope sits tucked inside a hole in the lining I cut. “Okay.”

“Please write me and tell me where you are when you get there.”

“I’ll try.” I kiss her on the forehead, knowing how I’ll miss her sweet, innocent smell. “I turned off the camera in my room.” I check the time again. “Get out of here and do something in your room to make it seem like you’ve been

there the whole time. Do your stretching with that classical music you love.” I wink at her. “I’ll miss you, *mladshaya sestra.*”

“I’ll miss you, too.” Poor girl looks ready to cry.

But I know Yulia, Papa’s housekeeper, will protect her. Papa has no use for Katya since she’s technically illegitimate. When she graduates, she’ll move far, far from Astoria.

CHAPTER 2

Anastasia

I **DUCK** out the window and down the set of metal stairs from the balcony outside the media room. With the front gate unmanned, I slip through with no problem. A few blocks away, I hail a cab.

“JFK, please.” I shove my sunglasses on, hoping that disguises me.

The promised snow falls and picks up intensity. I worry I’ll miss the flight that Dante booked for me and pray he’s not at the gate waiting for his blow job.

But Dante is nowhere to be seen. With a swell of relief, I collect my boarding pass. I board my flight to Las Vegas and swear under my breath at the cramped middle seat. Really? Dante couldn’t at least book me a first-class ticket? I’m saving his life!

No, I’m seated in-between two besties who talk over my head and in my ears. But after takeoff and a few drinks, I soften and relax enough to chat with them.

I tell them my name is Ana, the name on my fake ID, and that I’m headed on a solo getaway after a bad breakup. They’re going to a bachelorette party. In Vegas. What a life! I never would have been able to fly off to Vegas for my bachelorette party. But I don’t want to get married.

With my long blonde hair, perfect makeup touched up in the bathroom, and sleek polished nails, I look like a posh, party girl and not a scam artist. They are extremely sympathetic to my faux breakup. I’m not surprised when they

invite me to stay in their Airbnb since a girl couldn't make it. I had planned to get a cheap hotel room and pay cash, but this is too good to be true.

Sometimes it's about being in the right place at the right time. I hope my luck continues. With the plane's dramatic lift off, however, a sinking feeling settles into my stomach. Am I making a huge mistake? Will I live the rest of my life on the run? Maybe I'll give it a few weeks and then call home. Bargain with Papa for my freedom in exchange for my return.

Chatting makes the flight time fly by, and we land to a red-hot setting sun. A far cry from New York's freezing snow and rain.

My new friends are a blast to hang out with. I linger behind them with my sunglasses on and suck down the free drinks on the casino floor. Papa kept me isolated, and to have friends feels so electric. I blend perfectly with these girls, who probably also have rich daddies.

In the third casino we visit, I pass a souvenir shop and spot an older couple buying postcards. They're wearing baseball caps with RV-shaped pins from other states. They're road warriors. An idea pops into my head.

"Can you guys wait for me?" I call out to the girls.

Thinking they'll hang back, I go inside the shop and approach the couple.

"Excuse me." I smile, and the old man returns a yellow-tooth grin.

"What?" the wife snaps.

"I wonder if you can help me." I look at him, ignoring her. "I promised my sister I'd send her postcards from all over the country. But I ran out of travel money. I don't want her to worry about me." I take out the address Katya gave me and snap a photo with my burner phone. "If I give you money, will you buy a postcard on your travels and sign it from me, say hi, and say that I'm having a good time? Please?"

"Sounds suspicious," the woman grumbles, looking me up and down.

“No problem, honey.” The man takes Katya’s address from me in a flash. “What’s your name?”

I freeze. “Just sign it, A.”

“A?”

“A. Like apple.”

“Your name is Apple?” Wifey thinks I’m a poison Macintosh from the Garden of Eden, trying to sweet talk her wrinkled old husband.

“No, ma’am. My name is...Alicia.”

“Then we’ll sign it Alicia.”

“Just A is fine.” I reach into the purse I hid under my coat when I left and give them money. “How is twenty dollars?”

“Do you know how much stamps cost, missy?”

I sadly do not, but I also don’t have that much to spare. “Forty? Three cards, minimum, please.”

“Deal.” The man takes my money and scoots his wife away before she can spit on me.

Back in the casino, a loud, rapid-dinging sound and the roar of cheering catches my attention. An imposing, well-built, golden blond-haired man in dress slacks and a black button-down shirt has apparently won big at the roulette table. I watch as he scoops up a large pile of multi-colored chips.

I look around, realizing the girls I came here with didn’t wait for me. Shit, I need to find that bachelorette party, so I have a place to sleep tonight. But I can’t take my eyes off the big winner.

Until he turns around.

Sheer terror nearly makes me lose my balance.

Cormac O’Rourke. One of the youngest O’Rourke brothers from back home.

Shit! What’s *he* doing here?

He recognizes me immediately and waves me over with a look of curiosity on his face. His very handsome face. All the

O'Rourkes are handsome.

Cormac and his twin brother, Darragh, live in Seattle where they're doctors. They moved away years ago, and from what I heard, they have nothing to do with their crime family.

Ducking away will raise suspicion. It's not every day he sees a pakhan's daughter. I take a deep breath and steady myself. If he doesn't regularly talk to his brothers, maybe I'm safe.

"Stasia?" Cormac purrs when I get closer, and I can tell he's drunk.

This might work in my favor. "Hi." I lean in for a hug.

He grips me and sniffs. "God, I miss Astoria. I miss everything. How's things back home?"

Horrible.

"It's great. I'm just here for the weekend with friends. Bachelorette party." I swallow nervously. "I need to find them."

"Looks like they ditched you." He grabs my hand. "Come gamble with me."

"No, that's okay. I have to find them." I'm not sure Cormac would believe my father let me come here without a guard. I need to get away from this guy.

I reach into my purse to take out my phone, so I can pretend to call the girls, when I see my wad of cash is gone.

Spinning around, I realize the older couple pick-pocketed me! Or maybe it was one of the bachelorette girls and I didn't notice. No wonder they ran off. My heart pounds as I curse. "Shit."

"Problem?" Cormac studies me.

"No." Feeling sick, I glance at all those chips in his hand. "Show me how to play roulette."

Having no choice, because I not only lost all my money, I also have nowhere to sleep tonight, I let him steer me away.

We come up on a table I've seen in James Bond movies, only there are no chairs, and no one's wearing a tux. In fact, most people around this table look one step away from being homeless, like me.

Cormac hands me a handful of black chips. "That's a grand, baby. Put it on a number."

I stare at one thousand dollars in my hand and consider running. But this place is swimming with security. I won't get away with it. "What are the odds?"

"Thirty-six to one. That's what I love about this game."

I see no chips on 21, so I drop the pile on it for good luck, since it's my age.

"No more bets. No more bets," the dealer, who probably smokes a pack a day, bellows to the crowd.

She pinches a white ball into a sparkling roulette wheel, and it bounces all over the place. My heart stops when it comes close to 21, but it pops up. Pops high and...lands on 21!

"Holy shit, baby." Cormac grabs me. "You just won me thirty-six thousand dollars!"

"*You* won?" I yelp. "Don't I get a cut? I picked the number."

He eyes me cautiously. I assume he's living off some kind of trust fund. And *he's* not on the run. "What will you give me for your share?"

His tone drags me back to that conversation with Dante Caruso. They are all the same, aren't they? Gangsters. Cormac doesn't work for his family, but he grew up in that world. Men like him usually only want one thing from women.

"How long are you in Vegas, Cormac?" I quickly change the subject.

He takes a swig of his drink. "I'm not sure."

He was a known party boy back home, not the type to get married and settle down. Maybe he is running away from something. Despite the creepy comment about what I'll give

him, I feel safe with him. Doctors save lives, not take them. And besides, we have something in common. Cormac escaped the life I also don't want to live.

Feeling a little better, I smile. "Let's see if we can win more money."

"Addicting, isn't it?" He takes my hand. "Come on, princess."

We just won thirty-six thousand dollars! Maybe I can make a life here after all. Hang out with a cute, harmless doctor.

What can go wrong?

CHAPTER 3

Anastasia ~ Present Day

“HOW FAR ALONG ARE YOU, ANA?”

the EMT asks me.

“I’d check my watch, but I’m handcuffed,” I sneer sarcastically because that’s who I am now.

A woman who sneers.

A woman who is unhappy, bitter, and hasn’t smiled in I don’t know how long.

I live with a man I hate.

He hates me, too.

Cormac stares at me from the second ambulance parked across from mine. He’s also cuffed, his ankle messed up from rolling and totaling his car. I stole it to escape him, even though I don’t know how to drive. I left with the clothes on my back, rushing out of the motel when I had the chance. Cormac caught up to me and jumped on the hood. I slammed on the brakes, and he forced his way inside. When he tried to turn around, I grabbed the steering wheel, screaming at him.

That’s when the car flipped over, the sounds of screeching tires and scraping metal ringing in my ears.

“Seriously, sweetie. Just ballpark it.” The EMT checks my blood pressure. “Considering what that car looks like, it’s a miracle you’re sitting here with just a cut on your forehead.”

“I... I don’t know how far along I am.” I didn’t know I was pregnant for months and haven’t been to a doctor. After

weeks without my period, which I thought was from all the stress, a pee-stick showed two pink lines. I was still in denial until my belly started to swell.

Cormac felt because he was a doctor, he could care for me, and didn't let me get checked out. The only heartfelt thing he did was not push me to keep doing the drugs he got me hooked on.

Since learning I was pregnant, I've been living with the fear that I hurt my baby.

I've also been dealing with these last horrific months, sober and straight, while Cormac continued to live in his fantastical haze of booze and crack.

He peers at me with hooded eyes from several feet away. They're bright green like many of his brothers, although right now, they're bloodshot. They find me and wreck me. He's terrified I'll call his brother, Kieran, the Irish mob boss, back in Astoria. I'm terrified he'll call my father, who will send his henchmen to abduct me.

We're caught in this co-dependent bond of fearing our families.

"Last chance, Miss Michaels. Whose drugs are these?" A cop in a suit waves a bag of white powder, glowering at my pregnant stomach.

I said they were Cormac's. He said they were mine. Now we're both under arrest. A jail cell might be the safest place for us.

God, what am I thinking? I'd rather be in jail than go home to my father. My brain is so messed up, I can't think straight anymore. I've been living in complete hell for almost two years.

"We'll let your lawyers and the prosecutor straighten this out." The detective pockets my ID.

I breathe in relief when he doesn't even bat an eye at the fake California driver's license that reads Ana Michaels. The Italians were good for one thing. I wonder how Dante Caruso

is, but thinking of anyone from home leads me to worry about Katya. And I can't do that. It's too stressful.

The EMTs huddle, looking from Cormac to me, and convince the detective to send us right to Clark County Jail. They can process us there, take care of Cormac's ankle, and run those tests on my baby.

Baby...

I haven't even bonded with this little thing growing inside me. I've been too busy living a nightmare. Still, I feel terrible. Cormac doesn't care about this child. Never touches me. His Irish-Catholic upbringing couldn't push the words 'terminate the pregnancy' out of his mouth, but he looks at me with such disdain, like getting knocked up was my fault.

After six months together, I lost all interest in Cormac. The sex continued because I had nowhere else to go. With my pregnancy came my imprisonment. I'd been holding on day after day, hoping something would change. I had a roof over my head, food to eat, a bed to sleep in. Cormac started selling drugs so we had money to live. It kept us in a seedy motel and gave him enough to gamble. His incessant chasing down a big score that never came drowned us further into poverty. He came back late and usually passed out on the sofa, shitfaced on cheap booze.

I look down at my very swollen stomach. I tried to pinpoint when I got pregnant. I couldn't look at gestation timetables and other signs because Cormac sold my burner phone and kept his phone locked in that car.

"Bratva," I whisper, taking a chance that someone will hear me. I *am* Bratva, my baby *is* Bratva. There are Russian brotherhood cells all over the world.

My heart calms down, realizing that may be the only way out of this situation. Even in prison. *Especially* in prison, someone will get word to the closest brotherhood leader. I'm carrying a Koslov baby.

One look at Cormac reminds me I'm *also* carrying an O'Rourke. They'll fight for my child, too. To the death, which

might mean me, if Kieran, that evil king of theirs, has his way. He'd gut me to get the baby out. Leave me to bleed out and die. I doubt Cormac would stop him. They stick together, that family.

My stomach flips as they put me in the back of a police car, and I vomit on the seat, getting some of it on my T-shirt and sweatpants.

“Oh shit, honey,” the female officer cries out.

“I'm sorry. I'm pregnant.”

“I know, honey. We'll get you an ultrasound as soon as we get to the infirmary.” She shows incredible sympathy considering my sad state.

It's clear, I've had every advantage in this world and threw it all away. We drive away, and when Cormac isn't within five feet of me, I slump in utter relief. Holding back tears, I'm brought to a gray cinderblock three-story complex, complete with metal fencing and barbed wire twisted along the top. Several guard towers dot the perimeter with flashing, revolving lights.

The whole processing routine passes quickly, and after an ultrasound shows my baby is fine, they tell me I'm due in a month. I take this news with both terror and relief.

“When can I talk to a lawyer?” I ask the guard, who hands me a prison jumpsuit to wear since my clothes are ruined, and I don't fit into anything else they have.

“You can meet with a public defender at the courthouse tomorrow morning.”

Morning...

I'm spending the night locked up. Not much different from the last two years of my life.



The jail is filled with prostitutes and rowdy drunk girls. I'm somewhere in-between. The food isn't terrible. In the cafeteria

the next morning, I'm given a box of cornflakes and a container of milk with a banana. Because I'm pregnant, they added a pre-made protein shake to my meal. I smirk, noticing it's the same brand people on TikTok used to make all kinds of high protein desserts.

TikTok, Facebook, Instagram. All apps I haven't been on in over two years. I let my social media accounts go dark after I ran away from Astoria.

I meet with the public defender after breakfast, who gives me a list of outstanding warrants for both me and Cormac, based on our descriptions.

"Yeeeeeep. There're a ton of police reports shoved in here," he says.

That explains the thick file. God, I'm screwed.

"This isn't looking too good, Miss Michaels," he adds. "You and Mr. O'Rourke went on a bit of a crime spree."

We were banned from all the casinos, forcing Cormac to pull cons on the street with me. When I got too big, he said I was hurting business and left me in the room, usually tied to the bed, so he could sell drugs. Drugs the cops found in the car. But no one seems to care that he kept me a prisoner.

"The car was in your name, Ana," the public defender says to me, going through the massive file someone put together in less than twenty-four hours.

"Car..." I mumble, thinking of the shitbox Cormac bought when Ubers and taxis got too expensive. Since my name was fake, he registered it to me.

"Yes, the car you were driving, Miss Michaels."

"I was *escaping*." I take a breath. "You have to believe me. Cormac O'Rourke was holding me prisoner. He put the car in my name without my consent. He hid the keys from me. *He* put the drugs in there. Ask those kingpin informants the police have. He's a dealer."

My lawyer checks another file. "Hmmm. Your tox report came back clean." He stares at me with a young, serious face.

“But that’s just a twenty-four-hour snapshot.”

Had we met any other time, this guy would salivate over me. The old me. Now he looks at me with disgust. I’m just another day’s legal mess for him. I’m tempted to yell, “*I’m rich! I have a huge trust fund!*”

I exhale instead. “The nurse at the infirmary said my baby is fine. That’s not evidence of anything?”

He blinks, thinking about that. “Good catch! I’ll add that to my motion.”

“Motion?”

“To dismiss all charges.”

“*You believe me?*” I cry out. “You’re going to get me out of here?”

“We always do an MTD first. Motions to dismiss are standard.” He shrugs, going through the files until he gets a call. Without looking at me, he murmurs, “Your arraignment is at four p.m.”

“For which case?”

“All of them.”

I struggle to breathe.

Shit... this just got so real, so fast. Perhaps I should mention my father. But a slick DA will conclude that since I was born into the Bratva, I must be guilty. Or they’ll try to use me to flip on Papa.

Ha... Not happening. His henchmen will be on the next plane. I shudder, wondering if my father will kill me, or send me to one of those prison camps.

I stare down at my gray jumpsuit, three sizes too big to fit over my belly. The neckline slides off, exposing my pale shoulders, and the hemlines drag on the dirty floor. “Do I get to change?”

Into what, I don’t know. The clothes I wore to escape were dirty with vomit and bloodstained from the accident.

“Not for an arraignment.” He clears his throat. “No jury to impress.”

I roll my eyes. “Is there any way you can go to my motel and collect my things?”

He taps a pencil against his mouth. “And bring them where?”

“Can you keep them at your house? If we’re going to trial, I need clothes to wear, right? The motel will throw everything away.”

Cormac had bought me a brand-new designer wardrobe that first week in Vegas with the roulette winnings. He later sold all those nice clothes, along with what I had on when we met. As I got bigger, he took me shopping at cheap stores for sweats and large T-shirts. Either way, I’ll look like a hobo.

I’m so screwed.

CHAPTER 4

Darragh O'Rourke

"YOUR BROTHER'S *FOOKED* UP,"

Tamryn O'Leary, a detective in Las Vegas, drawls in the same lilt as my entire family. "Again."

I don't speak with the accent. Despite hearing it in my house growing up with seven siblings, it never stuck. Perhaps that made breaking away from my 'crime' family easy.

My father, or Da as I sometimes call him because my brothers do, had his heir, my oldest brother, Kieran and four more male reinforcements to take over his legacy as King of Astoria.

He didn't need me or Cormac.

Fucking Cormac...

"How bad it is?" I grip the phone.

Tamryn, a connection I made in Las Vegas, where I keep a villa at a five-star casino, recognized my last name on the docket and called me in Seattle.

"He overturned a car last night. *Fooked* up his ankle and caused a scene."

Doctors make the worst patients. We graduated medical school, and our advisor at UCLA referred us to a hospital in Seattle for our residencies. We were stars, or freak shows, depending on how you look at it. Identical twin doctors waltzing up and down the corridors.

“They found drugs in the car,” Tamryn goes on. “Then a detective saw he fit the description of a conman scamming tourists. Several filed reports to LVPD. He’s banned from most casinos.”

“God damnit. Where is he now?”

“Hang on, Darragh. Let me see what else I can find out.”

Listening to the hissing on the other end, I reflect on how Cormac and I love many of the same things, like most identical twins. Vegas being one of them. Although, he took gambling and games too far. He had pissed off enough people at our hospital and then came the disciplinary hearings. With his refusal to take responsibility, he got fired.

We get a monthly allotment from my family, more than enough to live on comfortably. But when I noticed Cormac spiraling, I called Eoghan, our lawyer brother, who also handles the family’s finances. I made up a story, so he’d open Cormac a new account. An account I controlled.

I limited his spending, thinking that would control him.

He said he was going to Vegas for a month to get his head together. Looking back, I don’t know why I didn’t try to stop him. Why I thought a month in Las Vegas would clear anyone’s head is as good a question as any.

It’s not like my brother is my only concern. I’m a highly sought-after pediatric surgeon, and I’m raising my seven-year-old daughter alone.

One month turned to two, then six. Then years went by. But Cormac sent me casino account statements. He was making money with his gambling. And so long as he didn’t get into trouble and kept his lifestyle far from my family, I didn’t urge him to come home.

I chose not to be a part of their crime world, but O’Rourke blood swims in my veins, and I have a knack for making strategic connections. Tamryn is one of them.

“What time is my brother’s arraignment?” I ask him when he gets back on the line.

I curse, staring at my watch, furious that the daddy-daughter day I took off work for has to be canceled.

“He’s on the docket for four p.m.”

I’ll have to ask Sophie’s nanny to stay over to take care of her, since I don’t know when I’ll be home. I’d bring her. She loves the city, too. Vegas has a surprising number of things to do there for kids, and she loves the villa. Loves the sunshine and the pool. In the fall, Seattle’s constant cloud cover and rain is dreary as hell. But it’s where my livelihood is. Plus, it’s far away from my family.

“I’ll be down there in a couple of hours.” I cringe, seeing it’s already noon. “Thanks for the call, Tamryn.”

“Daddy?” Sophie’s voice springs open my clenched eyes. “Where are you going in a couple of hours?”

Her sad drawl pulls at my gut. My Sophie was a surprise. Because I was raised right, I married her mother. But Ginnifer left us three years ago when Sophie was only four years old. She took an eight-week rotation with the Red Cross and never came back to the states.

Ginnifer calls Sophie once in a while, and it’d been easy to lie to my daughter, saying Mommy will come home soon. She just turned seven and has figured out Mommy isn’t ever coming home.

Christ, those three years went by fast.

Before I answer where I’m going, I eye Sophie’s nanny, Olivia, who is always here when I’m on call at the hospital. That part is understandable to Sophie. Getting on a plane to bail my brother out of jail isn’t.

“Do you mind staying over tonight, Olivia?”

She doesn’t live here, and rarely stays over. I’m asking her for a favor I usually don’t need.

“Dr. O’Rourke, tomorrow is Saturday.”

“Daddy, I have Morgan’s birthday party tomorrow. Remember, you said *you’d* take me?”

“Right.” Cormac’s situation weighs on me, and I feel like I can’t breathe, being stretched like this.

“Sophie, go get your iPad, and we’ll play more of Minion Rush,” Olivia says with the right firmness a child needs.

“Yay!” Sophie flies up the mahogany steps in our renovated Victorian with a view of Puget Sound.

Ginnifer and I had an apartment, but I always believed kids need to grow up in a house. She picked this place out. Its \$1.3M price tag startled me for a moment, but I have no regrets. Sophie was born here. This is her home.

“Thank you,” I say to Olivia, realizing she bought me time to get a plan together.

“You’re welcome.” She strokes my arm, hinting once again how she wants me.

I’m a man. I know the tone, the look, the hair twirling. But she’s my daughter’s nanny. I’m not crossing that line. Plus, I’m still married, even if I don’t bother wearing the ring anymore. Even if I’ve not had sex in three years and am ready to explode.

“My brother is in trouble.” I shift so Olivia’s not touching me. “I have to fly to Vegas.”

Panic creeps into my throat, realizing I’ll likely need to bring Cormac back here, and somehow be present to take my daughter to a birthday party in twelve hours.

I don’t even know what kind of shape he’s in, or if it’s safe for him to be around my daughter. Sophie comes first, always has. Where else can he go, though? I can’t call Kieran. He’ll send his jet and put Cormac on lockdown. He’ll go fucking nuts. Do and say shit to wipe out his relationship with the rest of our family. Cormac messed up, but I can’t let that happen.

Yes, I’m a fucking enabler.

This is my fault. I should have done more to prevent his downfall. We’re twins. We look out for each other. He’s my responsibility.

“Do you have plans tomorrow, Olivia?” I scroll on my phone and find the app to book a private jet. A captain, a co-pilot, and a crew to fly to Vegas last minute, who will then wait in a private hanger while I go grab Cormac, will cost me a fortune.

All on a Friday night. The busiest travel day to Las Vegas.

“I actually do have plans,” Olivia says. “Thanksgiving is coming up. I go shopping with my mother, and we prepare the house for relatives.”

While Sophie and I carve pumpkins, eat turkey, make Christmas cookies, and color Easter eggs, it’s only her and me now for every holiday. I have a massive family back East. But my refusal to be a backroom butcher for my brothers, stitching up knife wounds and digging bullets out of bloody flesh, has kept my daughter from a truckload of uncles. And a few aunts, now that my brothers are racking up wives. Christ, two of them are married now.

At my mother’s insistence, I flew back home over the summer when Riordan was in the hospital after running into a burning building that collapsed on him. I wanted to see my ma, who’s sick with MS. I pushed away the feeling of what I was missing as far as being part of a big family, but it tore me up inside.

When my brothers were younger, they were hooligans, terrorizing the streets of Astoria for my da. I didn’t think I was missing anything. Times have changed, and I wonder if I need to consider going home to Astoria, too.

I have to deal with Cormac first. He’ll never go back home on his own. Kieran will lock him up with guards until he gets his act together. He’s the weak link with a reckless streak and a big mouth who can bring their world crashing down.

He’ll hate me for dragging him back here. But I have to fix this.

My daughter skips into the dining room with her iPad. “Sophie, honey, come here.” I breathe in relief when I get the confirmation that a jet is ready for me.

“Yeah, Daddy?”

“Uncle Cormac’s been in a car accident in Las Vegas.” My words tumble out, and I can’t believe I just said that.

“Oh, no!”

“He’s okay. But I have to fly down there and...” I won’t tell Sophie her favorite uncle’s been arrested. “He needs my help.”

“I can come and help, too, Daddy.” She jumps to her feet, and it kills me.

It makes sense to bring her since she has her own room at the villa, but I have no one to watch her there. I will not bring her to a fucking courthouse and make her see Cormac in shackles.

“Not this time, honey. Olivia will stay with you.”

“What about my party tomorrow?” She’s worried I won’t be home. “I need to bring my own cupcakes.” She looks around, figuring out I haven’t bought the nut-free cake mix we need because she’s highly allergic.

Shopping and baking were on the agenda for our day together. For all the parties, Brownie meetings, and soccer games she goes to, I send her with her own food, snacks, and sweets.

“Sophie, let’s go to the market right now and get your cupcake mix.” Olivia saves me, snagging her coat and umbrella from the hall tree.

“Cool!” Uncle Cormac’s accident forgotten. Thank goodness for short attention spans.

Olivia helps Sophie on with her coat and above a whisper, she says, “I’m sure my mother won’t mind if I skip helping her just this once. I’ll make the cupcakes, too, Dr. O’Rourke.”

The tone of her voice, tempting me to give in to her advances, sits on a razor edge of what’s right for me and Sophie. Saving myself, I say, “I’ll call you from Vegas after I have my brother.”

“Okay.” She smiles with hope on her lips.

She’s attractive, but I swear, I feel nothing for her. What the hell is wrong with me? I stopped having feelings for Ginny years ago. How could I love someone who doesn’t want to live with me *and* her own daughter?

“Sophie?” I wave her over and finish buttoning her coat. “I won’t be here when you get back, but I’ll be home as soon as I can. I will take you to your party tomorrow. I promise.” I kiss her forehead, pushing back a sudden wash of tears, worrying I’ll break that promise.

“Okay, Daddy.” She hugs me, and her arms around me strike a nerve in my heart.

We’re fine. We’re just fine, her and I.

I don’t need *anyone* else.



The private plane gets me to the front of the take-off line out of Sea-Tac, and we land on the priority tarmac in Las Vegas ahead of everyone, too. When we touch down, I call Tamryn.

“You’re cutting it close, mate.”

“Stall,” I bite out, thinking of all the money I give him. “You’re a detective first grade.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” He ends the call in a huff, signaling he’ll want extra cash this month.

I hop into a limo I ordered while on the plane. I was supposed to be at the courthouse by four p.m.

It’s five after when we tear out of the hangar.

I get to the courthouse twenty-minutes later, where Tamryn waits for me and opens the limo door. “I pulled some favors with the DA. They’re waiting for you.”

“Thank you.” Turning to the driver, I say, “I’ll text you when we’re ready to go back to the airport.” My stomach twists at all that I’m missing with my daughter for this.

I jog up the steps with the blaring afternoon sun on my skin and dry air filling my lungs. Such a difference from misty, gray Seattle, but I don't have time to even enjoy the nice weather.

"I did some more digging into the case, mate." Tamryn steers me to the courtroom. "I didn't want to call you mid-flight until I had all the details."

"Talk to me."

"Your brother was living with a woman."

That hardly surprises me. "And?"

"She was inside the car when Cormac crashed. The car is technically hers. When they found the drugs, they arrested both of them."

I take a deep breath, thinking of the liability. "Is she on drugs, too?"

"I got a look at her tox report. No. Cormac's was through the roof. And his alcohol level was three times the legal limit."

Shaking my head, I say, "And?"

"Well, there's something else. Something...big." He waves his hands.

"Jesus Christ, what?"

"Ana Michaels," a court admin calls out as we get inside.

A woman with greasy, long blonde hair stands up to face the judge.

"That's her." Tamryn nudges me.

My stomach drops seeing hers. She's pregnant. *Very* pregnant.

Fucking Cormac!

That's assuming it's his. Although, why would she be with him if it isn't? Why didn't he mention any of this to me? I'm going to kill him. Knocking up some poor woman and then getting into a car accident with her, putting his baby's life in danger is beyond the pale.

Then again, birds of a feather. She's with him because she's a druggie, too, and part of his games. She's a criminal.

Led by a court officer, Cormac enters the courtroom limping and shackled. It breaks my heart. Christ, he looks terrible. Gaunt and bald. Fuck, I can only imagine how having his head shaved pissed him off since he likes to wear his hair longer. I keep mine short these days. Cormac shoots me a weak smile. I shudder at the missing teeth and the chaos of tattoos etched into his neck.

"Talk to me *real fast*, T. Give me all the complaints."

Tamryn reads from his phone, something he hacked from the court's database, and I cringe at the details.

"Ana Michaels, how do you plead?" the judge asks.

"Not guilty." Her voice forces my eyes on her again.

I detect a New York accent with a touch, just a touch of something I heard growing up in Astoria.

"Bail is set at ten-thousand dollars."

"Motion to set aside bail, your honor," her lawyer argues. "My client has been held against her will by her co-defendant. He stole all her money, her phone, and kept her a virtual prisoner. He forced her to help him commit these crimes in exchange for food and shelter. She did everything she's accused of under duress."

Anger fires through my veins. Deep inside, I really am ruthless like my brothers and want to put Cormac on lockdown myself to punish him. Punish him for putting us all at risk.

"Who's her lawyer?" I whisper to Tamryn.

"Public defender, young kid, just out of law school."

I roll my eyes. She's toast.

"She's also eight months pregnant, your honor," her lawyer continues. "I've arranged for her to go to a shelter for battered women. She has no passport and will wear an ankle monitor."

I think about when Ginnifer was that pregnant. Christ, she was miserable, and this woman has to go live in a shelter

wearing an ankle monitor.

Something hits me like a bolt of lightning. If that's my brother's baby, it's technically my baby, too. Identical twins share the same DNA.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Approach." The judge waves her lawyer and the prosecutor over.

The woman looks around, and her profile starts the beginning of my heart attack. First, at her utter and astounding beauty, despite the wrecked and ravaged state she's in. Next, a deeper rage has me ready to scream.

"No *fucking* way." I must have said that out loud because she turns around and our eyes lock.

Anastasia Koslov.

The missing Bratva princess who was kidnapped from Astoria. She's pregnant with Cormac's baby. He may not have been the one to snatch her from her bed, as the mafia rumor mill has churned for more than two years. But if she's telling the truth, Cormac kept her a prisoner here in Vegas and forced her to commit crimes.

If her father, the vicious Astoria pakhan, finds out what my brother did to her, he'll slaughter my entire family.

Our gazes connect, and something rearranges inside me. I've watched her grow up into the utter beauty she is. While I see traces of a princess, right now she's a hot mess, and it's my brother's fault.

I have to fix this.

"I can pay her bail," I say in a loud, firm voice.

She looks at me with horror in her eyes, and yanks on her lawyer's sleeve, furiously shaking her head.

"Mate, what are you doing?" Tamryn whispers.

Cormac stands up, gawking at me with a look of confusion. How could he not have seen the massive risk he

was taking with her? Was he that far gone? Or did he just not know who she was?

How could he not? We *all* grew up together. We mingled at fundraisers and other parties. Us, the Russians and the Italians.

“I’m bailing her out.”

“What about your brother?” Tamryn looks at me like I’ve lost my mind.

I give Cormac a cold, dead stare for putting me in a position to choose sides. “He stays right here.”

CHAPTER 5

Ana

DARRAGH IS HERE. In Las Vegas. In this courtroom. I glance at Cormac, who's pale as shit, but also livid. Darragh bailed me out and not his own brother. Our eyes connect and the way his stare lingers as I'm hauled away by a court officer, I know he recognizes me.

Damn it!

An hour later, I'm led out of the processing room. I stand there in this ugly, gray jumpsuit staring at polished and beautiful Darragh O'Rourke. He's Cormac's identical twin. Although there is nothing identical about them anymore.

"Where are her clothes?" Darragh asks my lawyer, not making eye contact with me.

He's just as tall with wide shoulders and has the same golden blond hair. Cormac always dressed casually and has a wild streak, like me. Darragh is GQ and sophisticated with a cold and chiseled air about him. Cormac lives on the edge, but Darragh, as far as I know, has always been strait-laced and plays by the rules.

Staring at Darragh, looking so clean-cut and stylish, it's easy to see how much Cormac has changed. What the drugs and the booze have done to him. It happened slowly, and I didn't see it until he and his brother were in the same room.

Just like that, everything changes. So much snaps into focus in a short amount of time. What I've been through. It all catches up to me, and my anger finally surfaces.

My mind fights for a response to Darragh as far as where my clothes are. “They had blood and vomit on them. The jail took them.”

Darragh looks at his phone and curses under his breath. “Where can we get her new clothes?” he asks my lawyer.

“I’m right here. Talk to me. I have clothes at home,” I snap at Darragh.

“Home?” He lays a stare on me that withers my spine.

“A motel off the strip.”

His eyes flutter for a moment, then he reaches for me. “Let’s go.”

“I... I can go home?” I gawk at my lawyer.

“Yes,” he says, rocking on his heels, relieved to be rid of me. “I’ll be in touch about your next court date.”

“I... I don’t have a phone.”

Darragh rolls his eyes. “Here.” He hands something to my lawyer. “This is my business card. Call *me*.”

My lawyer tucks Darragh’s card away and says, “I’ll be in touch, Miss Michaels.”

He leaves, and Darragh stares at me with cold eyes. A man in a suit stands behind him and whispers something I don’t hear. He leaves, too, looking over his shoulder at us.

It’s Darragh and I. Alone. The weight of his gaze, cutting across all corners of my body, sends heat flaring low in my belly. It’s a caress I can feel. Christ... I’ve not felt anything close to arousal in so damn long.

What a time for my hormones to kick in.

But I can’t feel that way for Darragh. It’s wrong.

“Thank you,” I say softly.

“You’re welcome.” His piercing green eyes bore into mine. “*Stasia*.”

I shudder, realizing he only did this because of who I am. “I’ve been going by Ana.”

“Your kidnappers just dropped you off here in Vegas?”

My eyes slip closed. “I... I wasn’t kidnapped.”

“I don’t know exactly who thinks what anymore, but your disappearance has caused a lot of grief for a lot of people in Astoria.”

“I know,” I say, even though *I don’t know* because Cormac cut me off from the world.

Darragh glares at my stomach. “When is your due date?”

“I had an ultrasound in the infirmary. They said I have a month to go.”

“You didn’t know before that?” He’s just as dangerous as his brother, but I’m utterly captivated by him.

“Cormac didn’t let me see a doctor. Not that I can afford one.”

“He *is* a doctor. A pediatric...” He grumbles under his breath. “It is his baby, isn’t it?”

“Yes, of course.” I go breathless at the insinuation.

Tension is thick between us. He bailed me out and not his own brother. What’s going on here?

“Your clothes are in that hotel room?” Is Darragh just bringing me back to that disgusting motel to leave me there?

“*Motel* room.” I cringe, having to point out the difference. “I have some clothes there, even though they don’t fit very well. Your brother didn’t buy me any maternity clothes.”

“I’m going to kill him,” Darragh mutters. “Let’s go.”

“Wait. I... I don’t have any money. Cormac gambled away what I had and kept everything we made. I have no way to eat.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He grips my arm.

The contact shocks me, and I cower, covering my head. “No, don’t hurt me.”

Darragh crouches slowly, eyeing me like a wounded animal. His spicy scent hits me. It screams how powerful and

masculine he is. Like his brother, Kieran. Like my father.

“I’ll *never* hurt you. I promise. But we have to leave right now.” He gently helps me to my feet and leads me out of the courthouse. Outside on the curb, a man opens the door to a limo.

I’m not surprised. He’s rich.

“Get in,” Darragh says, and I do it because I just don’t have a choice.

The driver gives me and my Clark Country jumpsuit a side-eye. Inside the limo, I feel worse. It’s the lap of luxury, and I’ve been reduced to rubble.

I reluctantly tell the driver the name of the motel. When the ugly red and yellow sign comes into view, I gasp. “The key. I don’t have the key.”

“I’ll get the key,” Darragh says confidently and coldly.

We park, and he struts into the office. Sure enough, he waves me over to the door with a key card. Either he convinced the clerk he’s Cormac, or Darragh is just as cunning.

“How did you get the key?” I ask.

Darragh scoffs, “Cormac hasn’t paid them in weeks. I did. And checked him out. Both of you. Get your things.”

“Where are we—” I step in, and the smell makes my stomach revolt. I rush into the bathroom to vomit, but Darragh grabs me.

“No, you don’t!” He runs after me, probably thinking I’m going to jump out the window. “Christ.”

“Get out of here!” I yell from the bathroom floor, hurling into the toilet. Now that I’m out of Cormac’s clutches and not fighting for survival, I find my voice, my strength, even if it’s a sliver.

Darragh stands over me, cursing under his breath. Next, the water is running, and he hands me a cup. “Drink this.”

I gulp it down, and then try to melt against the wall so he'll leave me alone. "You don't have to take care of me."

"I'm taking care of the mess my brother made."

Mess. That's me. I'd like to argue, but I'm wearing a prison jumpsuit with my stomach hanging out.

I stand and start to shake. The more I talk, the angrier he seems. He stomps into the main room and opens drawers, cursing, slamming them because Cormac's stuff is filthy and torn.

"I... I keep my clothes in that nightstand." I think back to that moment when I emptied my expensive white and saddle brown suitcase and left Astoria with nothing.

Darragh walks to the closet with confidence and purpose. His long legs in sharply pressed trousers of an expensive suit spark another wave of arousal.

God, I don't know when I felt desire last.

Darragh grabs the leather duffle bag Cormac refused to sell. "I bought him this."

I'd heard pregnancy makes a woman ravenous for sex. Those feelings never came. Thank goodness, because I don't want Cormac to touch me ever again. Yet, my hormones have woken up, watching Darragh deftly pack up my meager wardrobe out of the broken nightstand.

"Let me." I reach inside and our arms tangle.

He's so warm, and his hands feel so strong, but he snaps them back. With his eyes boring into mine, a flicker in my chest startles me.

"I... I can wear this." I yank out an XXL dress Cormac bought me from a street vendor. It's ugly as sin, and the fabric itches, so I don't wear it often. Sliding into oversized sweats and a giant, stained T-shirt is too humiliating.

"Can you... Can you just give me a few hundred dollars?" I ask Darragh softly. "I'll figure out a way to pay you back."

"No. I'm not leaving you here."

“I’ll be fine.” I straighten my back, faking strength.

“I know I look like Cormac, but I’m *not* him.” He gives me a once over that sets me off balance. “Change your clothes and let’s go. I’ll buy you better fitting ones.”

I have no idea where to go from here, but clearly, I need to gulp down my life in five-minute increments. Right now, I need to get out of this jumpsuit. When I have real clothes on again, maybe Darragh will see me as a human. Be more reasonable with me.

“I’ll... I’ll go in the bathroom and change.”

His cheek ticks in irritation.

“The window is too small for me to squeeze through.” I hold my stomach.

The way his eyes settle on my body unnerves me. “Five minutes.”

After slamming the door in frustration, I lean on the back of it. I want a shower so badly, but not with that sliver of dirty soap. I strip out of the jumpsuit and shove it into the trashcan. I’m naked underneath and catch my hideous reflection. Boney arms and legs from not eating very much and a basketball for a tummy make me look inhuman.

I think of that girl on the plane two and a half years ago, flying to Vegas, in my white cashmere coat, five-hundred-dollar jeans, and expensive high heel shoes.

I brush my teeth, squeezing the very last bead of toothpaste from the tube. A drop of mouthwash at the bottom of a trial size bottle is my salvation. I suck it into my mouth, desperate to taste something else other than bile and regret.

Using a washcloth, I scrub my face with hot water, digging with the scratchy surface to strip my skin of any lingering remembrance of that jail cell.

With shaking hands, I reach for my makeup bag sitting lazily on the counter. The pressed powder and blush are probably stale since I hadn’t put anything on my face in more than a year. A splash of toner wakes up my skin, and I manage

one coat of foundation, amazed at how different I look in a matter of seconds.

The door flies open, and I jump back. My brain doesn't even tell my hands to cover my nakedness. My body doesn't feel like mine. Then something snaps, and with an ounce of my old self, emboldened by a layer of makeup, the fight in me returns.

"What the hell?" I don't cover myself, though.

His gaze cuts me, and a hint of a grin tugs at his full upper lip. "Five minutes is up."

"Clearly, I'm not ready. Back off." I reach for the dress, but when I step into it, I miss and nearly tumble over.

Darragh catches me, his warm fingers closing around my naked hip. "Let me help you."

"I don't want your help," I choke out. "Please, just give me some money to get me through to my next court date. You heard the lawyer. I can stay in a woman's shelter."

Darragh doesn't answer me, just pulls the dress up past my legs and over my stomach. "Arms." He holds out the sleeves, and his ability to put me together launches butterflies in my chest.

It's like he's dressed plenty of women before. Men like him *undress* women and don't give a damn how to put clothes on. "That's..."

"Ugly, I know." It's a cheap, linen maxi dress with wide, white and beige stripes. I push past him and kick off the jail-issued flip flops. From the closet, I grab a pair of tennis shoes that Cormac saw no value in selling.

I sit on the bed and gasp when Darragh gets down on one knee to put them on me. Tears well up when I realize my feet are swollen from retaining water. He pulls the laces out, giving my feet room to breathe.

"Thank you." I stand up with his help but spin around the room, dazed. It's striking to be leaving here again. Twenty-four hours ago, I ran from here and didn't look back, hoping

I'd never see it again. The memories haunt me. God, I hate it here.

"You're welcome." Darragh's cologne reminds me of his maleness and his sophistication while I'm falling apart. "It's going to be all right."

"I can't imagine how."

Darragh nods. "It will be. I promise. I'll see to it." He has my clothes jammed into Cormac's duffle bag. When he leaves, I follow him like a puppy.

The door slamming behind me knocks reality into me. I'm homeless. Well, I guess I was already homeless. Living here, I had a roof over my head, but it was never a home.

I get back in Darragh's limo, and with non-jail issued clothes on, my face cleaned, and teeth brushed, I consider the next few minutes.

"Where are we going?" I ask when Darragh doesn't instruct the driver where to go. The guy just pulls out of the motel parking lot and takes off down the street.

"The airport," Darragh mumbles, typing into this phone.

"*What?*" Rage and fear tear through me like an assassin's bullet. "No!" I attempt to jump over him and open the limo door, but my protruding baby belly land me clumsily on his lap.

He holds me there, his hand on my stomach. Our eyes lock in a nerve-wracking stare, and my heart beats differently. "What are you doing? Were you going to jump out of a moving car with *my baby?*"

His words slap me in the face. "*Your baby?*"

He bites his bottom lip. "Cormac is my identical twin. We share DNA. That makes your baby, *technically* my baby, too. You're carrying my family's bloodline. That's why I bailed you out."

Dread chokes me like a wave pulling me under. "I'm not going back to Astoria. I can't."

“No shit, you’re not,” he bites out, but his warm hands settle around my large stomach. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to grab you. I didn’t want you falling out of the limo.”

I take a few deep breaths and don’t feel anything different. I’ve seen women this pregnant in the casinos and on the strip pick up older kids who wrap their legs around the swollen tummy with no issue.

Sliding off Darragh’s muscular thighs that feel like marble, I mutter, “I’m fine. Where are we going then, if not Astoria?”

“To Seattle.”

“Why?” My breath hitches, remembering that’s where he lives. My plan... Maybe I can get away to Canada after all.

“I told you. You’re carrying my family’s blood. My stupid brother was too fucked in the head to realize that. I, however, know better.”

“You... You want my baby?” I cradle this thing growing inside me. I’ve felt so detached from it. Without any ultrasounds to see its little shape swimming all this time, it hasn’t felt real.

I just know he or she is alive because it moves around and kicks.

One month. The baby is due in one month. I’m going to be a mother *in one month*.

“We’re going to figure something out. You and me. Right now, we have to get home. My daughter...” He glares at me, eyes trained for my reaction.

“Sophie,” I mutter, remembering Cormac telling me about his niece.

“Yes, her name is Sophie.” Darragh goes to say more, but his phone rings, and he takes the call.

It sounds like medical business. Perhaps he’s talking to another doctor. I lean back and zone out until I see the airport lights off in the distance. Landing here over two years ago flashes through my brain. It’s so jarring how so much went wrong in that mere span of time.

“I’ll call you back tomorrow, Dr. Lowe. I mean Monday. Have a nice weekend.” Darragh looks at me like he’s just realizing I’m still here. In the past, Darragh threw money at Cormac and turned a blind eye to his problems. He can’t do that now.

Because I’m his now...

That idea ignites a flame between my legs.

“Tomorrow is Saturday?” I ask, adding up his conversation.

“You didn’t realize that?”

I can argue it’s because I was in a major car accident and spent the night in jail, but that’s not it. “Your brother took away my phone and hovered over everything I did. If you told me it was Wednesday or Sunday, I would have believed you. Don’t even bother asking me what month it is.”

The weather here in Vegas doesn’t help with the perpetual heat and sunshine. Casinos are designed to be disorienting, too.

“It’s early November.”

“*November?*”

“I’m *going* to kill him,” Darragh grumbles.

“I know you want to get home to your daughter, but can we please stop so I can buy something else to wear?” I pinch the ugly dress. “Don’t make me sit on a plane and have other passengers look at me with—”

“I have a private plane waiting,” he says astutely. “That was the only way to get here so quickly.”

I consider how he dropped everything, including his daughter. “Thank you, by the way, for coming to help us.”

“I did it for my brother. I had no idea about you.” His eyes narrow to beady slits when his phone rings again. “Hello? Yes, I’ll accept the charges.”

I sit up, realizing it must be Cormac calling from jail.

“No, I’m not bailing you out. I have *Anastasia Koslov* sitting next to me. I found her in a fucking prison jumpsuit, eight months pregnant with your baby. She’s got no money. No phone. She’s not been to a doctor. What in fuck’s sake is wrong with you?” Darragh spews anger at his brother for me. “Do you have any idea what her father will do to our family if he finds out?” He shakes his head at the shouting I hear from the other end. “Yell all you want. I have contacts in this city, Cormac. You’re staying right where you are until I figure out what to do with Stasia.” He eyes me. “Ana, whatever. Yeah, call home. See how that works out for you. See how fast Lachlan will get on Kieran’s plane and take you to the same camp they sent him to. Oh... Oh, now you’re singing a different tune.” Darragh pinches his nose. “I’ve done so much to help you, Cor. You fucked up. You were arrested for drugs and fraud. You’re going to have to deal with that. I’ll call a law firm and get you a good attorney, but that’s it. Have a nice weekend.” He hangs up.

Our eyes meet as Darragh’s anger simmers down. “Sorry.”

We pull into a jet hanger, and he makes another call. “Hi, it’s me. We’re getting on the plane to come home. I should be there in a few hours. Did you get the cupcake mix? Thank you. Thank you so much.” He sneaks a look at me under his golden lashes, his cheeks blushing. “No, you don’t have to stay over. If you can just get her bath and do bedtime. You can leave when I get there. What? No, you don’t have to come to Sophie’s party with us tomorrow. I’ll see you in a few hours.” He ends the call and pushes a hand through his thick hair.

“Girlfriend?”

He pops me a glance. “I’m *married*.”

“Oh, right.” I never got that full story.

“But she’s in Africa. Red Cross. That was the nanny.”

The limo door opens, and Darragh leads me onto the plane. I feel so utterly helpless again. I’ve been pulled out of one spiderweb only to get stuck inside another one.

“We’re wheels up in ten minutes, sir.” The captain looks at me then sputters, “Sir, a woman that pregnant can’t fly.”

Darragh freezes. “That’s a myth. I’m a doctor. I’ll take responsibility.”

I grip the handrest, thinking if I stand up and protest, the captain won’t take off with me on the plane. But then what? Darragh may just rent a car and still drag me to Seattle. And he’ll be rip-roaring mad that he missed that party with his daughter.

I keep my mouth shut, and the captain tips his cap before he disappears into the cockpit. A few moments later, we’re moving down the runway.

“Is that really a myth? About flying late in a pregnancy?”

Darragh texts on his phone. “Partially. It’s more about the altitude and time. For the size of this plane, we won’t go above 20,000 feet, and we won’t be in the air for more than three hours. Tomorrow, I’m taking you to the hospital for a full workup to check the baby.”

“Tomorrow’s Sophie’s party.” I catch on quick.

“Fuck,” he mutters and tosses his phone aside.

“You can drop me off at a hospital or a walk-in center.”

He glares at me. “No, you’re not leaving my sight.”

“Don’t you work?”

“I mean, you’re not leaving my house without me. Once you crossed over 38 weeks, you can go into labor at any time.” He brushes his thumb against a set of full lips. Damn, his brother puckers the same exact way, but Darragh’s lips look lush and in need of kissing. “How old are you, again?”

“Twenty-three-ish. How old are you?”

“The same age as Cormac.”

“Right.” I roll my eyes. “It’s been so long since he and I had any kind of meaningful conversation. I forgot, to be honest.”

“Thirty-two. But that’s not important.”

“How old is Sophie?” He twitches when I say her name.

“Don’t ask about Sophie.” He leans in with a glower that sinks my heart. “I don’t know you. I know who you are. That’s it. You had drugs on you, and you were pulling cons with my brother. You’re not to go near my daughter. I have a very big house and several guest bedrooms with their own bathroom. All the locks are controlled by me.”

Everything he said about me is true. I can’t argue.

I sit on a loveseat by myself and keep quiet for the rest of the plane ride. I’m starving, but there’s no food on board. Just water. When my stomach growls, Darragh finally notices me.

“Shit, I’m sorry. I have plenty of food at the house. I’ll make you something to eat when we get there.” He exhales, hands splayed on the granite table in front of his lounge chair. “I’m sorry for my outburst before. I’m wired.”

“You and me both.” I swallow down more water.

He stands, moving to sit beside me on the loveseat. “May I?”

I scoot over. “Sure. I have no idea how I smell.”

“You were in jail. I get it.” His hand hovers over my stomach. “Can I feel the baby?”

If he’s interested in the baby, maybe he’ll take care of us. Darragh’s heavy palm sends a feeling of warmth, melting the ice in my veins from months, no years, of torture with Cormac.

“Any bleeding? Spotting?”

“No.” *No, Doctor...*

“How often does he kick?”

“In the morning... Wait, *he?*”

He smiles. “It’s just a guess, but you’re carrying low, and you’re still utterly gorgeous. With girls, women tend to carry high and steal their mother’s beauty.”

“You think I’m pretty, looking like this?”

“I see a faint resemblance of what you looked like when I last saw you.” His eyes land on my lips. “You were your father’s *seoid*.”

“His what?”

“His treasure.”

I scoff. “That was a long time ago.”

“Besides the stress lines on your face, you look healthy.”

“As soon as I found out I was pregnant, I didn’t do any more shit. I promise.”

“I believe you.”

“I tried to eat healthy.”

“The ultrasound will tell us all we need to know.”

We...

What did I get myself into?

We land in the dark, starless Seattle night, and an Escalade waits for us. I tremble, getting into the back passenger seat. “I’ve never been to Seattle.” My voice quivers from the cold.

Darragh takes off his coat and wraps it around my shoulders. His nose brushes mine, and our eyes lock. A moment sparks between us, the tension charged and confusing.

I shrink back. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He sounds affected by our moment, too.

We drive for a while until the SUV pulls up to an amazing house. I grew up in a mansion, but this is different. It’s not a compound like Papa’s sprawling estate. The entire block is filled with similar large Victorian houses boasting wraparound porches and looks like a friendly neighborhood. I get a glimpse of why Darragh preferred to live like this and not like our families back home.

Our families. We’re the same in so many ways.

He opens the SUV door and helps me out. In front of the house, a man lingers on the porch, and Darragh's guard goes up.

"Wait here." He sprints up the steps to his front door.

The man looks hostile toward him. A dark-haired woman comes out of the house, and there appears to be a three-way argument. Darragh's body turns to stone as the woman and the man hurry down the steps to leave.

The driver puts Cormac's duffle bag filled with my clothes on the curb and leaves. Darragh disappears inside the house. Slowly, I walk up the eight wooden steps. The front door is open, and my senses lock in on something fresh out of the oven. That's how hungry I am.

"Daddy!" A little girl is in his arms, but she's crying.

"Is everything all right?" I ask, coming up behind them.

"It's fine." Darragh turns toward me, holding the girl, cradling her head, and the scene weakens me. It's so touching. He stands with his daughter's head resting on his shoulder. Nodding, he waves me inside with a free hand.

I'm shot into another dimension, a scene of Cormac with our baby. Anger fires through me. No, he planned to drop our baby off at a firehouse.

That bastard took everything from me. My money, my dignity, and almost my baby.

"Who's that, Daddy?" Sophie asks, all sniffly.

Darragh smiles. "That's an old friend of mine."

CHAPTER 6

Darragh

"OLD? SHE DOESN'T LOOK OLD."

Sophie wiggles to get out of my arms to stand on her own, confusion on her little face.

Fuck, I want to throw up at what she just witnessed with her nanny. Olivia's boyfriend showed up and accused me of sleeping with her.

"Yeah, Daddy. What do you mean *old*?" Stasia looks annoyed.

I move to close the front door and feel massively outnumbered by these two females. I don't know who to address first.

Sophie comes first... Always.

As I open my mouth to address my daughter, Stasia beats me to it.

"Hi, Sophie. I'm Ana." She narrows her eyes at me, signaling that's the name she wants to be called.

Smart, protecting my daughter, who can say the name Stasia to who the hell knows, sending an army to my front door.

But I only think of her as Stasia, the missing Bratva princess. Maybe if I see her as Ana Michaels, a woman who escaped her father's cruelty, like I left my family behind, I'll feel differently about her.

“Hi.” Sophie squeaks cautiously. “Whoa... Are you having a baby?”

“I sure am.” She smiles at me, and I quickly shake my head, hoping she doesn’t mention Cormac. “That’s why I’m here. I’m a friend of your dad’s. He helped me out of some trouble. That’s where he was. I’m sorry I took him away from you.”

Sophie scratches her head. “Where’s Uncle Cormac? Is he okay, Daddy?”

I now regret telling her about Cormac’s accident. I just had no idea what kind of mess I was walking into. “Yes, honey. He’s fine. He’s... Still in Vegas.”

“Okay.” Sophie shrugs, then turns sad eyes to me. “Where did Olivia go?”

I resist an eye roll.

“Yes, where’s Olivia?” Ana asks.

“She had to quit, honey. I’m sorry. I’ll explain more tomorrow.” I crouch in front of my daughter, feeling Ana near me. “Are you hungry? Did you eat?”

“Yeah,” Sophie sounds tired. “Olivia made me macaroni and cheese. She cooked you something and left it in the oven after we made the cupcakes.”

Ana’s stomach growls again, and I realize I have to feed her, too.

“Thank you, honey.” I hug Sophie. “Did you have your bath?”

“Uh huh.” She eyes Ana again.

“Let’s get you into bed. We have your party tomorrow.” My brain scrambles, and I consider if I should leave Ana alone in the house, where she can escape. Or do I bring her out in public where she can make a scene and take off? Take advantage of me having Sophie, knowing I can’t chase her. Or that I won’t do anything irrational in front of my daughter.

“Right through there.” I point to the kitchen. “Take the dinner that’s in the oven for me. I’m going to get Sophie settled. Then you and are having a talk.”

“What about you? Aren’t you hungry?”

“I had a big lunch.” My stomach is in utter knots.

Ana glances around. “Your house is beautiful.”

“Thank you. And it’s safe.” When I get close to her, my skin tingles from the memory of seeing her naked and how primal it felt to touch her. “This is the best place for you.”

She closes her eyes and nods.

I bring Sophie upstairs and help her into bed, since she’s already in her pajamas. “Can I skip a book tonight and do two stories tomorrow?” I kiss her on the forehead. “I have to get Ana settled in her room.”

“She’s going to *live* here?”

“For now.” I pull at the necktie strangling me at this point. “Is that okay?”

“Will she play games on my iPad with me like Olivia?”

A vision flashes in my mind of the kind of games *I’d* like to play with Anastasia Koslov. I can’t believe I’m having these thoughts about my brother’s baby mama. I don’t want her near Sophie, but now, I don’t have a nanny.

“I’ll ask her when I get downstairs.” I switch on the wave machine that helps my daughter sleep. “Good night.”

I breathe in the smell of soap and powder, feeling the first sense of relief in hours. Sophie’s always been a good sleeper. I stroke her back since she likes to sleep on her stomach. She’s my whole world.

And I’ve invited the missing Bratva princess into our house and risk being slaughtered by her father. What the fuck am I doing?

I close Sophie’s door and freeze, seeing the light on in one of my guestrooms.

Ana...What the hell? She came upstairs on her own?

She was in a car accident caused by my drunk and drug-dealing brother. She got knocked up by him and held a prisoner. I'll cut her some slack.

I cross the hall and step into the guestroom. The sound of water running in the adjoining bathroom stills me. She's taking a shower. And left the door open.

My eyes trail toward the mirror and snag on the vision of her behind the clear glass enclosure.

I see fucking everything.

Water sluices down her body as she leans on the far shower wall. My eyes trace the line of her back to her ass. Fucking gorgeous. Plump and perfect, leading down to long, toned legs. She turns, giving me a view of her golden wet skin, large breasts, and a beautiful swollen belly. It *is* my baby in there, even if I didn't put my seed into her. It would be the same if she were a surrogate.

I'm so damn lonely that a gorgeous naked woman in my shower sets me on fire. A *pregnant* woman with my brother's baby ignites a kink I didn't even know I had.

I back away, not wanting to freak her out and give her a reason to take off.

I go to my bedroom and open Ginny's closet. The scent knocks me sideways. I haven't been in here in years. Her smell weakens me. But I don't miss my wife. I miss having a woman of my own. I miss breathing in a fresh feminine scent, and then turning to find her waiting for me. Preferably naked in my bed, legs spread with a wet pussy, hungry for me.

That's what I miss.

I can't confuse these misplaced feelings I have for Ana with my loneliness.

Anastasia fucking Koslov. I've lost my mind.

Ignoring my wife's scent, I look for the dresses I remember she wore when she was late in her pregnancy. There's a bin in

the back filled with all the clothes I remember her wearing right before giving birth.

I bring the bin to the guestroom, and because the door is still open, I walk right in but nearly drop everything. Ana stands there in a towel. Only, the towel doesn't cover her figure very well. She's holding it closed on top, but it parts, and I see her stomach and her...

I'm a doctor. I'm a doctor.

"Oh!" She sounds surprised to see me. "I figured this was a guestroom. I'm sorry. I had to take a shower."

"No problem." I put the bin on the bed. "Here, these were Ginny's."

"You want me to wear your wife's maternity clothes?"

"Just to get you through a couple of days." I wipe my brow, trying not to stare at her swollen stomach. "I'll take you shopping for whatever else you need."

"When?"

"Fuck, I don't know." This is getting complicated.

She turns around and drops the towel, giving me an encore view of her ass. "Don't worry, Darragh, I saw you looking at me."

"I heard the water running. I get you needed to shower, but you came upstairs before I gave you permission." I reach into the closet and hand her a spare robe.

Dropping it on her shoulders, I inhale the smell of fresh soap and lemon shampoo. It nearly brings me to my knees.

"Thank you." Tying the robe over her stomach, she adds, "I don't want to impose and wear your wife's clothes."

"You need something to wear." Letting go of any territorial feelings over things Ginny didn't care about, clothes she didn't bother to bring with her, clothes she hasn't asked me to ship her, clothes she left, like she left her daughter and me, I step aside and say, "Pick out whatever you want. Honestly, she left when Sophie was four."

“What about you?” Ana fists through the pile. “Will seeing me in her maternity clothes trigger you?”

Yes... “Doesn’t matter.” I exhale. “I’ll get over it. Let’s get you some food.” I need to get the hell out of this bedroom.

“I’m not hungry anymore. I haven’t been eating much to begin with. I have to get my appetite back.”

“What did you eat back in Vegas?”

“There was a cheesy mall nearby with a food court. I ate salads and chicken.”

I nod, hating the way Cormac made her live.

Ana lifts out a cotton PJ set. “I’ll sleep in these.”

“Fine.”

She drops the clothes on the bed and fingers her wet hair. “Can I ask now what we’re doing? What’s your plan for me? You told me on the plane to stay away from your daughter. But I’m sleeping across the hall from her.”

I hand her a hairbrush. “It’s simple, *Anastasia*. You’re staying here until you have the baby. Then I’ll give you money, and you can disappear for good.” Those words prick my skin with tension.

“I just want to do what’s best for my baby.” She slowly brushes her hair, the measured strokes, and the way she grips the wooden handle sends heat right to my cock. My feelings are irrational, but I can’t look away.

“Then you’ll agree that I should assume full custody of the baby once he’s born.”

Her spine stiffens. “Full custody?”

“If you’re going to live a life on the run, a baby will slow you down. He’s better off living here. With me.” I hold my hands out. “Clearly, I can take a care of a child by myself.”

“You want my baby? Forever?”

“Did I not make that clear?”

“We’ll see about that.” Our eyes meet in the stand-up mirror next to the bed, her icy blues heating my blood. “What happened with your nanny, by the way?”

I consider how to answer. “Her boyfriend came to pick her up.”

“He looked mad. Did he make her quit because she had to work late?”

“Yeah, that was it.” For some reason, I don’t mention that Olivia told her boyfriend she and I were having an affair in an attempt to break up with him.

Furious that she’d lie like that, I fired Olivia on the spot. Nothing can put my daughter in danger. Yet, I have the very pregnant Bratva princess, half-naked under my roof, and I’m dying to fuck her.

That admission rocks the piss out of me. I’ve never experienced this kind of intense attraction that has me forgetting everything that’s important.

Hair brushed, she turns to face me, her robe splaying open. “Are *you* hungry? I can make you something.”

You’re making me fucking nuts...

“You know how to cook?”

Crazed, I grab the clothes she picked out for bed and help her dress. It’s to cover her up, otherwise, I’ll push her to her hands and knees and ease this ache killing me.

“Yeah, I did all the cooking when we lived in a villa.” She steps into the PJ bottoms, sans underwear.

“My villa.”

“That was yours?” She gasps, taking the top from me. “Oh, right! The room with all the pink kid stuff.”

“I keep Sophie’s vacation clothes there. I let Cormac use it.”

“It had a great kitchen, and the hotel had grocery service.”

“I know. I paid the bills.” I hadn’t realized I was feeding her, too.

She pulls the top down, but it gets stuck on her head. Frustrated, I reach to help her, my knuckles grazing her bare breasts. My throat goes tight, and when our eyes lock again, I notice the vein in her neck throbbing. Her nipples are rock hard.

“Thank you,” she whispers, looking just as wary at this tension between us.

“You’re welcome.”

Cleaned up, she’s fucking stunning. Even heavily pregnant, which makes me question just how sex deprived I am. I see beautiful women every day. Yet, this poison apple has my mouth watering to take a bite.

“Did your brother thank you for all you did for him?”

“No.” I drop my hands to cover my growing erection. “But... I sort of confiscated his trust fund. Much of my money comes from our family.”

“Right.” She nods.

Her new fresh scent wakes up a shameful and unwanted fire in my veins. My body never reacted so viscerally to a woman like this before. I’m just as furious with her as I am with my brother. Every second with Ana, though, cools the anger a little more.

“Let’s get you something to eat.” She smiles and walks toward the door.

All I think is I want to bury my face between her legs and eat her until she screams my name...

Ten minutes later, after I’ve tossed out the burnt steak tips Olivia left for me, I pour myself a much-needed tall glass of scotch. Ana repurposes some left-over chicken thighs from the fridge, a bag of microwave rice, and a block of frozen broccoli. She fishes out a wok from the kitchen island, one I didn’t even know I had, and spins around. “Peanut oil?”

Choking on my drink, I inform her, “No nuts. Ever. Sophie is allergic. Anaphylactic.” Grumbling, I point to the tiny pink and white knapsack hanging by the garage door. “Her EpiPen is in there.” I see no reason why the two of them will be alone. Still, my daughter’s life is more important than my pride. “If you need to inject her, pinch her thigh muscle, stick the needle in, and plunge the measured dose all the way in. They are metered shots. It’s always set to go so you don’t have to measure.”

“Got it. How many times have you injected her?” Her question catches me off guard.

“I haven’t had to. Ever. I’m extremely careful. So is she.”

“That’s good.” Ana nods. Her color is much better. How different she looks now that she’s showered, and wearing fresh, clean, nice clothes.

No, I don’t see Ginny in them at all.

Stasia splashes garlic infused olive oil into the pan, and the sizzling, spicy aroma wakes me up. She dumps everything into that heated pan and in a few minutes, it’s on a plate set before me. My mouth waters at the best chicken and rice dish I ever had in my life.

When I get up to get another drink, I bump into her. “Sorry.” But I find it hard to move.

I don’t understand this attraction I feel toward her. I must be in alpha overload. That denied, primal side of me is crawling its way out, begging to prey on this beautiful woman swollen with my family’s heir.

Stasia doesn’t move so quickly, and I’m not sure if she’s reacting to me, or if she’s playing me.

Swallowing, I ask, “Why were you running from your father?”

She studies me, cutting a piece of chicken. “He wanted to marry me off to the Boston pakhan.”

I have no idea who that is. But I understand how that world works, strategic marriages and all. “And did you think you’d

live on the run forever?”

“I was so startled, maybe I wasn’t thinking.” She picks at the broccoli, her eyes rolling in the back of her head. “I probably just should have told him no. I mean, what could he have done? Dragged me to the altar?”

“My brother managed to isolate you. He’s on crack and alone.” I exhale. “Sure, your father, *the pakhan* with his brotherhood, could have forced you down the aisle.”

CHAPTER 7

Ana

YESTERDAY, I woke up behind bars and had no idea what day or month it was. Last night, I slept soundly for the first time in months. And in a bed that can pass for heaven.

The sheets were so damn soft and perfumed with lavender and orange. This entire room smells amazing. Or maybe my senses are so raw and damaged from filth and bleach that anything pleasant shocks my system.

The clock on the nightstand reads six a.m., but I'm wide awake. The baby is moving and woke me up a while ago. I've peed and am dying for a cup of tea. I don't feel right walking around this house on my own, though. I came up here last night out of pure desperation.

And Darragh doesn't want me near his daughter.

I get it. I'm a criminal. And he doesn't know me, even though we grew up in the same city. Our families hate each other back home, I get that. Cormac didn't care about the rival war in Astoria. I admit, the first six months, the sex was hot.

That changed quickly when the money ran out.

The idea of sex has my center clenching, but it's not Cormac I see on top of me. It's Darragh. I close my eyes and sink into the fantasy that has my nipples hard and my breathing suddenly erratic.

Darragh. Darragh.

I see him gripping my hands and squeezing as he thrusts into me.

The man is utterly gorgeous, and his sophisticated attitude turns me on. Even if he's cold to me sometimes. It's like a challenge and challenges are catnip to me. I remember all the games I played back home for an hour of freedom here and there. I had to shut off who I was when Cormac got abusive. I had to hide my strength to survive. I had nowhere to go.

Now, I feel free and, well, Darragh looks like he needs to get laid.

God, I'm so confused.

I roll onto my side and push off the bed, rules be damned. I assume that massive, gorgeous kitchen has tea bags. I'll grab a mug of water, stick a bag in, microwave it for two minutes, and haul my ass back up here.

It's Saturday morning, for crying out loud. No one gets up this early.

Slipping into maternity yoga pants that feel like a dream and an oversized white sweater, I duck out of the guestroom. The entire top floor with all the bedrooms is silent. The gray clouds outside and gentle patter of rain keep the landing shadowed.

I pad down the stairs, but when I get to the bottom, I can't remember where the kitchen is. Much of yesterday is a jumbled mess in my head. After a few wrong turns, I see it at the end of a corridor, but the sound of grunting stops me in my tracks.

An open door reveals a sliver of light and a set of carpeted stairs descending to a basement. Male grunting noises down there sharpen when I nudge the door open more.

Darragh...

What is he doing? If that's how he masturbates, I feel sorry for his dick. A dirty fantasy crashes into me, and a wave of lust hits me again.

Whether he's working out or beating off, I bet he's sweating. Are his thick, sculpted muscles flexing and throbbing? All the months of feeling nothing catch up to me.

But I can't fall for Darragh. He'd never entertain something between us. I'm his twin's ex. That's got to be icky for him.

This business about my baby being his baby is just him being an alpha. Even if his acknowledgment that my baby is technically his family's heir is true.

Am I really having a son?

I hold my stomach, and whisper, "So that's what all the kicking is about." I'm having a boy.

A *bad* boy. Of course, it's a bad boy.

He's half Irish mob and half...

I grab the railing to take a seat at the top step as bile fills my throat. "Oh no," I whisper, realizing I'm not carrying some random male in the Koslov bloodline. My brothers are dead. This *boy* inside me is the *future pakhan* of Astoria.

Once my father figures out the newest O'Rourke is *my* baby, he'll blow up this house to steal him.

I yank on the railing to stand up, and everything creaks around me. Turning, I catch Darragh wavering at the bottom of the stairs, shirtless, sweaty, his golden blond hair slicked back. His black shorts... *gulp*... show the outline of a very big cock.

"Are you all right?" Darragh's deep voice cuts through me.

If this is his baby inside me, then that cock *theoretically* has been inside me, too. Cormac was huge, even if he didn't have the greatest finesse. I bet Darragh is much better in bed. A man that brooding and grumpy probably also likes it a little rough.

Struggling to breathe, I groan, "I heard groaning. Just making sure you weren't having a heart attack."

"Close." His gaze tracks across my legs. "Ever do burpees?"

"What?"

He shakes his head. "Nothing."

“Show me.” Holding the railing, I amble down the steps, wanting to talk to him. I haven’t really talked to anyone in months.

“You want to see burpees?”

Under brighter light, I see a room full of gym equipment and mirrored walls. The air reeks with the faint smell of male sweat. My center throbs again, and the hint of masculinity torments this ache inside me.

I perch gingerly on the bottom step, legs splayed wide to make room for my belly. “Sure. I’m going to have to get back in shape after the baby.”

“Have you seen your arms? Your thin face? You need to eat more first.” His concern is sweet. But his harsh tone hints at a darkness I think he tries to hide.

“Noted. Burpees?” I just want to see his body in action.

Smirking, he steps back and turns on an angle. He squats to the floor, his hands outstretched when his legs snap back behind him. He lowers and does a beautiful pushup, the muscles in his forearms throbbing along with his thigh muscles. His legs bend, and in one swift impossible move, he jumps up.

“Again,” I mutter.

Darragh stares at me, and it’s the kind of look that says so much. That look when you know someone is... *dear God*... your soul mate. But that’s impossible.

I have an excuse for being so wired and unhinged. But why is Darragh looking at me like that?

God, I need a drink, but tea will have to do.

“Never mind.” I stand up and grip the railing again. “Do you mind if I make myself some tea?”

“Not at all. I have several kinds.” He grabs a towel and wipes the glistening, sexy sweat from the back of his neck. “I’m a tea junkie.”

He approaches the stairs, and I back myself into the wall so he can pass me. My throat goes tight, thinking he's going to walk around shirtless like that in those skimpy shorts.

I catch a look at myself in the mirror on the far wall. I'm a freaking whale. With an arrest record a mile long. "My case!" I hadn't even thought about that.

"I'm calling a lawyer I know in L.A. He'll get both your charges dropped."

"You can do that?"

Darragh stops climbing the stairs and looks over his shoulder. "Of course, I can do that."

"How?"

"It's called money."

"You're going to bribe the Las Vegas DA?" I wonder if he's on the take, considering how much money and power swims in that town.

"Not me. The lawyer. The *right* lawyer always has backdoor connections."

I scoff. The four-leaf clover doesn't grow too far from the meadow. Darragh grew up with the Irish King for a dad. It's in his blood to skirt around the law. Pay for what he wants. Hurt people to get what money can't buy.

I glance at Darragh's hands and the smooth, unscarred, untattooed, veiny fingers I remember holding his daughter relax me. If he gets my charges dropped, that solves a huge problem of mine.

I have to trust him. I'm having a baby in a few weeks, and I *can't* go to jail. I follow him toward the kitchen, where the soft ripple of Puget Sound's current lapping against the rocks at the shoreline takes my breath away. "God, what a view..."

Darragh crosses in front of the dozen narrow windows that sit in a bowed-out wall and opens a pantry. "It cost over a mil."

You're a much better view. Priceless.

He shows me various jars of tea leaves. “I love a good Irish whiskey, but some of these teas also give me a buzz. They’re herbal and safe for you to drink.”

“Should I get buzzed at six-fifteen in the morning?” I slide onto a stool at his kitchen island.

“This lemon ginger will wake you up.” He pinches the leaves with his bare hands and drops them into a round metal ball with a long handle.

At the sink, he fills a kettle. His movements are so sublime, a sheen of sweat still glistening off his skin.

“Oh shoot, did I disturb your workout?” I ask.

He glances over his shoulder. “No. I’ve been up since five. I checked on you, and you were sound asleep.”

My heart jolts. “You came into my room?”

He dips a thick, golden eyebrow at me. “It’s my house. I can go into any room I want.”

I can’t push for privacy less than one day in. Not when he’s doing so much for me. Hell, he bailed me out, *and* he’s getting my charges dropped.

“Wait, if you’re getting Cormac off the hook too, he’ll be free.” Panic fills me as I grip the edge of the island. “He’ll come after me.”

Darragh’s face turns to stone, and it’s a look that sends ripples of goosebumps across my skin. “He knows I have you here and what’s at stake. Our family’s lives. Cormac won’t ever hurt you again.”

“What will happen to him?”

With the kettle fired up, he places his hands on the counter, inches from mine. “I don’t know yet. I have to call my brother, Eoghan.”

Right, his brother is a Harvard lawyer. “Why not call him to represent us?”

Darragh exhales and turns around. “That’s waving a red flag. I’ll call an L.A. attorney I know and get it all straightened

out.”

“I hoped I could disappear there,” I murmur, staring at a bead of sweat dripping down his spine and into the curve of his ass. Christ, this man is insanely hot. “A city with so many people.”

Darragh scoffs and turns around. “Where there’s lots of people, there’s mafia. Vegas was the least safe place for you. The Cosa Nostra is brutally vicious there. Eoghan’s had some run-ins with them. He’s a lot more dangerous than people think.”

“Eoghan’s...dangerous?” I’m intrigued by the younger members of Kieran’s tight circle.

“He’s an O’Rourke.” Is all Darragh says, picking up his phone from a wireless charging pad. Making strained faces, he reads his messages.

“What time is Sophie’s party?” I ask.

He looks up. “Why?”

I move to the refrigerator. “May I?”

He nods.

“Those cupcakes should sit out for a while, so they’re not ice cold.” I see a tray of vanilla and pink frosted cupcakes and take them out. “She brings her own sweets to parties?”

Darragh puts down his phone. “I don’t trust anyone to tell me the food has no nuts. Except her school. It costs me a fortune, but they know about her allergy. I vetted them, so did Eoghan. She’s safe there.” But he looks down and curses under his breath.

“What?”

“I have to hire a new nanny.” He pinches his eyebrows. “Today or tomorrow.”

“I can—”

“No,” he snaps, shutting me down.

I'm deflated that he doesn't trust me. Doesn't see that with every minute, the real me returns. Only, the real me is a spoiled Bratva princess. Who's having a little prince. I need to grow up. Fast.

"You're doing so much for me."

The kettle whistles a high-pitch squeal. and without saying anymore to me, Darragh pours my tea. The lemon ginger aroma calls out to me. I take a burning sip, wanting something normal.

"Then what am I supposed to do around here?" I blow on the tea and suck on my burnt lip.

"Rest up to have the baby." Darragh swigs his tea, pushing past the scorching sips.

"Darragh, you're a doctor." I put the mug down. "I assume you know pregnant women aren't completely helpless."

I realize he may be projecting Sophie's mother. How he gave *her* freedom, and she took off.

He opens his mouth to say something, but I add, "And perhaps I'm working on pure adrenaline, but I feel one hundred times better. Let me help you with Sophie."

"I said no." He pushes past me with his mug, the scent of him drowning out the lemon ginger.

That... *Want* that.



"I said... no." Darragh repeats to Sophie when she asks if I'm coming to her party. "Ana's not feeling well. She needs to rest."

Sophie looks adorable in a pink dress, white tights, and black patent-leather buckled shoes. Her hair smells like strawberries, and Darragh made an impressive high ponytail.

He looks handsome and polished with that single dad romance novel vibe, wearing a pair of black trousers and a

gray sweater with a white dress shirt underneath. Christ, all the single mothers at the party are going to lose their mind.

“Daddy, my ribbon.” Sophie holds up a pink and yellow polka dot strip of fabric.

“One second, Soph,” he says, packing up all the food.

“I got it. Come here, Sophie.” She skips toward me, and the way she’s so trusting kills me. “Big bow or little one?”

“Hmmm. I don’t know.”

“The big ones look floppy, in my opinion.” I slide the ribbon under the neat ponytail and make a tight bow, thinking of how I used to do this for Katya. “And then all this pretty ribbon is hidden.” I turn her toward the shiny reflection of the sliding glass doors to the backyard. “See how the ends sit on your shoulders?”

“It’s so pretty. Olivia made them floppy.” Sophie looks down. “I’m going to miss her.”

My heart breaks for this little girl. First her mother and now her nanny.

“Okay, I have all the food packed up.” Darragh slings a boxy cooler bag across his broad shoulders.

“Bye, Ana.” Sophie singsongs as she opens the door to the garage. “Daddy, it’s raining.”

“It’s always raining, Soph.” Darragh fishes out an umbrella from a stand near the garage door.

“Can I bring my phone?” Sophie asks.

“No. That’s for emergencies at school.”

A seven-year-old has a phone? But with her allergy, it makes sense.

I hold the door open for Darragh. “Do you need me to do anything while you’re gone?”

“No.” He gives me a look. “Do I need to lock you in here?”

The idea of him tying me up sends waves of pleasure through me. “I have nowhere to go.”

“Good girl.” He looks horrified. “I mean...”

“I know what you mean.” God, I really do.

There’s a force between us we’re both struggling to deny.

What’s wrong with me? With us? Falling for Darragh, after what his brother put me through, makes me more reckless than Cormac, who flirted with my father’s dangerous brotherhood by keeping me a prisoner.

“Um... I saw a library behind the living room.”

“I just had it renovated,” Darragh says, looking frustrated. “I didn’t put the books away yet.”

“Oh.” I perk up at the idea I can do something that doesn’t include sitting on the hot Vegas asphalt begging for change. “I can put the books away.”

“I don’t want you lifting anything.”

I narrow my eyes. “Now you’re being ridiculous.”

“Daddy, we’re going to be late.” Sophie’s voice echoes from the garage.

“Fine, you can put some books away. *Please*, be here when I get home.”

I just smile. With the bar so low, I can bust into his bedroom, take a nap in his bed, rearrange all his drawers, and he’ll be relieved I didn’t leave.

When his silver Benz pulls away, and the garage door closes, I’m struck with feeling so alone, it cripples me for a moment. Getting past the emptiness, because I’m going to have to get used to it, I take my cold tea and head into the library.

Boxes are stacked on a long, handsome table in the center of the room under an iron and mesh hanging light. The smell of freshly carved wooden bookshelves strikes me with a memory of home...with Papa. In his library. But it’s his yelling and his cruelty that echo inside me.

Katya... What have I done by leaving her there? I have to believe if anything bad happened to her, Cormac would have known, since he and Darragh spoke occasionally. I heard Darragh had been back home to Astoria to see his mother. Cormac would have said something to me, even just to torment me.

Sweet Katya... She's a college senior now. Hopefully she'll get a position with a dance troupe and leave Astoria forever. Maybe find her mother.

It's November.

I've been gone for over two years.

I back out of the library, bad memories triggering me. Darragh will understand if I don't put the books away.

I go back into the kitchen to make another cup of tea, something with chamomile to calm my nerves. But they get cranked up when I glance at that peg by the back door and see the pink and white knapsack.

Sophie's EpiPen!

My heart pounds, and I drop the mug, ceramic shards all around my bare feet. Damn it!

Darragh left at least fifteen minutes ago for the party without it. Where the *hell* is this party?

The fridge. I bet the invite is on the fridge. I step over the shattered mug, and sure enough, a yellow party invitation is pinned to the fridge door under a magnet.

Celebrate with your creativity for Morgan's Birthday at Soundly Paints on Fenwick!

Only, I don't know where that is. Or how far it is from here. Can I walk? Should I run? I can't run, not with this bowling ball of a belly.

I can call Darragh, only... I don't know his cell phone number. He gave his card to my lawyer. Who I also have no idea how to reach.

I climb the stairs and go into Darragh's bedroom to look for more business cards, then remember Sophie has a phone.

I rush into her bedroom. On a white lacquered desk, the hutch above it filled with colorful books, sits an iPhone attached to a charger.

Damn it, it's probably locked.

Only... It's not. Makes sense. She's seven, and if she's in trouble, she might forget it.

A picture of her and Darragh on the lock screen stills me. He's smiling, kissing her cheek. I've not seen him smile since he plucked me out of that courthouse.

I scroll through the contacts and look for Darragh's phone number.

Daddy.

I tap the call icon. "Pick up. Pick up. *Oh Daddy, pick up. Please.*" But it goes right to voicemail.

What the heck?

Maybe he's in that tunnel we drove through to get here from SeaTac Airport.

I go to leave a message, but he may never see it. My eyes snag an Uber app.

For a kid? But, again, if she's in trouble, and Darragh's phone is off because he's got a precious child on his operating table, it's for Sophie's protection.

I step into my shoes and waddle downstairs to set up a ride.

Minutes later, clutching the knapsack, I get into the car that pulls up. I have no choice but to leave the house unlocked.

The sedan smells like smoke. "Hi. I need to go to this address." I shove the invite at him. "I don't know where it is. I'm new in town."

"You are new to Seattle?" His accent freezes me like ice injected into my veins.

Russian.

He glances at the house and knows Darragh's name. It's on the account, along with his credit card. "Yes. I'm... I'm the new nanny. And my boss forgot his daughter's medicine. Please, can we hurry?"

"*Da.*" He takes a drag of a long black, Turkish cigarette, like Papa.

Shuddering, I mumble, "I'm pregnant, asshole."

"*Kak the menia nazval?*" he spews in Russian, sarcastically asking me what I said.

I won't repeat louder that I called him an asshole. "Nothing." Or let on that I speak the language.

It's silly and paranoid to think this random Uber driver in Seattle has any connection to my pakhan father, king of the Astoria brotherhood.

"You are due soon?" The driver takes a road that hugs the Sound. His accent is unsettling after all these years not hearing Papa and his henchmen.

"Yeah. Any day."

He twists around and peers at me. "Not in my car, please."

"I'll see what I can do." I pull the rain slicker I borrowed from the hall tree down by the hood and sit back. Clutching Sophie's knapsack, I worry for her. She's going to a party with all kinds of sweets. What if she just sneaks something?

"We are here," the driver says and glances back at me. "I prefer *cash* tip."

And I have zero dollars.

"I don't have any on me. This was an emergency." I show him the tip on the cell screen. "I left you a big tip on the app."

"You bitch. I must share that with pig bosses."

Wide-eyed with fear, I yank the door handle at the same time he opens his own door.

"No, no, no," I'm shouting as I push myself out of the car.

And run right into Darragh.

CHAPTER 8

Darragh

HORRIFIED, I realized I left the house without Sophie's EpiPen. I begged the one mother I trust to keep an eye on her, especially around the snacks, so I could race home to grab it.

My horror deepened as Anastasia pulled up in an Uber across the street, holding Sophie's phone.

The rage I felt, and how I wanted to see someone dead, stopped me in my tracks, recognizing what that murderous O'Rourke bloodlust running through my veins could make *me* do.

How easy it is to tip into wanting to do harm, when, as a doctor, I'd taken an oath to *do no harm*.

I dive into the street, not looking, and I'm nearly flattened by a bus that didn't even beep, didn't even slow down. I jump back, frantic every second my eyes are off Anastasia.

With a clear path across the street, I run at top speed and grab her. "*What are you doing? Where are you going?*"

"Calm down, you maniac!" She struggles against my ironclad grip, and something falls from under her arms.

My accusing brain thinks it's shit she stole from my house. Shit, she could sell to make a run for it. But the bright pink color makes me gasp.

Sophie's knapsack.

I pick it up, keeping my fingers around Ana's wrist. "Shit."

She pulls away. “You forgot Sophie’s EpiPen. I was bringing it to you.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.” I catch my breath. “I realized I forgot her meds and freaked out. Then I saw you. I was irrational. I’m *sorry*.”

“Fine.” Shaking hands push Sophie’s phone at me. “I ordered an Uber from the app.” She looks back at the car she arrived in. “Can you give this guy a tip? He got mean with me when I said I didn’t have any money. I’ll pay you back.”

A tall, menacing, dark-haired man stands next to a beat-up car.

“Not necessary.” Staring at this fucker, I dig into my wallet and toss him a twenty. “Here. Now, get the fuck out of here before I get you fired.”

The guy drives off, and my brain catches up that I’m holding my daughter’s phone. I tuck it into my slacks, impressed Ana handed it over, since there are other ways to explain how she got here.

“Can you order me another ride to bring me...” Her eyes lift to mine and saying home sits on her lips. “Back to your house. Or hail me a cab and pay in advance.”

Swamped with mixed concerns, mostly that I don’t want her out of my sight, and leaving her home may have been a huge mistake, I say, “Come on.”

“Where?”

“The party.” I point to the paint studio across the street. “Do you have more important things to do?”

“You said I could go into labor any day and shouldn’t be out in public.” She crosses her arms, and I notice she’s wearing my Seahawk’s raincoat.

A feeling of possessiveness hits me, so fast, so strong, my arms itch to hold her again. Seeing her wrapped up in something that’s mine, and not just wrapped around a baby with my family’s bloodline, sends heat billowing through me. “It’s good that I’m a doctor. I can—”

“Dr. O’Rourke!” a voice shrieks from across the street.
“Sophie’s not breathing!”

My heart stops, and my life flashes before my eyes. Forgetting about Anastasia, and not really caring if she takes off, I race back across the street.

Dodging cars flying down Fenwick like it’s a fucking racetrack, I burst through the doors of the paint studio. “*Where is she?*”

“She ate a cupcake and started choking.”

My world spins seeing her laid out on the floor, her little legs with those shiny shoes shaking. I tear into the knapsack and take out the EpiPen. But my hands are sweaty.

“Hurry, Dr. O’Rourke.” A woman sits on the floor, holding my daughter’s head.

I try to snap the tip off, but my palms keep slipping over and over. Tears cloud my vision as the panic grows. I’ve not had to give her a shot. Ever. We’ve been so careful. She’s been careful.

How could this happen?

“Give me that.” Anastasia grabs it from me and shoves me aside.

Feeling sick, I watch her roughly twist the top off and plunge the needle into Sophie’s leg like I told her. My daughter gasps back to life in a manner of seconds, then starts hysterically crying.

I drag her into my arms, crying along with her. Maybe even harder. “You’re okay. You’re okay. Daddy’s here.” I lose my balance from crouching and collapse to the floor, feeling bodies around me.

She’s coughing now, but she’s fucking breathing.

“Here.” Anastasia is there with a cup. “It’s water, sweetie.”

“Thank you.” I take it from her. “Sophie, honey. Open your eyes and take a sip of water.”

Shaking, with tears streaming down her little face, Sophie's mouth tips open as she sucks down the water from the cup. "Thank you," she squeaks and drinks more water.

"Now take deep breaths." Anastasia drags in a breath to do it with her. "Now the water again."

I stare in amazement at how she's captured my daughter in this rhythm, and how Sophie begins breathing normally. With her against my chest, I get to my feet, feeling Anastasia's hand on my arm, helping me.

"Give us some space," she snaps at the people who have us surrounded, her voice strong and protective.

Holding my daughter, I stare at Ana, full of amazement. A spoiled Bratva princess isn't supposed to care about anyone but herself.

She strokes Sophie's ponytail. "I hope I didn't hurt her."

"She's fine." I hug my daughter tighter, but then gently pull her chin to me. "Sophie, *what* happened?"

"I... I don't know." She clears her throat and leans her head on my shoulder again.

My eyes find the mother who called out to me, holding a cupcake wrapper that's not ours. "I think she mixed up the cupcakes she brought with another batch."

I remember putting hers down, not thinking someone would set up another tray next to it. I don't blame shit on other people. That's a waste of time. She's seven. This was an accident and would have been disastrous if...

If Anastasia hadn't shown up with her meds. And she had the emotional control that vanished from me when faced with my daughter in stress.

"It's good your nanny showed up with her EpiPen," the mom says to me, rubbing Sophie's back.

"She not my..." I trail off, watching Ana linger near the door. "Yeah, it was good that she showed up." I smile to the mother and walk that way, still holding Sophie.

I meet Ana at the door. “Thank you,” I say to her, feeling like an ass that it’s taken that long.

“You’re welcome.” She smiles at my daughter. “How do you feel, Soph?”

“I’m tired.”

I nod, knowing the effects of an attack. She must be wiped out. “Do you want to go home?”

“I feel bad,” her voice is low.

“For what, honey?” My heart breaks, hearing her so sad.

“I ruined the party.”

“You didn’t ruin the party, sweetie,” Ana jumps in. “Look.”

I turn around and sure enough, all the little girls have gone back to the painting table, eating snacks. “See.” I hold Sophie tighter. “Do you want to stay?”

“I want to go home.” She snuggles against me.

Nodding, I say, “Then we’ll go home.”

“I’ll get her things.” Ana squeezes my arm, and the contact jolts through me.

I’ve been doing this alone for so long with Sophie, and only now do I feel like I’m drowning.

But *keeping* this particular woman who’s throwing me a lifeline will get everyone I love killed.



I drive home, Ana sitting in the back with Sophie, holding her. My eyes have trouble believing what I’m seeing in the rearview. How my daughter has warmed up to another woman so quickly, so easily, and so completely.

In the house, I put Sophie to bed for a nap, changing her out of the party dress she couldn’t wait to put on. In leggings

and a sweatshirt, she falls asleep almost immediately. I keep my hand on her chest, counting her heartbeats.

Feeling wrecked, I leave her room and don't know where to go in my own house. I left Ana in the kitchen, hanging the knapsack back on the peg. Hearing the tea kettle whistle, my legs move down the stairs before I tell them to.

Ana is cleaning up thick blue ceramic shards from the floor. "I saw you left the knapsack here, and I dropped my mug. I hope it wasn't important."

You're important. More than a fucking mug.

"No. It wasn't. I got it." I take the dustpan from her. "Sit. I'll make the tea this time."

I pour water into two fresh mugs filled with chamomile and lemon tea bags.

"I don't know how to use the leaves in the infuser. I found good old fashion tea bags. Seriously, Darragh." She scoffs a laugh. "I didn't peg you to be so..."

"So..."

"Stuffy and highbrow."

"Because my twin is a reckless drug addict?"

"Maybe." She takes a breath. "He was fun. For about six months."

I'm torn between how much I want to know about their relationships but also dread bringing a look of horror to her face. Her lawyer said in court that Cormac kept her a prisoner. That tells me what I need to know about where the relationship stands now. The look of that disgusting motel room and how she acted in it reinforces what she told her lawyer. Even if she slept in the same bed with Cormac, it sounds like he didn't give her a choice.

Fuck, I have to hire him a lawyer. And I have to call home to tell my brothers what happened. Tell them that Cormac not only got *Anastasia Koslov* pregnant, but was keeping her a prisoner. I'm not sure which part of the story will piss off Kieran more.

But I'm keeping her a prisoner, too. Even if it's for her own good.

I sip the tea and let the silence stretch out between us while I sort out my feelings. For her. I'm fighting an attraction that will get me into just as much trouble. How she took over and saved my daughter knocked me sideways.

But she wants to disappear into the shadows again. I'm prepared to help her. Only, she can't take the baby. She can't live on the run with an infant. My family will *want* this child, especially if it's a boy.

"Thank you again for before." I raise the mug to punctuate the eerie silence.

"You're welcome. Again." She sips the tea, her greedy mouth wide around the rim of the mug.

My cock hardens, but I remember something that sends the pulse in my neck throbbing. I have a date tonight. Not a real date. I roll my eyes at the absurdity my life turned into. A few weeks ago, I hired an escort to meet me at the Canterbury Hotel downtown tonight. After months of hedging, I reached out to a service a friend uses. A tech billionaire who goes to the same gym recommended this woman highly.

Deciding to fuck someone meant I was technically cheating on Ginnifer. But my decision to do this, to find sexual relief outside my marriage since the woman I said vows with never plans to come home, forced me to accept my reality.

That same night, I texted Ginny with my plans and waited for the phone to ring. Prayed for her tears and the words *I'm coming home* to drop from her lips. I even sent the message in the middle of the night when I knew she'd be awake.

No call came.

No tears.

Just a reply text:

Ginny: I understand. I met someone here, too. A doctor. But I haven't done anything. I was waiting.

Me: Waiting for what? I replied, crushed, but relieved.

Ginny: For you to break first. I'm impressed it's taken this long, D. Go, live your life, just do not neglect our daughter.

The hypocrisy choked me. Then again, she didn't want to get pregnant and never loved me. I shudder at what she would have done had I shrugged off my responsibility. I tried to make Ginny something she's not.

Am I making the same mistake with Ana?

The only thing clear to me right now is I have to cancel that 'date.' Given the hour, I'll still have to pay. But I'm not leaving Sophie alone after what happened. I also don't feel right leaving her with Ana. Although, she proved capable and trustworthy. She had a chance at freedom. With my daughter's phone, an Uber app, and the money loaded onto an e-wallet, Ana could have been hundreds of miles away by now.

"I'll be in my office," I say to Ana, and take my mug with me. "Oh, I defrosted some steaks for the grill tonight. Do you eat meat?"

"I sure do." Her eyes land on my groin, still swollen from watching her gulp the tea, her throat working down the warm liquid.

Picturing her swallowing my hot cum is something I need to get out of my head immediately.



I grip my phone, struggling through this three-way call with a lawyer and Tamryn.

"Just get those charges dropped, Lincoln," I bite out. "Dig up dirt on the prosecutor. Anything. I'll pay whatever you need."

"Then what?" Tamryn jumps in.

That's the question, isn't it? What do I do with Cormac? I planned to bring him home to Seattle and get him into rehab. But I don't want him anywhere near my daughter or Anastasia.

I honestly worry he'll kill Ana and dump her body in the Sound to hide what he did.

"I can make the prosecutor agree to court-mandated rehab." Lincoln has a sweet gig, being paid a fortune for one trip to Vegas and five minutes in a courtroom. "There's a place in Malibu and one in Phoenix that has security to keep remanded clients there."

"I'll make sure she agrees," Tamryn speaks like an Irish thug from Astoria. "With a name like Reilly, the lassie should know who to be loyal to."

"For the record, I didn't hear that," Lincoln says with humor in his voice. "Darragh, I got this."

"Thanks, Linc."

"You're welcome. Say hi to Eoghan for me."

"Trust me, that won't be a pleasant call." My brother will be highly offended at best, and murder me at worst, for calling Lincoln Stone, his Harvard roommate, to help with Cormac and not him.

I'm just not ready to call home about what happened. But the days are ticking down. I need to tell them I have Anastasia Koslov.

"Will Eoghan be in Vegas anytime soon?" Lincoln asks.

"Probably." I roll my eyes and consider he'll have to make a sweeping visit with Lachlan to settle his unpaid debts, and make sure all Cormac's dirty and frayed loose ends are tied up. That includes silencing any witnesses my darling twin may have blabbed to about our family. "Thanks, Linc."

"Anytime, Dr. O'Rourke." He reminds me of the performing enhancing drugs I call into a pharmacy for his perpetual need to look built and cut.

Calls I've made for my brothers back home, too. I'm no angel. Ordering up Oxy for Riordan when his wife ended up in his bed with a bullet to her shoulder. Ambien for my sister in East Hampton, and lately, experimental meds from Mexico to help my mother with her MS.

All offenses that can make me lose my medical license. That same arrogance permeating the air in the house I grew up in didn't escape me. I forged my way out of that life 24/7. But I'm still an O'Rourke, and I bend the rules to get what I want.

What I want...

Christ, Anastasia comes to mind. That mouth begging for my cock... Those swollen breasts aching for my hands... Even that perfect round stomach turns me the fuck on, like I have a damn breeding kink. Primal urges course through me to take her however, and wherever I want her. But I'm tempered by my duty as a father, and to make sure I never risk my custody of my daughter, especially now that it looks like I'm getting a divorce.

Things my brothers back home can fix, but I'd rather save my get-out-of-jail-free card for when I'm hanging by a thread with no way out.

Still, taking what belonged to Cormac drives my carnal thoughts even deeper. I'm so fucking mad at him. The first of a thousand cuts felt satisfying, seeing the anger in his eyes when I bailed out Ana and not him. Now, I'm having him involuntarily committed to rehab.

I lean back in my chair.

God, I need a drink. I stand up to fist the entire bottle of whiskey. I'll bring it to my bedroom and take a warm shower, where I'll relieve this damn tension between my legs. Then drink the whiskey down until I pass out.

"Knock, knock." The door to my office opens, and Ana's face hits the light. It frames her beauty in a way that brings me to my knees.

"Usually you knock, and I say come in." Anger hums off me. I want this woman so badly, it's burning me inside, the fire licking at my words.

"Who's Lilian?"

I freeze, thinking of the whore I was going to fuck later.
"Why?"

“A call came in on the house phone.”

“*What?*”

“Her name and phone number flashed on the television screen with an incoming call.” Ana drops a piece of paper in front of me. “I put the T.V. on while I was rinsing out my mug.”

Did I give that dirty bitch my home number? I’m losing it. “That’s no one,” I say, as I bang out a simple text:

Me: Changed my mind. Text me what I owe you for canceling at the last minute. Do NOT call my house again.

Ana eases into my office, her movement soft and sensual. “Did you have a date tonight?”

“I’m married.”

“To a woman you haven’t seen in three years.” She runs her fingers along my desk and leans on it. “No one would blame you. Hell, my father cheated on my mother for their whole marriage. That’s how I have a sister. One day, a woman brought Katya to our estate, saying she’s Papa’s daughter, too. She was twelve. Papa took my sister in because he recognized her Koslov features, and the Bratva *treasures* bloodlines.”

“I’m pretty sure my father didn’t cheat on my mother, and I don’t have any illegitimate half-siblings.” At least, I fucking hope not. “Have you talked to your sister at all?”

“No.” She dumps her head in her hands, and my body seizes at the worry in her voice. “But um... When I first got to Vegas, I paid a couple in the casino giftshop to send postcards to her college mailbox at East Side Performing Arts. They were traveling the country. I don’t know if they did. Especially since they robbed me.”

“They robbed you?”

She snickers. “Kind of why I ended up with your brother that first night.”

The image of her, with a sleek body, and fresh on the run in need of a hero, shatters me. Cormac took advantage of her.

“Well, either those postcards never made it, or your sister kept them to herself.”

Ana pushes a hand through thick blonde hair, falling in soft waves across her shoulders. “I miss her so much. I had the postcards sent just so Katya wouldn’t worry about me.”

“Can we agree, if you ever decide to go home, that you don’t mention anything about Cormac?” I hold my breath, not sure of her answer.

She sits down, and unable to cross her legs, hooks her ankles together. Even with a large round stomach, she looks sexy as hell. “Maybe.” But her smile is cagey. She admitted she faked a kidnapping. Surely, she wants to keep that a secret from her father. “Anyway. Go on your date with Lilian. I’ll feed Sophie when she wakes up.”

“It’s not a date. She’s a...”

Ana gasps. “A hooker?”

“Something like that.”

“Then why aren’t you going?” She frowns. “What changed your mind?”

“Sophie nearly died today,” I say, even if that’s only part of the truth.

Had that attack not happened, I still would have canceled Lilian. I’d rather bury my cock in my brother’s pregnant ex-girlfriend, who gazes at me with longing eyes. Ana acts like she wants me, for me. And I’d rather have her in my bed than a whore who just wants a dick in her dirty ass for cash.

“I see.” Ana bites her lower lip, driving me crazy. “Can I ask you a medical question?”

I glance down at her stomach. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She strokes her throat. “I can’t stop these... feelings.” Her eyes find mine and the way they’re glassy, I know exactly what she means.

“Go on.” I control my breathing because I can’t control my erection for her, bursting in my pants. This is nuts, she just

showed up here yesterday.

“I’m...”

“Horny?” I say, cringing at the word.

“Sounds juvenile.”

“You want to be held down and fucked?” My grittiness surprises me, but damn, this is who I really am. “Is that adult enough for you?”

Her jaw drops, and the shape her mouth takes kicks up my stifled desire to a nuclear level. “I didn’t mean that exactly, but that thought excites the hell out of me. Is that wrong?”

“It’s the hormones.” I notice she didn’t say who she wants to hold her down and get fucked by. But the way she looks at me...

“I didn’t feel anything during the whole pregnancy until...”

“You were living in substandard conditions. Your body’s survival mode kicked in.”

“I meant until I saw you.”

There it is...

“I look exactly like Cormac, it’s natural...”

She gives a throaty laugh, her mouth opening enough for me shove my cock down her throat. Show her what bad girls get. “You saw him. He’s a mess. Maybe I saw the old him in you.”

“That and he always dressed more hip, kept his hair longer than mine. I also broke my nose in college, rearranging my face slightly.”

Ana stands up and strolls toward me. “That’s it. That’s the slight difference I couldn’t pinpoint.” She brings her hand to my face. “May I?”

“May you what?” I grip her hand.

“Touch you.”

Fuck... I have to get a handle on these feelings and not do something I'll regret. "That's dangerous, Anastasia."

"Call me Ana. I certainly don't want to be Stasia anymore." Her fingers brush my collar, and it heats my neck.

"Did... Did Cormac take your virginity?" I ask in a low, husky drawl.

I don't live in my older brothers' world where virgins are commodities, but Stasia was her father's jewel. She was expected to stay pure.

"Does it matter?"

"I guess not. Was the sex with Cormac always consensual?" When she lifts tear-filled eyes to me, my heart falls. "I'm sorry." Rage clouds my vision, like the perpetual fog of this damn wet city. I feel my soul passing through Cormac at this very moment. Twins feel each other's pain. I hope he feels my fury, and it burns him until he's choking. "He forced himself on you?"

"No, Darragh, he didn't force himself on me. We had a great time for a while. I felt like he understood me. He promised to keep my real identity a secret and..."

"And?"

"He promised to bring me here to Seattle."

I shudder. "When?"

"It got muddy." She shrugs. "He said he would drive me to Vancouver and...leave me there."

"What happened?"

"This happened." She points to her stomach. "He freaked out. Left me for a few days. I don't want to talk about it. And we hadn't sex for months before that." She edges closer, and the air rearranges around me.

What is this?

"I see how you look at me. But I can't... We can't act on this." I feign wariness. "I mean, you're fucking gorgeous, Ana. And what you did for Sophie today, it...melted me."

“I was happy to do it, obviously.” She clears her throat.
“Will you drive me to Vancouver?”

“When?”

“Now. Tomorrow.” She futzes with her sweater. “If I give birth in Canada, my baby will be a citizen. I can disappear into the Canadian Rockies and—”

“Over my dead body.”

“I’m carrying *my father’s* heir. This baby is the future pakhan of Astoria. Your dead body is what my father and his *bratoks* will gladly climb over when Papa finds out *you* have us.” She brushes past me, her scent disorienting me as she slams the door and leaves me here feeling like a fucking mess.

CHAPTER 9

Ana

THE FOOD CRAVINGS hit me out of nowhere. For so many months, I barely had anything to eat. Maybe my brain didn't let me crave what typically taunts pregnant women since I stood a one percent chance of getting it.

Sunday morning, I wake up salivating for pancakes. I saw batter mix down in the kitchen. I'm sure Sophie will love them.

God, how her father adores her.

It occurs to me that my father hasn't even come close to finding me these past two and a half years. How hard has he been looking? Does he not have cyber capabilities?

Maybe he doesn't care about me as much as I thought. I was just his pawn to marry off to another pakhan.

When my brothers died, Papa shut down. Perhaps he wanted to get rid of all of us. First me, then... My heart stops, worrying about Katya again. But my sister is smart. I managed to escape. If Papa tried to hurt her, she would, too.

Perhaps I should write her a letter about where I really am. Now that I'm in a safe space, if she needs to get away, she could come here.

My stomach growls as I dress in yet more of Darragh's wife's clothes. Sophie woke up late in the afternoon yesterday and just wanted some soup. I microwaved myself a bowl, too, and ate it in my room. I don't know what Darragh did for dinner.

I hated how we ended last night. I feel so drawn to him, and that's wrong. Or am I just seeing Cormac how he used to be? It's so confusing.

Pushing all of that aside, I pad into the kitchen and look around, feeling such a sense of peace. Papa's house, our house, was bigger than this, but with all that harsh Russian spoken and guards with guns everywhere, it never felt like a home. I felt like I lived in a cold presidential palace.

In the cabinet below where I found the tea I made for me and Darragh, I find pancake mix. Opening the refrigerator, I grab milk, a few eggs, and, in another pantry, a large red ceramic bowl. I make one batch and even get a little creative, sprinkling cinnamon and adding fresh blueberries.

The stove is a six-burner monstrosity with a flattop in the center, which saves me time looking for a skillet. I fire up the griddle, grease it with a pat of butter, and then scoop out two ladles' worth. They fluff up beautifully. One flip and they are golden. I'm ready to eat the raw batter, I'm so hungry.

I let the other side cook as I search for a plate. Opening cabinets and drawers, I realize everything is in short supply. Spotting the dishwasher, I open it, and the telltale smell of detergent hits me. With everything inside sparkling, I know it's all clean.

I plate the pancakes, and while they cool down, I start emptying the dishwasher, wanting to help out. A throat clearing stills me as I turn around, holding a small cereal bowl.

Darragh stands there shirtless in black sweats that sit *very* low on his hips.

And he's eating my pancakes.

He picks one up with his hands and takes a huge bite.

"Good?" I ask him, crossing my arms.

"Fucking incredible."

"Glad you enjoy them."

He looks around. "Where's your plate?"

“In your hand. Those were mine.”

He blushes and puts the plate down. “Shite, I’m sorry.”

“Shite? You talk like that, too?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “Let’s just say all these shocking reminders of home are dragging me back to a place I couldn’t wait to get away from.”

I round the island, passing him, soaking in the musky smell of his skin. I turn the burner back on and make two more pancakes. “We have that in common. Hopefully, you understand that and will let me go.”

“Not until the baby is born.” He eyes me, daring me to bring up our argument last night.

“Since you told me it’s a boy, I... I feel different. All the kicking. It makes sense now.” I flip the new batch, not looking at him anymore.

“We’re going to find out for sure today. I’m taking you to my hospital in the afternoon. I know who’s on that shift. She’ll do an ultrasound and—”

“I told you, they did one in the infirmary.”

He cocks his head. “Excuse me if I don’t trust a Las Vegas prison nurse.”

“I can’t argue there.” I glance at the clock. “When does Sophie wake up?”

“Any minute.” He finishes his pancakes and rinses off the plate. “That was delicious. What else can you cook?”

“I had fun making use of the kitchen in the villa. I never learned to cook growing up, but now I can cook pretty much anything.”

“Good. Feel free to use the kitchen and cook whatever you like while you’re here.” Darragh’s smooth, bare ivory chest and sculpted muscles take my breath away. “What? What are you staring at?”

“There’s another way you look different from Cormac.”

“How’s that?” When he crosses his arms, thick veins pop and bulge everywhere.

“Your twin is full of ink.”

“I noticed a few tats on Cormac’s neck. All of my brothers have them,”

“There were quite a few more.” I didn’t eat for a couple of days because he wanted to finish the skull-and-crossbones scene on his back. “He has ink on his fingers, too.”

Darragh gives me a once over. “Do you have any?”

“You would have seen them. You saw me naked.” Heat swirls in my chest.

“It was overwhelming, and I didn’t get a good enough look at you—”

“The answer is no,” I bite out, the subject hitting a nerve. “I’ll save you the trouble of remembering. I was too scared it would hurt.”

“What about the drugs you did with Cormac?” he asks with an icy tone.

“It wasn’t hard drugs. It was pot and some speed. Cormac freebased coke and made crack. I wouldn’t touch that. But these creepy friends of his would show up...” My throat tightens. “That’s when we got kicked out of the villa.”

Darragh’s eyes darken. “I had you kicked out. When I found out he was doing drugs there, I snapped.” He hovers over me, his skin glowing and smelling so sweet. “I didn’t know you were there.”

“That’s how good he was at keeping me a secret.”

“Pancakes!” Sophie appears in the kitchen in a cute yellow nightgown and holding an iPad.

“Here you go!” I give her my plate.

“Those are yours.” Darragh goes to the refrigerator and pours juice into a purple plastic cup decorated with Easter eggs. “She needs her meds first. Eat,” he demands, and heat tingles spear me all over.

Defly cutting squares and popping them into my mouth, I watch him give Sophie three different pills, a kid's vitamin gummy, and then some kind of liquid.

She sits at the kitchen table under a wall of windows and fires up her iPad.

“What are those meds?” I ask Darragh when he puts them away.

“Allergy pills and prescription cough syrup.”

“She gets them every morning? Because I can help with that.”

He opens his mouth to answer but bites his lip. “I got a list of nanny résumés from the service. I have to review them and make calls at one point today. If I don't have anyone picked out, I'll change my hours to take Sophie back and forth to school. Someone at the hospital can watch her until—”

“Leaving me alone, *all* day?” I bite the last sinful triangle of warm heaven. “Hmmm.”

“I'm trusting you to stay here.”

“Don't forget, I'm a criminal. I know how to fence stuff. There's lots in here I can sell to buy a ticket to Canada.”

“I heard your lawyer say you don't have a passport.”

“I need one for Canada?”

“You do now.”

Damn it. Maybe I can call Dante Caruso...

“Can I have my pancakes now?” Sophie asks.

“Absolutely.” I turn the griddle back on and ladle up a few small dollops, remembering how I loved silver dollar pancakes as a kid.

Darragh cups her shoulder. “Sophie, after breakfast, we're going to the hospital to listen to Ana's baby.”

She looks up with wide eyes. “How do we hear the baby?”

“It's called an ultrasound machine,” I answer while Darragh sneers at his phone, possibly from poor nanny

candidates.

“That sounds so cool.” Sophie takes her plate and stabs each of the pancakes, shoving them into her little mouth.

I pull the plate away. “Hey, slow down, speed racer. We’re in no rush.”

She chews and chews, rolling her eyes, nodding. When I think she gets it, I put her plate back.

I notice a few ripe bananas on a hook, take one down, and peel it. Darragh watches me with an eyebrow raised. For fun, I turn away from Sophie and lick the tip.

He drops the phone.

Laughing, I take a butter knife and cut that part away and slice up chunks for Sophie.

“Thank. You.” She picks up a few slices and folds them into one of the pancakes.

Darragh peels another banana and says, “We need to stop at the grocery store, too.”

“Sounds like we have a full day.” I put my plate in the dishwasher. “I need a shower.”

Darragh’s eyes follow me. I lock into my memory of how he looks shirtless, turned on with that ruffled hair, because that bathroom has one sweet removable shower head.



The ultrasound makes it official. I’m having a boy.

“Do you hear that, Sophie?” I ask her about the *whoosh-whooshing* of my baby’s heartbeat.

“He’s so little.” She stares at the screen in amazement.

This baby is her cousin *and* her brother, in some twisted genetic fashion. Yet, she thinks I’m just some knocked-up stranger she’ll never see again.

That's true, I guess. After my baby is born, we're leaving. I have to get through these next couple of weeks with Darragh and convince him to help me.

Playing nice, I agree to a shopping spree at the mall. Darragh buys us lunch, and after, Sophie begs her daddy to take her on a train ride that circles the whole mall.

He hands me a credit card. "This is Ginny's Amex. Shop for whatever you want." When I go to take it, he pulls it back. "I'm trusting you, *Anastasia Koslov*."

Signaling with one call to his brother, Balor, and a stolen credit card number, they'd track me down like a dog.

"How much can I spend?" I look at the card that reads: Ginnifer Dailey O'Rourke.

His warm green eyes light up. "Spend what you need to."

"What I need, I can't buy here." I take the card and stalk off.

In the fancy maternity boutique, I consider how big I am. And since I have no reason to leave the house, I opt for loungewear, a few sweaters, two pairs of nice jeans, and a few sleep sets. The sales lady reminds me to buy new bras and underwear. She doesn't ask for ID to charge thousands of dollars to Darragh's wife's credit card.

Back at the house, Sophie proudly sticks the little black and white photos from the ultrasound on the refrigerator. "My friend Emily from Brownies has her baby sister's photos on their fridge."

Darragh and I freeze and sneak a look at each other.

"Sophie, those photos belong to Ana," her father says, sounding guilty.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She blushes, looking so sad.

"That's fine." I shrug like it's no big deal. "This way I can see them every morning, too. Otherwise, they'd be in a drawer." I lift my eyes to Darragh, who nods gently, approving of my response.

“Will the daddy want one?” Sophie asks, and Darragh just shakes his head like he didn’t expect his daughter to ask all these questions.

Thinking quickly, I say, “Come here, Sophie.”

She skips to me, holding one of the photos. “Yeah?”

I sit down on one of the kitchen chairs so I can be eye-level with her. “I know this may be hard to understand.”

“Ana...” Darragh warns, leaning on the island, glaring at me.

“It’s okay.” I mouth *I got this*. “I actually don’t know who the father is.”

Sophie’s head tilts when she stares at *her* father. “Daddy? I don’t understand.”

Darragh folds his arms. “Explain. I don’t understand either.”

“I wanted a baby of my own, but I didn’t have a husband.” It’s all I can think of quickly. I don’t want to be asked about Cormac. I might slip up and say his name. “I went to a place, and they put a baby in my belly.” A *very* loose truth, if that place could be considered the Vegas villa.

“They can do that?” Sophie gazes with keen curiosity at her father again, signaling just how dependent she is on him even to validate strange thoughts and new concepts. She’s completely attached to him, and it kind of breaks my heart, because she doesn’t have a mother. “Daddy, they can do that?”

“*They* sure can,” he answers her, then smiles at me.

“So you see...” I take her hand and put it on my belly. “This baby is all mine.”

“What if the daddy shows up and wants it?”

“Yeah, what if the daddy shows up, Ana?” Darragh mutters, pinching his eye sockets.

“That won’t happen.” I notice the alarm on her face. “He won’t show up here. Never. As soon as I have the baby, I’ll be leaving.”

“You are?” She sounds sad, and I don’t understand why she would be upset. Perhaps this little girl is desperate to cling to a mother-figure, considering how she cried when her nanny quit.

“Not right away,” Darragh interjects, strolling toward us. “Soph, why don’t you go wash up? I’ll put a movie on in the media room.”

“Can I watch *The Little Mermaid*?”

“Sure.” Darragh fingers the strands of her blonde hair, then watches her as she scampers off.

I stand up and say, “She put me on the spot.”

“Like this?” Darragh crashes his mouth down on mine.

I wrap my arms around his neck and moan. I’m shocked he’s kissing me in the kitchen, in the open, when Sophie can easily double back and catch us. But I don’t care either. His lips spark life in my chest after feeling dead for so long. I sink into the kiss, loving the warmth of his mouth and the way his possessive hands hold my waist.

“I don’t understand what I’m doing,” he mutters before taking more of my mouth.

“Me neither. Why is it so easy to kiss you?”

“It’s because I look like Cormac,” he deadpans. “The question is, why is it so easy for me to kiss you?”

“Because you haven’t been laid in three years?”

He laughs and kisses my forehead. “True. I want to change that later, if you’re game.” He smooths a hand across my stomach. “Call me kinky, but I find you so fucking sexy like this.”

I swallow at his visceral confession. “Is sex dangerous at this stage?”

“Good sex is good for the baby at any stage.”

I fold my arms, my nipples straining against the fabric of the sweater. “You’re certain you’re still good at sex?”

“Very.” His confidence is so damn arousing.

I can think of so many reasons why I shouldn’t do this, why I shouldn’t get close to Darragh when he holds so many cards. The power imbalance is wide enough. But damn, I need sex, and I admit, the idea of him taking me heats my blood.

Mostly as a big fuck-you to Cormac.

My heart aches for him briefly. “What are you doing about your brother?”

Darragh’s eyes flutter that I killed the mood. “I’m getting his case thrown out on the basis of him going into remanded rehab.”

“Remanded?”

“Forced. He won’t be able to leave.”

“He won’t like that.”

“He gave up that right when he got you pregnant, forced you to commit crimes with him, and made you live in that hovel.” Darragh’s passionate words kick me in the heart.

“Is it that he did it to me, the Russian princess? Or just any woman?”

Darragh thinks about that. “I know we’re enemies back home. But you don’t know my family. We respect women. Sure, my brothers use sex clubs, escorts, and have one-night stands, but all with full consent. My father treats my mother like gold. I’m much younger than my brothers, but Kieran had a long-time girlfriend who walked on water in his eyes.” He looks down. “It destroyed him when she died.”

I’d heard about the new Irish king who suffered a terrible loss and refuses to love again. It strikes me how long I’ve been gone.

“I have something I need to tell you.” I swallow.

Darragh dumps his ass into a kitchen island stool. “Considering what I do know, whatever you’re holding back can’t be worse. Go ahead.”

“Dante Caruso helped me escape. He got my fake ID and the phone your brother stole.” I take a seat next to Darragh. “I know I made what happened look like a kidnapping. But it’s been over two years. I don’t care what anyone thinks. I have a trust fund. Will you get in touch with Dante to—”

“Dante Caruso is dead.”

My throat goes tight. “What?”

“Kieran killed him.”

“Wait.” I wave my hands. “Your brother, the head of the Irish mob, *killed* the Italian underboss?”

And Dante said I’d start a war.

“It’s a long story. Gabriel Parisi is dead, too. Kieran married his daughter, Isabella.” Darragh exhales. “I don’t know who’s running the Cosa Nostra now.”

That’s information overload. “Darragh, can you help me get access to my trust fund?”

“So you can escape for good?”

“Yes. After the baby is born.”

“Not if you’re taking him with you.”

“I’m not leaving my baby with you. I can call Katya. She’ll find someone to help me.”

Darragh’s eyes flare with restrained anger. “I can prove that’s my son with a DNA sample after he’s born.” He folds his arms. “I put a call into a genetic researcher to confirm that identical twins’ offspring match the other twin’s DNA.”

“I’ll tell whoever is swabbing his mouth for the sample that he’s Cormac’s.”

“My brother is a remanded drug addict.” Darragh grips my throat. “And you’re out on bail. Do you want to jeopardize that? I can make sure you go to prison, and *they* will take your baby.”

It hits me he hasn’t had my case dismissed yet. “You’ll let *strangers* take this baby you say is yours, but I can’t?”

“If you try to take him away against my wishes, yes.”

“With one call to the right person, I can get my money. And with millions of dollars in the Cayman Islands, my baby and I will be fine. I’m sure I can pay someone down there for a new identity.”

Darragh turns white. “You’d do that?”

“Darragh, you’re not seeing the bigger picture. This baby, this *boy*, is the heir to my father’s brotherhood. I don’t want him to live that life.”

He drills me with a stare. “He won’t be the Bratva heir if his last name is O’Rourke.”

CHAPTER 10

Darragh

ANA STOMPS away after my comment about the baby's last name being O'Rourke.

"We're not done talking," I bark.

Even mad, I'm fixated on her ass. I kissed her because I couldn't stand not tasting her lips another second. To see if she even remotely felt the same as me. Was I alone in this strange kink attraction for my brother's pregnant ex-girlfriend? Her eyes fluttered, boosting my confidence that I still know what to do with these damn lips.

That kiss woke me the fuck up after icing myself over for years. Now, I'm on fire, and no matter what, I want more. More of her.

"End of discussion." She snipes over her shoulder, heading for the stairs. "I'll figure out a way to call your brother, Eoghan. He'll help me disappear for good."

My heart jumps into my throat, knowing I need to cut that threat off at the knees.

"Daddy?" Sophie's voice makes me jump.

"Yeah, honey?"

"What's for dinner?"

I glance at the clock and realize I should be neck deep in cooking a big Sunday meal for us. I'm so rattled. This situation with Anastasia is already affecting my daughter and that infuriates me.

“Let Daddy make one call, and then I’ll grill some steaks for us.” The ones we never ate last night.

“I don’t like steak.” Sophie pouts.

“Since when don’t you like steak?”

“Since forever.” She exhales, and I’m startled to remember the last time I cooked it for us. Had she pretended to eat it? “Can I have chicken nuggets?”

I know there are packages buried deep in the freezer for emergencies when I have to work late. Those are not for Sunday dinner. But we never made it to the grocery store because we took so long at the mall. Now, I’m caught with nothing.

I’m fucking exhausted from the appointment at the hospital, watching a black and white screen reveal the next O’Rourke baby about to be born. There’s a fully formed son in Ana’s belly, who’s ready to kick his way out any day. A son I am ready to call my own.

Finding out the Italians had a hand in Stasia’s disappearance, that she faked a kidnapping with fake postcards might have shown up in Astoria, I’m clear in my decision more than ever, Anastasia must stay here.

I have to convince her of that. Her fake identity held up for more than two years. Just shows how weak her father is. She’s been in a major city all this time. He has no Bratva contacts in Las Vegas?

I trust Eoghan will clean up our brother’s mess.

My daughter stares at me for an answer. Keeping the frustration out of my voice, I say, “Okay, you can have chicken nuggets tonight. Just this once for a Sunday.”

“Yay!” she chirps and skips to the freezer’s middle drawer. Sometimes chicken nuggets aren’t the biggest evil or the worst problem. “What will you and Ana have, Daddy?”

A big fight and hopefully some hot, dirty make-up sex.



I find Ana in my bedroom, trying to figure out how to break into my phone.

“Hey!” I snap.

“Give me the code to call Eoghan, and I’ll be out of your life.”

“No.” I grab her and pin her to my bed, watching out for her stomach. One swipe, and she’ll find his number in my phone.

“Listen to me.”

“No! *You* listen to *me*.”

“Do it for Sophie.”

“Don’t do that.” Ana blushes when I hold her stomach. “Don’t be a dick and use your daughter.”

“This baby is her brother. Don’t take him away from her. She already lost her mother.”

“Cheap shot.”

“Compromise.” I lower my mouth and kiss her neck, unable to control myself. But she’s under the same spell. She needs to feel loved, and I can give her that.

Damn, the smell of her skin will be my undoing.

“What the hell is this?” She arches her back, giving me better access.

What *is* this? Fate? *Twisted* fate because she ended up with the wrong brother? But here she is, in my house. In my bedroom. Letting me kiss her on my bed.

Fuck, I have to get control of myself. I can have it all—her and the baby—all while keeping everyone safe.

I pull back and peer into her eyes. “You want freedom? I’ll give something better.” I lower my lips to hers again and devour her mouth until I can’t breathe. “Why do you think I’m

here and not in New York? I get you, *Anastasia*. You didn't want to marry a pakhan and live that life. I didn't want that life either. I work every day to keep my freedom, and I'll work just as hard to protect who you really are." I cradle her head in my hands. "Look at me. I don't blame you for taking off. You can't help who your father is any more than I can. They both have blood on their hands."

"I want my trust fund." She struggles to speak. "That's how I stop the cycle. Keeping what is mine and not having it reinvested in that awful life."

"My trust fund is bigger. I'll share it with you."

She shifts and sends a jolt of pleasure to my groin where my hips are grinding into hers. "I feel that."

"I'm not joking right now." I push her legs apart. Up on my knees, so I don't put pressure on her stomach, I seat myself between her thighs. "I can be everything you need. Give me a chance to prove it. I can make you feel things and blow your mind, Ana."

"If you're identical to your brother..."

That age old comparison hits a nerve. Gripping her face tighter, I say, "I'm not Cormac."

"We still have to deal with him." Her voice reeks of fear.

I sit back and pull her into my arms. "No. I have to deal with him. Say you'll give me a chance, and I will make that problem go away."

"How? What are you going to do, kill him?"

"If I have to," I only say this because I worry he'll kill her.

The simultaneous gasp from me voicing I'd kill my brother has her scrambling to her feet. "You're a monster, too."

When she pulls away from me, I let her go. She ambles out of my bedroom. Without my phone. I had her wanting to fuck me, right up until the moment I suggested killing my twin.

Maybe I really am just like my brothers.



“Oh hey, nuggets. Can I have some?” Ana coos to Sophie downstairs in a sweet voice that travels right to my bedroom.

I have some for you, princess.

God, I’m losing it.

I spot my house phone cradled on the nightstand and pick it up so Ana can’t make a call downstairs. Sticking it under my pillow to muffle the annoying fast beeping, I call Eoghan.

“Lincoln Stone called and told me everything about Cormac and Stasia,” my brother answers abruptly, without even a hello.

“Fuck.”

“You told Kieran you had him under control.”

“No, I told Riordan.”

“Riordan is the underboss. It’s the same thing.” Eoghan sounds mad. *Shit.*

“Does Kieran know what happened?”

“No.” Eoghan exhales. “And that’s for his sake. Not yours. He’s got infant sons he’s having a ball with. He’s stupidly happy, and he deserves it. I’m not going down as the one who wrecks it.”

I wonder if Kieran will put a hit on Cormac *and me.*

“Kieran has to know eventually.” Hiding shit from him is worse. That I know. “He’ll make all our lives a living hell if he finds out from someone else.”

Like the Bratva.

“Once I have it under control, we’ll—”

“There’s more to it, Eoghan. Are you sitting down?” I launch into a replay of how I found Ana, and everything else I learned over the last three days about what Cormac did to her.

Including knocking her up.

My brother is eerily quiet, then releases a long *Fuuuuuk* in his thick brogue. “Do you need me there to give her a talking to?”

“No! I can handle her. I just need...” A sharp pain nags at my chest. “I *need* help with Cormac.”

“He’s locked up in rehab for a month.”

“Already?” I’m shocked Cormac hasn’t shouted from the rooftops that I have the Bratva princess.

“I don’t fuck around, Dar. He’s under control.”

“What happens after the month?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Tell me.” I still feel protective of him.

“Lachlan offed a quack here who messed with Riordan’s wife. We need a new doctor.” *We...* My family. Shit. “Cormac had his chance to live on his own. He fucked it up, and now he has to pay.”

“That’s my fault.”

“No, it’s not, Darragh. You made him your responsibility. No one here saw you as his keeper. He fucked up on his own. I’m arranging to bring him home after he does his mandatory rehab in Malibu.”

“He won’t agree to it.”

“Lachlan will handle him.”

“Are you sure you want him back in Astoria?” I shudder. “He can spill about Stasia’s baby.” It feels weird referring to her as that now, even though it’s the name we all knew her by for years.

“Admit to her father that he knocked her up and kept her against her will? That will get a bullet in his head. Cormac won’t say a word.”

“I want to keep her,” I say softly. “I... It makes no sense, Eoghan. But I’m attracted to her. She’s attracted to me. We... we have chemistry. I know I can convince her to stay here with

me. Raise the baby—” God, nothing good can come of how I feel about her, but I can’t stop. It’s all consuming.

“Stop thinking with your dick. That’s the future pakhan, Darragh.”

“I know that,” I snap. Fully aware that if Lachlan can kill a doctor and drag Cormac back to New York, he can do the same to me. And Ana.

“Shite,” he mumbles. “You want that danger on your doorstep with Sophie living under your roof?”

“Stasia confessed to me that she left her father on her own. She wasn’t kidnapped. She was going to be married off to the Boston pakhan.”

“That fucking Siberian snake never once mentioned that.”

“There’s more, Eoghan.”

“Chriiiiist.”

“Dante Caruso got her the fake ID she used to get out of New York.”

“That fucking piece of oily shit. What he put us through. What he put Isabella through.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. You don’t need more horrible details in your head. You’ve got your own nightmare to wake up from.” He clears his throat, calming down. People think because he’s a Harvard lawyer, he’s not dangerous. Years ago, I overheard mumbling in my father’s office about how he tied two bullies bothering Balor to his bumper with a chain and dragged them to their death. “Look. We’re on the same side. We have the same goal. Keep this shit from Alexei Koslov.”

“Speaking of which, Ana is worried about her sister. Can you find out how Katya is doing?”

Eoghan laughs out loud. “Katya is *married* to Lachlan.”

I stagger to the bed. “*What?* When?”

“A couple of months ago. And she’s pregnant, too.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.” I can’t tell Ana that. She’ll definitely try to call her sister. “How did Koslov allow that one?”

Eoghan gives me a stiff explanation of how Lachlan ended up married to Katya and it drips with all kinds of mafia craziness that would sound insane to an outsider. I really don’t envy their life.

Something about my psycho brother—I know he’s a psycho—killing her fiancé at the fucking altar and forcing her to marry him instead.

When Ana finds out, she might lose it, and suffer a major guilt attack because she wasn’t there to protect her sister. She might blow this all wide open to try to help Katya.

“Is Katya still in college?” I wonder if I should mention the postcards.

Only, it sounds like it doesn’t matter. We’ve got *both* Bratva princesses on our side now.

Good one, Lach...

“No. She and Lachlan are house hunting.”

I push down the impulse to snarl a laugh at my six-six, murdering brother commenting on backsplash tiles. “Stasia might try to get in touch with you or Balor to hack into her trust fund.”

“Do you think Balor has a death wish?” Eoghan reminds me we’re loyal to each other, first and foremost.

I hate the idea that all her money is sitting there. She’s right. It’s rightfully hers. “Can you ask Balor to sneak in and empty that account so—”

“That’s taking a huge risk. Do you need money?”

“No. It’s what she wants. I don’t want her to feel trapped.” I want her to *want* to stay with me. “Cormac already did so much damage.”

“I get it. Let me talk to Balor and see what we can do.”

My head is ready to explode with all this new info crammed in there, shit that will make Ana flip out.

I have to get back in her good graces and wipe the idea from her mind that I offered to kill my own twin so she doesn't take off.

CHAPTER 11

Ana

IN THE KITCHEN, Sophie eats her nuggets under my lingering gaze while I discreetly open up cabinets and drawers until I find...*ha*...stamps.

Sneaking a look over my shoulder, I see Sophie watching the kitchen television mounted on the far wall. She swings her legs happily, not suspecting anything is amiss, so I keep searching until I find...

A notepad and envelopes.

I shove everything into my bra.

Darragh appears in the kitchen moments later, his eyes tearing into my soul. I'm so confused, and I'm tired of feeling alone. Like I have no one.

I have my sister, and I want to reach out to her. Clearing my throat, I say, "I'd like to lie down if I can."

"Of course. I'm going to grill those steaks. Red meat has iron which is good for the baby," he says, pulling two rib eyes out of the refrigerator and begins seasoning them.

"Great. Just...call me."

He stops the pepper grinder and glances over his shoulder. "You okay?"

No. Shrugging, I say, "Sure. Just tired."

Nodding, he goes back to the seasoning. "Get some rest."

I swing by Sophie and stroke her head. “Did you enjoy going to the baby doctor with us today, sweetie?”

She looks up at me with the same green eyes as her father. “Uh huh!”

With golden hair and a strong jawline like Darragh, it’s like her mother was wiped from this little girl’s existence before she left.

What will my baby look like? Catching my reflection, I have the same blonde hair, but blue eyes. I hope when I look at the baby, I’ll see myself and not Cormac.

But I take heart in knowing that if I do, I’ll see Darragh. *And Sophie.*

Darragh’s comment about killing his twin for me rocked my nerves, though I don’t think he was serious. He’s wired, and so am I.

Could Darragh just feel that strongly for me? After two days?

It’s not really two days, though. We met years ago, briefly. Him on one side, with his Irish family, and me, with my Russian brood on the other.

Katya had struck up a friendship with Isabella Parisi, the Mafia don’s daughter, who is now Darragh’s sister-in-law. I avoided friends. I spent more time figuring out how to sneak off. Or losing my guards for fun. I was eighteen!

Now, at twenty-three and pregnant, I feel stuck.

Shaking all that away, I amble through the main floor and climb the stairs. In my room, I lock the door, and then go into the bathroom for extra security. With a pen I swiped from a desk in my room, I scribble out a note to my sister back home in Astoria.

Getting it all out, I give her the facts. Where I am. Who I’m with. Darragh. Not Cormac. But I summarize the last two plus years with gritty and honest testimony. I don’t want her to worry about me, but I can’t lie. We grew up in a brutal world,

and she deserves the truth. I urge her not to fret and tell her that I love her.

After signing my name, *Anastasia*, I fold the note sheet and stick it in the envelope. I fish out the address I wrote down before Cormac took my phone, so thankful I went back to that motel. Otherwise, I would have lost Katya's school address forever.

I attach the stamp to the envelope and glance out the window. A mailbox sits at the end of the street. I see the rain has temporarily stopped. With the letter now shoved into my pocket, signed, sealed with hopes of delivery, I head back downstairs.

Sophie sits on Darragh's lap in a kitchen chair, playing a game on her iPad. The sight crushes me. How can a man who said he'd murder his own brother turn off that kind of evil to be so damn gentle and warm with his daughter?

He lights up around her. The only time a smile remotely forms on his beautiful face is with Sophie. Then again, he smiled when kissing me, too.

Growing up, Papa never turned off his hate. But despite speaking harshly all the time, I knew he loved me. He would never hurt me directly, like strike me, but he was never warm. The O'Rourkes had seven or eight kids. I'd lost track. They looked like a happy family. That the oldest five brothers now run the O'Rourke empire suggests how close they were growing up.

I clear my throat, forcing Darragh to notice me.

"Hungry?" he asks.

Sophie cradled on his lap is a sight that makes my blood whoosh faster in my veins. Hungry, yes. For him.

"I am," I say, embarrassed by my uncontrolled attraction to him. "Can I get some fresh air first? Take a walk? It's not raining."

Darragh eyes me suspiciously, giving my cardigan, yoga pants and sneakers a once-over. "A walk. For fresh air."

“Uh huh.”

“Can I go for a walk with you?” Sophie asks.

My heart seizes, but this is an opportunity to prove I’m not running off. “Of course, sweetie.” I hold out my hand to her. I’m sure I can distract her while I shove a letter in the mailbox.

Darragh looks at the clock on the stove and stands up, gently putting Sophie on her feet.

She scoots past me. “I’ll get my coat.”

“A walk.”

“Darragh, I was cooped up in that motel room. Please...”

He lowers his eyes. “Why now? We were in the mall. The hospital.”

“That wasn’t outside. I like fresh air.”

“Sit on the porch.”

“Everything is wet.” I fold my arms. “Where am I going to go with nothing? No money. No phone. And *with* your daughter?”

That sets off alarms, though, as he grabs my arm. The roughness sends mixed signals of lust through me.

“I’m ready!” Sophie sticks her head into the kitchen.

“Please, it’s just a walk,” I whisper. “To get my blood moving.”

“I offered to get your blood moving.”

Now it’s a tsunami under my skin. “And I said I was considering it.”

He stares at me. “If you don’t come back... If I find my daughter wandering—”

“You. Won’t.” I pull away and turn around. Snagging Sophie’s hand, I say, “Why don’t you show me your bus stop?”

“Okay!”

We leave, and I don't look back. Outside, the lampposts on the street keep the darkness away. Sunrise and sunset times are similar to those of New York. But in November, daylight is limited. Here in Seattle, the sun is on a permanent holiday.

I glance down the street where I saw the mailbox.

"My bus stop is this way." Sophie tugs me.

Shit. "Okay. I thought I saw something on that street. Can we walk that way first, please?"

"Sure." She skips along.

I think of my mother, who never took us for walks. We had nannies who watched us play in the garden. I recall how Yulia, my father's housekeeper, took care of Katya, who was only twelve when she came to live with us. I watched from the shadows, jealous of the attention. But Yulia's tenderness stuck with me. That's the mother I want to be.

I finally feel more connected to the baby, excited to get those kicks and the squirming. Before, those movements filled me with dread, the impending birth terrifying me. I'm not scared anymore. I can do this. I *want* to do this.

One thing is also certain, I can't go home to Astoria even if I wanted to. Papa would punish me and take my baby for sure. Then plan his slaughter of the O'Rourkes.

With the mailbox in sight, I sneak the envelope out of my pocket, curling it into my fist.

Sophie walks along, oblivious, telling me who lives where, pointing to other houses just like hers. They vary in color and rooflines. But they're all sweeping Victorian masterpieces.

We get to the mailbox, and I assume the coast is clear. Even if Darragh catches me mail the letter, he can't do anything about it. Tampering with the mail is a federal offense. Unless he has connections at the post office.

"Sophie, who lives in that house?" I point.

She chatters on with names I won't remember, but I hear something about a new puppy.

“What’s the dog’s name?”

“Violet.”

“Oh, rather fancy for a dog.”

“I know.” She looks up at me with a trusting smile that melts me.

When she’s looking away again, I try to jam the letter into the open slot, but it falls to the ground.

A polished shoe steps on it, and a brawny hand picks it up.

“What is this?” Darragh stares at the letter, his face tensing up. “Where did you—”

He’s cut off by a whoosh of rain hammering down on us.

“Ack! Daddy, I’m getting wet!” Sophie yells, keeping a hand over her cute head.

“I see that.” Darragh lifts a massive umbrella. He tries to pull me under, too, but I shoulder him off. “Let’s get to the house.”

Inside, I expect Darragh to be shaking with rage over Sophie getting caught in the rain so I can break the rules and reach out to my sister.

He’s oddly...calm, but he’s talking to Sophie. “Go take a shower, since you have to change anyway for bed. Ana and I are going to eat dinner.”

“Okay, Daddy.” She stomps up the stairs, shaking her wet hair.

“I’m sorry,” I say immediately.

“It’s just water. It’s just rain.” He looks me over.

“I meant the letter.” I close my eyes, expecting to hear shouting as Cormac’s angry voice rings in my ears. “Please don’t hurt me.”

Darragh doesn’t move. Doesn’t say a thing. I don’t even hear breathing.

I peek from under my lashes, and see sympathy.

“I told you, I would never hurt you,” he says.

“Even if I don’t do what you want?”

“Then I have to work harder to make you want to do what I want you to do.” He pinches the tips of my wet hair. “Come on, let’s eat.”

While the steaks smell heavenly all grilled up, I say, “I’m not hungry. Please, can I just go to my room?”

“You need to eat.”

Swallowing, I say, “Leave it on a plate. I’ll come down—”

“You don’t want to eat with me?”

“I don’t know what I want.”

“Why did you write to your sister?” He takes the letter out of his pocket.

“I wanted her to know I was okay. If I could have called her from Vegas, I would have.”

“Don’t you understand the burden you keep piling up on your poor sister? First the fake kidnapping. And now what’s happened to you? Do you think that’s fair to her? You’re not thinking straight. I am. I can’t let you send this.” After pulling the stamp off, he hands it to me. “Please eat.”

“You don’t want to read it?”

“I don’t have to.”

Breathing in, I can smell the steak. “Can I help with dinner?”

“Nope. All plated. Just waiting for you.”



After a nerve-wracking dinner with Darragh, who cooked two perfectly delicious steaks, ignoring the massive tension between us, I went to my bedroom and locked my door.

I shake off the anxiety from the confrontation with him, wandering around the beautiful and comfortable guestroom,

getting my breathing under control.

I put the television on to have white noise in the background when a knock on my door stills me.

My choices right now are limited. I have a roof over my head that's not made of cement blocks. I'm wearing nice, well-fitting clothes, and not a disgusting prison jumpsuit.

Taking a deep breath, I open the door. This is Darragh's house. He can smash it down. He has that right. "Were you getting ready for bed?"

"Yes and no."

"Can I come in?"

I step aside. "It is your house."

"Sophie is asleep, by the way."

Feeling guilty, I say, "I'm sorry I didn't say goodnight to her."

"She was in a chicken nugget coma."

I laugh.

"Glad you find that funny. I called Eoghan."

Fear rakes down my spine. "The lawyer, and not your psycho enforcer brother to come kill me?"

"That psycho is *your* brother-in-law now." He lowers a bushy eyebrow at me.

"What are you talking about?"

"Lachlan and Katya are married."

"*What?*" I feel dizzy. "When?"

"A couple of months ago, apparently." He approaches me. "She's pregnant, too."

Tears fill my eyes, thinking of her with that priest-killing monster. And he got her pregnant? "If your brother hurts her." I shove a pointed finger in Darragh's face.

He grabs my finger, using it to pull me close to him, so our lips are touching. "I have it on good authority they're happy."

I had to accept the world would keep spinning when I left, but this? “I want to speak to her.”

“Not yet. The same reason I told you before applies.”

“You’re no better than Cormac.” I break away and pace in front of the row windows. “I went from being his prisoner to yours.”

“I just told you this to make you understand what’s at stake. If your father tries to slaughter my family for what Cormac did, *your sister* is an O’Rourke now.”

“Papa wouldn’t hurt her.”

“He tried to marry her off to a man who beat her up.” Darragh’s cold voice strikes a nerve, weakening my knees. “My *psycho* brother saved her. He *loves* her. He’s keeping her safe. Let me do the same with you.”

“Someone beat up Katya?” I can’t hold back tears anymore, and I crumple onto my bed.

Darragh crouches next to the mattress. “Just once, from what I was told, the night before the wedding. Lachlan saw her bruises and stopped it.” Darragh reaches out to run a calming hand over me. “Then he married her. We’re furious with Cormac for what he did to you, and Eoghan is dealing with that. Kieran wouldn’t put up with Lachlan not treating your sister with anything other than respect.”

I sniff, taking in his words. “So, we’re...related. You and me?”

“I guess we are.” He cracks a smile.

“Wait... My father let your brother stop a wedding he arranged and—?”

“Your father is more unhinged than ever. And wants you back more than ever that he’s making these pathetic deals. The groom, *the dead groom*, was helping him find you.”

I glance down, cradling my stomach. “God, I feel awful.”

“I just wanted you to know your sister is okay.”

“Thank you.” I lean forward and hug him.

“I’m glad the ultrasound looked good today,” he whispers in my ear, his warm breath sparking my arousal again.

God, his voice is so hot.

Sniffing, I mumble, “Me too, really.”

“I told Eoghan to ask Balor to look into hacking your trust fund. It is *your* money. But not to take and run away with. Not with the baby.” He caresses my stomach. The touch, the warmth of his hands, and the firmness of his thick fingers set me on fire. “*Our* baby.”

“Then what?” I squeak, seeing that future a little clearer right now.

“We’ll figure it out.” He kisses my forehead softly. “I have something else to tell you. Tomorrow night, I signed us up for a prenatal class.”

“Us?”

“You and me. We’re having a baby.” He stands with his arms folded. “Have I not made that clear?”

CHAPTER 12

Ana

THE FOLLOWING EVENING, Darragh drops Sophie off at her Girl Scout Brownie meeting, and off we go to a prenatal birthing class.

When he signs us in, he proudly declares himself my *partner*.

“Let me hang this up for you.” He takes my coat, the stylish trench he bought me at the mall.

I study the other mothers through my lashes, feeling out of place, like they know my situation. That I’m carrying my partner’s *brother’s* baby.

Other couples flutter into the studio and sit in a circle. By the waves and air kisses, I can tell the women are friends. Either from these classes, or they all decided to get knocked up together.

The only available space is right next to the instructor, since the others have been doing this for weeks. I’m the loser who’s just catching up. It was easy to wallow in self-pity, trapped in a sleazy motel room when I didn’t have any options.

Now, with a clear head and not drowning in fear, I see I had many chances to escape. Only, my choices were severely limited, even if I had managed to get away from Cormac. I curse myself inwardly now for not trying sooner.

But I wouldn’t have Darragh...

“Come on.” He takes my hand, and with that beam of pride, he steers me into the yoga studio.

He lowers to the floor and helps me down, too. I’m seated between his open legs, both of us facing the open circle and other pregnant couples.

Being close to him like this, the warmth of his legs encircling my hips, is confusing. He’s just so comfortable putting his arms around me. Maybe he too just needs to feel something after being alone and lonely for so long.

The instructor welcomes the class and leads a chanting session of breathy *Om Shantis* for a few minutes.

Darragh hums in my right ear. “I. Know. This. Part. Is. Stuuuuuupid.”

I snort, never expecting him to have a sense of humor. But Cormac had an upbeat personality when I met him. Does that mean, if faced with stress, Darragh will spiral the same way?

When his hands close around my stomach, my heart beats faster. I’ve not been touched so lovingly in so long.

And now when I feel a kick, so does Darragh who reacts with smiling lips on the back of my neck. “This is so fucking sexy.”

The instructor tells Darragh how to massage me. Where to squeeze, where to put pressure. By his peppering kisses, she assumes we’re a couple. I’m a puddle in a few minutes, and my hormones fire up to an atomic level.

“Sex is so much better when you’re not stressed,” Darragh whispers, his cologne intoxicating me. “When your mind is open.”

“And my legs,” I joke.

He snorts a laugh, his warm breath fanning my neck.

“What are we doing?” I ask softly. “Are we in a relationship now?”

“I don’t know.” He brushes me with more kisses. “I’m just as confused at what I feel for you.”

“Are you sure you’re not just power hungry?” I know he wants to keep my baby, but does he really want *me*, too?

“I’m hungry for something.”

He’s an O’Rourke, born of the same ruthless killers I walked amongst for years in Astoria. Those men don’t seduce and sweet talk to get what they want. They take it. But Darragh’s a father—and that must have brought about this softer side of him.

When our eyes locked in the courthouse, something scorched between us. The surprise and then a spark. Even the anger with a palpable brusqueness of a man who was raised to believe he can have whatever he wants didn’t bother me.

Now Darragh’s kissing the back of my neck. And my panties are embarrassingly damp. My eyes spring open when I hear the instructor tell the partners to massage...our vaginas.

Walking around, handing out blankets to cover our laps, she says, “Perineal massages can be done alone, Moms. But Dads, you can help. You should have read somewhere by now that orgasms at this stage of pregnancy are very helpful. Loosens the muscles in the birth canal. Dads, I suggest you give Moms one at least once a day.” She gets back to her mat at the top of the circle. “We’re adults here, folks. For those of you with full-time jobs and other kids at home, feel free to take this time for yourselves. You’ll be very busy with the baby soon. Dads, remind your partner she’s still a woman.”

“I’d love to remind every inch of you,” Darragh whispers as his hands lower from my stomach to my thigh under the blanket. “Tell me to stop.” When his fingers land right on my center, I let out a soft moan.

“Oh, we have a vocal one,” someone says.

I pop my eyes open and see smiles in my direction.

“How does that feel?” Darragh whispers.

“God, so good.” I haven’t come in months.

“Can I?” He pulls at my waistband. “Are you wet?”

My hips curl with anticipation to feel him touch me.
“Maybe.”

“Fuck, you’re soaked. Poor baby. I know what you need.”

“Please.”

Darragh rubs my clit, and the back of my head melts into his shoulder. “I want to make you feel so good.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I can’t explain this.”

“I know what you mean.” I turn my head, and he lowers his lips to kiss me. It’s soft and sweet.

Biting my lip, I say, “You can do better than that.”

“You have no idea.”



Two hours later, we’re making out in his car, Darragh’s thick cock straining his pants. The rest of the class was brutal, waiting for this moment, even though he gave me three orgasms.

“Sophie…” I mutter. “Her meeting.”

“We have twenty minutes.” He kisses me and pulls me onto his lap after shoving his driver’s seat all the way back. How I fit is a miracle. “I have to fuck you.”

“These tight yoga pants say otherwise.” I grind against him like a lap dance.

“God, yeah.” He unbuckles his pants and takes out his dick. “Just touch me. Please.”

I reach in between my legs and groan, feeling how big and hard he is. “Wow.”

“Christ, yes. Stroke me, baby.”

His head tips back, and I watch his throat pulse. With his dick in one of my hands, I squeeze the column with my other hand. “How can you be so damn handsome?”

With their golden hair, sharp jaws, clean cut, and cocky attitudes, I found Darragh and Cormac to be the most handsome of the O'Rourkes.

“Me?” He pulls his eyes forward and kisses me. “You... You're truly the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I thought it the first time I saw you.”

“Like prison jumpsuits, do you?”

“No. I saw you at a fundraiser years ago. But you were... God, seventeen maybe?” He takes a breath and groans, “God, that's so good. Fuck, I'm close. Christ, I wish I could feel your mouth around me.”

There's no possible way I can scoot down. “I can do that later if you want.”

“Aw, fuck.” His eyes flash open, and he throbs in my hand. I suck on his tongue when he shoves it into my mouth to deepen the kiss.

Warm, stickiness spills on my hand. “That's so hot, Darragh.”

“Yeah, don't confuse me with my brother.” He holds my face. “I'll take care of you. Treat you right. Like you deserve.”

This all happened so quickly, him finding me pregnant and going all alpha to claim what he believes is his family's heir. But I come with that deal, something he didn't like at first.

The mess in my hand means something changed his mind...



We get home and Sophie arrives moments later, shaking storm droplets off her little polka dot raincoat. Darragh brushes out her tangles after a shower, all with his intense eyes on me.

Sophie hugs me goodnight and with her near me, my baby kicks. “I felt that!” she cries out.

“The baby knows it's you.” I smooth her tender cheek.

He was doing somersaults while Darragh was kissing me, too, like he's telling they are his family.

Darragh stalks toward us. "Come on, Soph. Time for bed. It's late."

She skips toward the stairs, but it's Darragh I watch, looking at his daughter. I finally get it. How kids become your world. I had all his attention twenty minutes ago, and now it's like I'm not here. But it's okay, I adore seeing him so in love with his daughter.

I make sure the kitchen is neat and then head to my bedroom. A few minutes later, there's a knock on my door.

"Hi." Darragh stands there with a huge box.

My eyes track across it carefully. "What's that?"

"You'll see. First things, first." He puts it down and kisses me. "Fuck, you taste so sweet. I can't believe I thought I could keep my hands off you."

He deepens the kiss, my greedy mouth demanding more. His tongue strokes mine and my nerves light up with anticipation. I wrap my wrists around his neck, fingering the soft strands of his hair. Moving his mouth down my throat, he sucks on my jugular. He bites and nips at me, growling, the real Darragh emerging. No more mister nice guy.

He unzips his pants, and groans, "I'm dying to fuck you."

Swallowing my lust, I step back. "You really want me like this?"

"Especially since you're like this. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. You glow. And you're so damn sexy."

"How... How can we?"

"Undress for me." He cups his dick over his briefs. His pants are open and lazily hanging off his hips. "Slowly. Let me watch you."

For all the similarities, he and Cormac are vastly different. Cormac was wild, ripping my clothes off, shoving himself inside me. Usually without a condom, which is why I'm

pregnant. He was reckless, and I went along with it like an idiot.

Darragh is slow and measured and has me aching for him to the point of unbearable pain.

I slip the cardigan off my shoulders and let it drop. I never had big boobs, but I'm enormous now. They barely fit into this tank top. With my fingers inside the waistband of the yoga pants, I slide them down, thankful I let the saleslady talk me into a few thongs.

I turn around and love the gasp that escapes Darragh. From behind, I don't look pregnant. All he sees is my ass and my back. I lift my hair up, finally enjoying the long waves again now that I've been able to wash it with actual shampoo and not a bar of skeevy motel soap.

I catch my reflection in the stand-up mirror, and a shadow approaches me.

"I said undress for me." Darragh's hands come around and cup my breasts. "Guess I have to help you." He lowers the thin straps one at a time and rolls them down, exposing my nipples. Leaving the fabric hugging my stomach, Darragh's fingers slip into my panties. "Fuck, you're still so wet," he groans.

"Look at what you're doing to me." I gasp for a breath.

"I have to fuck you." He shucks his pants off and kicks them away. The bulge in his briefs steals my breath.

I pull off the tank top and feel sexy as hell, even with my baby-thickened body.

Darragh rolls down his briefs, and all his cut muscles work to show me what's between his legs. It's a stunning sight, how sculpted and perfect he is. His dick hangs heavily between his legs and stiffens in his hand.

"Get on the bed. On your knees. Hands on the headboard." He kisses my back. "Hold the fuck on."

My heart pounding, I do what he says and shudder, feeling him behind me.

Darragh pulls my thong to the side, and teases me with his dick, the thick head breaching me slowly. “Fuck.”

“I need you inside me.”

He enters me in one fast thrust. “Jesus Christ,” he groans, and I remember he’s not had sex in three years.

I feel like *this* is my first time. I’m broken open again and stretched to the hilt. His amazing dick fills me and pacifies me to take the edge off.

He thrusts and thrusts. His hands squeeze my ass. His fingers dig into my skin as he pounds into me. It’s fantastic, and my hormones shoot out of control. I lower my head to the pillow, gripping the top blanket with my fingertips.

I’m dripping down my thigh, I’m so wet.

“Are you close, Ana? I don’t know how long I can hold on.”

“I’m close.” I peek behind me.

Darragh’s disheveled hair dangles in front of his green eyes as a sheen of sweat glistens across his naked body.

Orgasms are mental, and when I realize I’m banging my baby daddy’s twin brother, that forbidden, taboo element has my womb clenching.

“Yeah, baby. Come on my cock.” Darragh pumps and grinds, moans and groans, faster and deeper, claiming me, owning me.

I feel like we’re one.

“Fuck,” he grinds out as his hot cum fills me. “That was... God, amazing. The best.”

“It was.” With a hand on my belly, I ease myself to the mattress. My tight, round stomach brushes against him, a not-so-subtle reminder that he just banged a pregnant woman.

Darragh’s smile widens, resting on his knees. His dick hangs between his thighs, wet and pulsing. He leans forward and kisses me.

Stroking my face, he whispers with a heady groan, “I didn’t think this could happen to me. I was waiting. I was waiting for you. To open me up and force me to feel something.”

“I know what you mean.” I sit back against the headboard, my legs splayed open.

“Hang on.” He hops off the bed and comes back from the bathroom with a warm washcloth. “Don’t move.”

I lose it when he strokes my aching center with a touch of heaven. “That feels so good.”

“I’ll always take care of you. Treat you like a princess. You may not want to wear the crown, but you’ll be the queen in this house if you stay with us. Me and Sophie.”

“Sure, drag the kid into it.”

“I didn’t say I’d play fair.” He finishes cleaning me and we kiss again for a few moments, the magical feeling overwhelming me.

I’ve come alive since Darragh found me. I wanted freedom and fell into Cormac’s trap, but Darragh is the man I thought Cormac would be. He’s offering me that freedom because he figured out how to escape his family.

My baby was the game changer. I didn’t expect to get pregnant. I must think of my unborn son. God, will he look like Darragh? I glimpse him kissing my thigh, his nose burrowed against my skin like he adores me.

Maybe... Maybe I’ll have the chance to create a new Bratva, born of Irish blood as well.

Darragh hops off the bed and opens one of my bureau drawers. He takes out the black satin nighty with red stitching he bought me. “I’ve wanted to see you in this one.”

I lift my arms, allowing him to dress me in the nightgown, enjoying this bit of pampering he’s giving me. Soaking in his smile, I notice the box again. “What *is* that?”

“Oh...” He picks it up, still naked, as if it’s perfectly normal to walk around looking like a God.

“I said fuck it and ordered this week’s groceries online. They were delivered before I came up here. This, too.” He tears into the box and pulls out something that looks like a big pillow.

“Is that?” My heart races with excitement.

“Yeah, a pregnancy sleep pillow.” He hands it to me. “Try it out.”

I lay back and tuck the pillow against me. *One, two, three*, I just let my body tip into it.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I moan, my eyes rolling in the back of my head. “That’s... That’s what I’ve been missing.”

Darragh leans across me. “Just that?”

“I didn’t miss whatever this is.” I motion between us. “I never had it with anyone.”

“What’s ‘it’?”

“Trust. Comfort. Understanding.”

“I didn’t think it was possible, but I feel the same way.” He smiles. “Speaking of *trust*, will you nanny Sophie for me until...”

It’s impossible to see so far out ahead, including not having this baby inside me and out in the world screaming for my attention. “I want to help, but I don’t know how to be a mother yet. How will I be able to balance everything, especially when the baby comes?”

“I know it feels impossible, and at first, you don’t have to. You’re not expected to.”

“Will you hire another nanny?”

“With you here, I was thinking I might not need to. Sophie just needs to be put on the bus, and taken off, given a snack, sat down to do homework, and then I get home.” He runs a hand through his hair. “It’s also second grade, not law school.”

He spends the next few minutes telling me about his schedule and the rundown for Sophie, ending with the caveat:

It's all written on a legal pad in the kitchen. "Are you sure you want me to take care of Sophie?"

"You've proven yourself responsible. I trust you." Darragh brushes my cheek. "When the baby is born, I'll figure something out as far as getting someone to help you. I have time off coming to me. I'll be here to get Sophie to and from school. If anything, when she's home, she can help you."

That makes me smile.

"Darragh, I'm scared," I finally voice and feel tears leaking from my eyes. "I don't know if I can do this. All of this."

Kissing me, he whispers, "You can do it. You're tough Russian stock!"

I laugh through my tears.

"We're gonna do this together." He kisses me. "You won't be alone. I'm here. Let's take everything one day at a time. I'll call the school on my way to work tomorrow and tell them you'll be at her bus stop." He exhales. "I need to use Ana Michaels, don't I?"

"I would if I were you." We already registered me at the hospital with that name and that I'm uninsured. When the more-than-eager administrator offered to find state-run insurance for me, Darragh spoke up and said he'd pay all the bills out of pocket. "What about Sophie?"

"As far as?"

"Us?"

Acknowledging we may be really falling for each other rearranges the air around us.

"I have to end my marriage." Darragh rolls onto his back. "Sophie needs to deal with *that* first."

"Will Ginnifer come home?"

"I doubt it," he scoffs.

"And she has no interest in seeing Sophie?" I fight the anger in my voice.

“Sophie doesn’t remember us together like that.” The pain in Darragh’s face guts me.

I’ve felt so alone in this pregnancy. Cormac dumped his seed inside me and saw me as a burden. Darragh looks at me as precious, as his.

And the baby is related to Sophie. I don’t want to leave. I feel like I belong here.

Darragh runs his hands along my stomach, possession in his eyes. “I find this so fucking sexy.”

“Mmmm. I’ve felt so big and in the way.”

Kissing my cheek, he says, “Not in the way. Never. Now turn around. I’ll remind you how I feel about you.”

He pulls my ass against his groin, but lifts my leg. He slides into me, deep and for a second, I don’t feel like the baby is between us. Like it’s just us.

But I just turned into his nanny, and I’m already sleeping with the boss.

CHAPTER 13

Ana

I WAKE up to lips on my skin, and then a gasp.

“Shit, I fell asleep.” Darragh’s panicked voice has my heart racing.

In the gray mist of the early morning, he jets around my bedroom stark naked...until he’s not.

He roughly kisses me again, and then he’s gone, the door clicking shut like a gong. I glance at the clock—5:15 a.m. I’m torn between wanting to sleep more and excited to start what is essentially my new life.

We made love in the shower last night, where we both got a little vocal. He made me come again in my bed, where he swallowed my muffled cries. After that, we both fell into a blissful sleep from sheer exhaustion.

Sophie’s schedule runs through my mind. The nanny used to arrive at seven and made her lunch. Darragh had groceries delivered last night. But I don’t know what to make her for lunch, especially since she has a serious allergy.

I push away from the bed and put clothes on, a light pair of linen pants and an oversized cotton tee with rolled sleeves. Barefoot in the hallway, I hear Darragh in his shower. I’m dying to go in there, but I can’t risk Sophie walking in on us.

I peek inside her room, and she’s sound asleep. Snoozing away in a soft darkness punctuated by a tiny lamp with a star-shaped cutout shade that projects a sea of constellations on one wall.

How will I know to buy something like that? It occurs to me I have nothing for this baby. I only have three weeks to figure it out.

One thing at a time...

I amble down the stairs and get the kettle on the stove, assuming Darragh wants tea. While the water is heating, I check out the groceries. My mouth waters at all the food. Fresh fruit, yogurts, milk, eggs, lunch meats, and cheeses. In the freezer, I find some delicious-looking frozen pizzas and packages of thick cut steaks.

The teapot whistles. I quickly move the kettle to silence it and switch the burner off. Darragh strides into the kitchen, and I go weak in the knees at how he looks dressed in a deep blue suit and crisp white dress shirt. He looks sharp, confident, and sexy as hell. He's the same man who picked me up last Friday, but my brain was a wreck, and I couldn't process how truly handsome he is.

Until he fed, clothed, and cared for me.

"Tea? I figured out the strainer ball."

"Love some."

"Victorian English Breakfast?" I grab that jar from the shelf.

"Perfect." He goes into the refrigerator and pulls out fruit and yogurt. In moments, he has the blender cranking.

"If you tell me what's in that smoothie, I'll make one for you every morning."

"You've got enough to worry about." He struts to that desk in the corner and takes out the yellow legal pad. "Here's the list I made up for Olivia in the beginning of the school year."

"Great." Reading the notes, I get to work making Sophie's lunch. "I assume everything in this house is nut free."

"Yes." He pins me with a look that sends ice down my spine. "Please do *not* bring food into this house."

I toss the knife aside. “From where? I’m still basically a prisoner. I don’t have a phone. Or a car. Or any money.” My tone turns harsh, but I wave it off. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re doing great. Let’s get through these next few weeks until the baby is born.” He kisses me on the forehead.

“What are you doing?” Sophie’s voice springs into the kitchen.

Jumping away and ignoring the question, Darragh sputters, “What are you doing up, honey?”

“I couldn’t sleep.” She shrugs, still in her pajamas. “Can I watch my video?”

Darragh exhales, battling good parenting with keeping everything in the house calm and peaceful. “Okay. Honey, come here.” Darragh sits on one of the kitchen chairs and pulls Sophie toward him. “Ana is going to take care of you for a while. She’s going to put you on the bus and take you off. If she’s not there—”

“I’ll be there.” I glance at the yellow pad and see he listed the bus schedule times at the top. It would be nice if an infant came with a set of meticulous instructions like this.

“Of course you will.”

“Sophie, what do you want for breakfast?” I ask.

“Can I have pancakes again?”

“That’s not an everyday breakfast,” Darragh squashes that. “Sophie, go in the pantry and pick out your cereal.”

“Not yet, I’m not hungry.” She yawns and disappears into the den that is mostly a playroom for her.

“Does she dress herself?”

“Yes,” Darragh says, and then frowns. “Olivia helps pick out her clothes, I think. Just to be sure, hover over her today.”

“Will do.” I finish my tea. “And dinner?”

“I’ll take care of dinner.”

“You’re working all day.”

“So are you.”

“Not really. And besides, I like cooking. I told you that.”

“Fine. You cook dinner.”

“Fine.” I move close to him. “She saw you kiss me.”

“Then obviously forgot about it.” He checks his phone. “Our whole routine is off. That’s probably why she woke up early. If she stays on schedule today, she’ll get back on track and wake up normal time tomorrow.”

“Okay.” I try not to panic again because he’s leaving. Leaving me alone with Sophie. He’s trusting me with her. I can’t let him down.

After kissing Sophie goodbye, Darragh passes me, sneaking a kiss. He smirks at me over his shoulder, leaving through the garage door.

Sophie is in her own world, lying down on the sofa, an arm dangling while she sings to the movie.

I make another cup of tea and creep into the den. “Can I watch the video with you?”

“Sure.” She snaps up and makes room for me to sit next to her, then puts her feet into my lap.

This is going to be my life when the baby is born and... I like it.



The week goes by smoothly, and Darragh brings me to his attic where he keeps all of Sophie’s baby stuff. Only, it’s mostly pink and yellow. I tried to argue it didn’t matter, but he’s a man, and when he said *it mattered*, I let it go.

Sophie’s crib is dark mahogany, and I insisted he didn’t need to buy another one.

On Friday night, he takes me shopping for the baby. “Most women have a baby shower,” he says, sounding upset for me.

“Who would throw me one? I don’t have any friends.” I’m more upset that I’ll miss Katya’s baby shower, that I can’t be there for her.

We decide the fourth bedroom, another guestroom, will get cleaned out this weekend for the nursery. A new white bassinet and changing station that he’s buying will go in my room.

I used to love shopping, but now it’s overwhelming and exhausting.

“Does a baby really need all of this?” I follow him down an aisle where he grabs nearly one of everything. “Darragh, stop.” I seize the edge of a crib on display and double over.

“Ana!” Sophie rushes to my side.

“I’m okay, Sophie.” I take a deep breath, blow it out, and smile at her. “Just got a little scared. I’m sure your mom was, too.”

Mentioning her mother makes Sophie freeze and Darragh go rigid.

“Right, she was.” He plays it off and braces me to help me stand up straight.

“You were kept in a dirty motel room,” he whispers to me. “That’s not normal. You should have been seeing a doctor. Taking prenatal classes sooner, and meeting other moms. You were denied all of that.”

Yet, Sophie’s mom wasn’t, and she left.

“Come on.” He shows me everything in the cart and explains what they’re for.

After a while, it all makes sense.

“Much of this is for the first month or two, and then you don’t need it. Babies are incredibly easy so long as...” He lifts his eyes to me. “The baby is healthy.”

“The ultrasound said so.”

“Right.”

“Why would the baby not be healthy?” Sophie asks, holding a stuffed bear she claimed the minute we got to the store.

Because I did drugs for a few months and your uncle smoked pot in the room until the day we got arrested. I don't say that, obviously.

“The baby will be healthy.” Darragh continues down the aisle, and I detect him smiling. He likes this, likes going through all this again.

We pick out blue-themed bedding, infant onesies, and a wardrobe of tiny outfits with cars, trucks, and bears on them.

Walking to the register, he spots an infant Seahawks jersey and snags it. Because, of course, a boy baby needs one.

Everything is rung up, and I close my eyes at the total cost. But Darragh is completely comfortable paying for it all. I tell myself he brought me here. He chose for me to be here. Plus, like my father, he has plenty of money.

Sophie yawns loudly in the back of the car on the ride home, and as soon as we get there, Darragh brings her up to bed.

I'm rinsing out cups at the sink when hands close around my waist, not my stomach. Darragh has an amazing way to make me feel like a woman and not a pregnant whale.

“Now. I need to taste your pussy right now,” he rasps in my ear, heady, needy.

“In the kitchen?” I turn in his arms.

Darragh is so big. He's got that wide, hulking, O'Rourke build. He kisses me, and I forget everything.

“You taste so good. This mouth. I think about this mouth all damn day. But you have another set of lips I want to taste.” He drops to his knees and lifts my skirt. “No panties after eight p.m. That's a new rule, baby.”

He drags my panties off, a plain cotton pair this time, but it matters none. They're gone, shoved into his pocket. “Spread your legs for me.”

We're on the other side of the island, Darragh completely out of sight if Sophie were to wander in. She'd just see me leaning with my head thrown back, groaning.

Worse comes to worse, I can fake a contraction, if needed.

But when Darragh pushes my legs apart and runs a gorgeous hand up my thigh, I can hardly think about anything but what he's doing.

"Show me," he says in a husky voice. "Show me what's mine."

I lift one leg, exposing myself, and he immediately buries his face between my thighs. He inhales me deeply and flicks a tongue with one sensual and flirty stroke. Next, Darragh's beautiful mouth is on my clit, his velvety tongue lapping at me with intense pressure. The feeling is incredible, the kind of incredible I've been hungering for.

"Wider, baby," he says, pushing a finger inside me.

I softly moan as he finger-fucks me while sucking on my clit. This. I need *this*. I hold his head against my pussy to feel more, harder, intense. Wicked heat builds in my chest, and the hormones ignite a fire that shoots from my lungs like a dragon in heat.

"Right there," I whisper, rocking against his mouth.

"Here?" He licks me with his tongue, and I catch our reflection in the row of windows. It's so hot, Dr. Darragh O'Rourke on his knees, pleasuring the Russian princess he's supposed to hate.

I explode in his mouth, blood roaring through my ears. Stars pop out behind my eyelids, and white glittering spots flutter all around me.

Darragh moans into my heat, my quivering womb. He gets to his feet and kisses me with wet lips. "You taste so fucking good."

I greedily kiss him back. He's mine.

"Now get into my bed so I can fuck you all night."

CHAPTER 14

Darragh

THE NEXT WEEK PASSES, and Ana shines in her nanny role for Sophie, who seems happier than I've noticed in a very long time. By the following Friday, I feel like we've been a family forever.

It's only been two weeks since I found that poor mess of a woman in a Vegas courthouse. I bring home a pizza for dinner and don't bother mentioning it. It feels like a lifetime ago.

After I've cleaned up from dinner, and Ana's put Sophie to bed, I find her in her bedroom watching the Sound's gentle waves glisten under the moon.

I come up behind her at the window. "Come sleep in my bed tonight."

"I think that's dangerous. If Sophie wakes up, she's likely to go into your room. Not mine."

"We'll worry about that if it happens. I want my sheets to smell like you. I want to smell like you." I kiss the back of her neck, stirring that needy side she thinks she hides from me.

"You sure it's okay to keep doing this?" She pushes against my growing ache.

"As long as you're not experiencing any pain. Have you been?"

She shakes her head. "On the contrary..."

"Good." I grab her hand and walk her to my bedroom.

I need a new memory in my bed. I crash our mouths together and we kiss against the back of the door until my lips turn numb. All I want to feel and taste is her sweet mouth.

“God. You’re nothing like Cormac.” She devours me, her touch firm and demanding. Feminine moans escape her full lips when I grab her ass.

“That’s the best compliment.” I pull her eyes toward me. “Now tell me you want my cock.”

“God, yes, I want your cock.”

I squeeze her throat, feeling an exciting spike of brutality rise in my blood. I unzip my pants and pull out my heavy cock. “This? You want to get fucked with this?”

She licks her lips in response. “You know I do.”

I tear off my dress shirt, giving her a view of my muscular back as I stand near the bed. “Crawl for it. Crawl for my cock. Suck me off, and I’ll ease your aching cunt.”

Blushing, she lowers to her knees, and I nearly come in my hand.

“Eyes on me, princess.” My voice is harsh with lust. “Keep your eyes on my mine as you crawl for my cock.”

“God, that dirty talk gets me wet.” Even heavily pregnant, she crawls with so much damn grace and sexiness. “And here I thought you were boring Darragh O’Rourke.”

“Ha! I was until you showed up, Miss Troublemaker.” I lower my pants below my ass and stroke my erection. “Keep crawling. I want your lips around my dick. Now.”

She reaches me, but before I let her touch me, I lift off her sweater. “I want to see those tits.”

The waistband of her yoga pants hangs low on her hips, and I’m tempted by her ass crack. It’s sexy as fuck.

I grip the base of my cock and pump gently, having watched her crawl to me, and now licking her lips.

The tip of my cock drips, dying for her. *I’m dying for her.* She kneels, hungry for my cock. Her eyes flash of longing, a

need that will unravel me as she closes her lips around my engorged pillowy tip.

“Fuck,” I hiss, and can’t help moving my hips. I throw my head back, struggling for control. Her going down on me is like nothing I’ve ever known. I thread my hands through her soft, silky hair.

She stops to take a breath, her eyes right on me. “You taste so good, Darragh,” her saying my name stiffens me to the point of pain, until she swallows me.

“God, I’m so proud of you. You’ve been through so much. Look at you. No one broke you. You can crawl for my cock and let me pacify you with it because you want it.” I grip her hair to bring her eyes up. “You’re the one with power right now. Claim me. Own me.”

“Fuck, yes, I own you.” She licks the underside.

She takes me deeper, inch by inch, along her wet tongue, until I hit the back of her throat. Her mouth around my erection shoots waves of wicked pleasure firing through my veins.

I’ve been fucking her all week without a condom, sinking into her wet heat with my bare cock, but this... This is too much. I’m not going to last long.

My breathing gets ragged, and my balls ache to come. The power-hungry man I hide slips through and enjoys the Russian princess I stole from my brother. Even though she’s pregnant with his baby, she’s on her knees, sucking *my* cock. Groaning. Loving it. Dying for me to be inside her.

She holds my thighs with firm, warm hands, letting one slide up to squeeze my balls. Fuck, they’re so tight.

Her soft feminine moans do me in, and I’m sent barreling straight over the edge. “I’m coming. Swallow me down. Milk me, baby. Fuck, that’s good.”

I don’t know how, but moments later, I’m hard again, and when I shift her to her hands and knees, I enter her from behind in one brutal thrust. Right on the fucking floor. She’s so wet, my cock sinks into her so deeply. We go at it until she’s

moaning, like she can't take it. Can't take being quiet. I feel her contracting around my cock.

Nothing's ever felt like this.

I pull her into my bed, my heart heavy and my mind on overload. "Give me a chance to prove that we can..." My throat goes tight. "That we can have something real. You and me."

Catching her breath, she says, "How can you raise your brother's baby like it means nothing?"

"Because it's *yours*." I stroke her face and kiss her, loving how she opens for me with passion. "I want you to be my..."

"Your what? Your girlfriend?"

I'm thinking wife, but I need to end my marriage formally before I can marry her. I want her to live here and for us to be a family. Marrying Ginnifer was expected, the right thing. But what I feel for Ana blows away what I had with Ginny. "Sophie needs a mother, too."

Ana smiles against my chest while we just hold each other in my bed, her stomach pressed against mine. It feels so damn good.

"That's sneaky, Darragh. Make me fall in love with your daughter and then I'll feel more guilty taking her brother away."

"I'm not playing a game with you. You're not someone I have to tell crazy lies to about who my family is. While your father finding out what my brother did terrifies me, you understand we can't trust outsiders. That draws me to you. That makes you perfect for me. More can grow later. But we have to stick together on this. You want to keep your baby out of the hands of your father. And I want your father to not kill my brothers. I can keep you safe, if you're here. Under my roof. You think you can just trust some stranger in Grand Cayman?"

Her eyes shift, like she knows I'm right. Her plan to run away to the Caribbean was a terrible idea.

I smirk. “I’ll give you whatever you want. Stay with me... We’ll raise our baby together. With Sophie. Give us a chance.”

“But everything I do here is with a fake name. That means at any time you can—” Horror fills her eyes.

“We have to come clean to your family. Eoghan and Balor are working to get your trust fund. Your father will notice it’s gone, and that will bring him to the table. You’ll have to confess you weren’t kidnapped. But I will protect you from him.”

“What do I say about Cormac?”

I look at the ceiling. “Whatever you’re willing to say, so he’s not hunted the rest of his life.”

She strokes my chest. “I’ll say whatever you want me to say. My brothers died, and it destroyed my mother. She wasn’t the same. Then she killed herself. I won’t do that to your mother.” She kisses me, and it shocks me how she cares about Ma’s feelings, a woman she’s never met.

“I’m going to tell Eoghan to draw up a set of divorce papers.” Slipping off the bed, I put my briefs on, reality crushing me that Ana can’t sleep here. “I should have done it when she didn’t come home. I was lazy. I didn’t want to rock the boat with Sophie. Looking back, I screwed up. She’s older now and understands it. Had I done it...”

“You were holding out for hope. That’s not a bad thing.”

“I don’t think I ever loved Ginny, to be honest. We were messing around. She got pregnant. I did the honorable thing.”

“And now you’re trying to do the same thing with me. Don’t do this to yourself. Don’t do it to Sophie.” Fear creeps back into her eyes.

“This time, it isn’t about doing the honorable thing. It’s about doing the *best* thing I can do, for Sophie and for me.”

CHAPTER 15

Darragh

SOPHIE'S CRIB is easier to put together the second time around. I remember more than I expect.

The room is painted a soft gray. Ana refused to let me paint it blue. Even though she's settled in nicely over the last few weeks, I'm torn between wondering if she doesn't want to be a bother, or if she still plans to sneak out of here in the middle of the night after the baby is born.

If she left, would she try to take the baby?

"It's not even seven a.m." Ana wanders into the guestroom right next to hers, which is now the nursery. She's wearing a sexy off-the-shoulder white eyelet night gown I bought her one day on my way home from work.

To me, when she's riding my cock with her tight wet cunt, her face lost in pleasure, head thrown back, the nightgown off one shoulder, exposing a breast with stiff nipple, she looks so unguarded, and not worrying I'm staring at a round stomach.

We devour each other like maniacs. I've never felt so alive.

I'm shirtless and in running shorts, working up a sweat. "I'd like to get much of this done before Sophie wakes up. I have to explain that you're staying, that we—"

"No!" Ana waves and sinks into the rocking chair I moved in here a few days ago. "You said you needed to get your divorce."

"Eoghan sent the divorce papers to her attorney in Zimbabwe. She signed them, and they are on their way back in

an express envelope.”

“She signed them, no questions asked?” Ana looks pale. This is getting too real.

“She’s seeing someone, too.” I stand up to tighten the bolts on the top rail. “Don’t worry, Ana, I will not *force* you to marry me.” I toss the wrench back into the toolbox and kneel at her feet. “I won’t force anything on you. I won’t be like Cormac.”

Ana holds her chin, and her eyes tear up.

“What is it, my love?”

She stares at me, and I silently acknowledge how I’ve fallen for her. “I feel like I’m... I’m missing everything at home. Don’t you? Three of your brothers are now married and having babies. I’m choking without Katya.”

“She’s safe. I promise.”

I worry she’ll want to go back on her own before my brothers can have a sit down with her father. He’ll want retribution. He’ll want Cormac’s head. My family is ruthless and wears blood on their hands like champs, but they’re disciplined.

Unlike the Bratva.

“I know I said, I won’t force you to marry me. But if you decide you want to go home, just for a visit, I must insist we get married first, so I can bring you there as my wife. And present the baby as ours.”

She turns her head and stares out the window, the gray misty morning keeping the room shadowed as soft rain pelts the windows. “I don’t trust my father.”

“We’ll have to face that, eventually. I want us to be together. To raise this baby together. I don’t want to spend the rest of our lives looking over our shoulders. I don’t trust your father either. I wouldn’t put it past him to hurt Sophie.”

“She’s a child. He wouldn’t hurt a child.”

“You’re sure?” I narrow my eyes.

Her soft whimper punctuates the silence. “I don’t know.”

I’d leave the negotiations to my brothers, Riordan and Kieran, if we were to go back and make our relationship public. “Ana, consider this. Your father is unhinged over your disappearance. You need to give him the peace that you’re safe.”

“I know.” She sniffs and looks at me with red-rimmed eyes.

I go to kiss her, but a little shadow catches my eye.

“What’s this?” Sophie asks from the doorway in her pajamas, hair all messed up, and holding her stuffed pink flamingo.

“Good morning, sleepyhead. Come here.” I’m aware of how much skin I’ve exposed and wanted to change into something else when she woke up. But I won’t act ashamed. It’s no different if I had a bathing suit on. “I have a surprise for you.”

Her eyes light up. “What?”

“Ana and her baby are going to stay with us for a while.” I wait for her to smile, but she...doesn’t.

“Oh.”

Ana begins biting her nails.

“Oh?” I tug on the flamingo. “You’re not excited about having a little baby in the house?”

She shrugs. “Are you going to play with the baby and not me?”

“Oh, Sophie.” I pull her into my arms. “Sweetheart, don’t worry about that. We’re gonna—”

“Sophie...” Ana’s hand stills on her belly. “The baby’s kicking. Want to feel it?”

Sophie’s eyes go large. “Does it hurt?”

“No. It kind of tickles.” Ana reaches for my daughter’s hand and gently places it on her stomach.

“Oh,” Sophie gasps as the baby shifts under her hand. “That’s the baby?”

“Yes. Amazing, isn’t it?” Ana and Sophie lock eyes. “Your dad is still going to be your dad. And no one is going to play with the baby and not you. I’ll be home all day, waiting for you to get back from school. I’m hoping you’ll help me feed him, give him a bath, and show him how to play with toys.”

“I can do that.” She sounds more confident.

Ana’s and my gaze meet over Sophie’s head, and I acknowledge with a nod of thanks that she made sure Sophie isn’t left out. It’s exactly what my daughter needed.

“In fact, you know all those things we bought the other night?” Ana asks, stroking Sophie’s forehead.

“Uh, huh?”

“Once your dad has the crib and changing table put together, will you help me put the clothes and diapers inside?”

“I can decide where everything goes?”

“Of course.”

Her face turns curious again. “But why are you living here? Olivia didn’t.”

We’re all silent. I admit, I don’t have an answer for that. I can’t tell Sophie how I feel about Ana before I explain her mother and I are getting a divorce. I don’t want her to think of me being unfaithful. Even if she doesn’t understand infidelity, she’s smart enough to understand mommies and daddies don’t kiss other people.

I hope she doesn’t put the events of my divorce with Ana living here together. It will make the conversation about Ana and I giving this a shot to be a family, and that the baby will be her brother, more emotionally triggering.

“Your dad is helping me because I don’t have anywhere else to go,” Ana says. Simple. Truth.

“Why?” Sophie’s face scrunches.

“It’s nothing you need to worry about, honey.” I stand and move closer, wanting to interject into this conversation. She’s my daughter. “I didn’t want Ana to be alone. We have this big house. Is that okay?”

I hold my breath, waiting for her to answer. I’m not a parent who lets a child make the decisions. But this is a big deal, a woman living with us, having a baby. A woman who I want to share my bed.

“Yes, Daddy.”

CHAPTER 16

Ana

“SHHH,” a raspy whisper comes from behind me on the bed, waking me from a deep sleep.

It’s almost four a.m. I snuck back into my room a few hours ago, like I’ve been doing, so Sophie doesn’t catch me in her father’s bed.

Darragh’s arms imprison me, holding me down, immediately signaling what he wants. The darkest before the dawn is when he turns feral, primal.

“Mmmm.” I turn my head to kiss him, but he forces my face away.

Brutally.

He closes his hands around my throat and lowers his mouth to my ear. “You like getting pounded big and pregnant like this?”

I truly get off on how Darragh gets rough with me, but keeps me safe at the same time. He brings me to a razor-sharp, painful edge, but the other side is bliss. “Yes, I love when you take me like this. But aren’t you tired? You have to be—”

He tightens his hold on my neck. “Shut the fuck up.” A sharp hissing whistle sickens my stomach. It’s the sound of ‘fuck’ through a missing front tooth.

My breath hitches, and my body goes cold. Catching a stream of moonlight from a rare cloudless night, I claw at the hands around my neck enough to see what I already know.

Tattooed fingers.

This isn't Darragh...

I twist my face and yell, "Stop! Get off me!"

Cormac covers my mouth and yanks my head, so we're face to face. He looks wild, worse than I remember, a raging, crazed man. And the fear I'd been able to let go of rushes back like it never left. My worst nightmare is happening. Cormac found me. He wants me dead for sure. I'm evidence. I'm *carrying* evidence.

"You didn't tell me to stop when you begged me to fuck you." Shaking me, he rambles on, "You knew you were ovulating. You knew you'd get pregnant, thinking I'd let you go."

I don't bother arguing such nonsense. Instead, I bite his fingers and cry out louder this time, "*Darragh! Help me!*"

"Ow!" Cormac slaps me across the face. "You'll pay for that, *Stasia*."

I kick, but it's no use. With all my might, I scream again, even if it wakes up Sophie. She needs to hide.

"I do miss that tight cunt of yours. Won't be so tight soon, though. My brother will get rid of you the way he got rid of his wife." Cormac lets go of my neck, only to put a knife against my throat.

I swallow hard, and try to stay still, my mind all over the place with these accusations and revelations. "What do you want, Cormac?"

"You. Dead."

My bedroom door bangs open, and Darragh rushes in. He's shirtless, bathed in the hallway light. I know every curve of his body and every inch of un-inked skin. It's him. It's my Darragh.

And he's got a gun.

"Ana, what's the matter?" Darragh throws the main light on and gasps. "What the hell are *you* doing here?"

He lunges for us, but I shout, “No, if he’s on something, he’ll overpower you.”

Darragh stops in his tracks. “Get the fuck off her, Cormac.”

“You here to fuck her some more, brother?” Cormac digs the blade into my throat, dragging me off the bed with him. “If you told me you wanted this princess, too, I would have shared her with you. Like the old days.”

“Those days have been over for a long time.” Darragh closes the bedroom door, his eyes furious. “Put the fucking knife down, Cormac.”

His brother laughs and holds it firmly, the blade stinging my skin. “Everyone thinks she’s dead, anyway.”

“Her father might think that. But our brothers know she’s here. *With* me.” Darragh raises the gun until it’s trained on Cormac’s head. “*You’re* supposed to be in California. In a secure rehab.”

Cormac barks a laugh. “I’m an O’Rourke. I know how to game the system.”

“They put you in that place for your own good.”

“My own good? So you can fuck my girlfriend?” Cormac’s brogue sounds thick and gritty.

Darragh’s eyes turn into beady slits, the green melting into blackened shadows. “Yes, I’m fucking her. And she loves it. Know what else I’m doing? I’m treating her like a queen. Like she should be treated. I’m crazy about her, and she’s crazy about me.” His brogue explodes, too. “Now drop the fucking knife. Don’t make me shoot you.”

Cormac’s shaking hands have me at his mercy. He came here to kill me.

All my senses sharpen, and I feel his muscles tense. He’s going to slit my throat. I release my grip on his arms and ram him in the stomach with my left elbow. He grunts and doubles over. Then I punch his nut sack with my right fist.

The knife comes loose and drops to the floor. I snatch it up and point it at him.

My father never showed me how to use a knife or a gun. I realize now how irresponsible that was. My horrible father kept me helpless. He knew he'd go back on Mother's word. He didn't want me to know how to fight back.

My Koslov Bratva blood sizzles in my veins. I know what to do, anyway. Like maybe my brothers are channeling me. I lunge at Cormac, aiming for his heart, but a searing pain low in my abdomen cripples me, sending me to the carpet, crying out.

Darragh throws himself in front of me and retrieves the loose knife. "What the fuck is wrong with you, Cormac? That is your child inside her. You want them *both* dead?"

It sounds so off for Darragh to acknowledge my baby is really Cormac's, but I get what he's doing.

"Her father will kill me." Fear laces Cormac's tone as he steps toward the window.

"I'm putting my name on that birth certificate," Darragh says. "I'm raising this baby as my own. You can walk away."

"If that's the case..." Cormac laughs sickeningly. "You go, and let her murdering father believe you did this to her, Dar."

"I'd be more afraid of Lachlan if I were you. He *will* find you," Darragh taunts. "Kieran wants you home. He's in charge. You fucked up your freedom. The freedom I worked to keep for you. Do you know how many lies I told for you? How I covered for you and your drug issues, and your gambling, and your debts?" He takes a breath. "No more. My daughter is in this house. How dare you break in here? We're through, Cormac. And if you think because you're blood, our brothers will go easy on you, you're mistaken."

Darragh and Cormac are *more* than blood. They're identical. They shared a womb, did everything together. Undergrad, medical school, their residencies. They only had each other for so long, and now Darragh is pushing him away.

For me.

“Then I’ll work harder not to be found.” Cormac laughs.

“With what?”

Cormac doesn’t answer, and I wonder how the hell he got here from Southern California. How did he get money? And where will he go?

The only thing I know is he doesn’t want my baby.

Cormac sticks his foot on the sill to climb out the window. “Forget about me, brother.”

Seconds later, he’s gone.

“Fuck,” Darragh says and rushes to the window.

He closes and locks it as I rock on the floor, pain radiating through me. Cormac wanted to kill me. The father of my baby. Tears roll down my face, processing that one.

“Are you okay?” Darragh tosses the gun and the knife on the bed to check my neck. “Thank God. It’s just a scrape.”

“I’m having cramps, Darragh. Bad.”

“Let’s get you into the bathroom. Let me examine you.”

“Just hold me, please.”

He sits on the rug next to me and pulls me into his arms. I shake against his hard muscles.

“Come on. I need to see if you’re bleeding.” Without waiting, he lifts me into his arms and carries me into the bathroom. He sits me on the small stool from under the counter and reaches to take off my underwear. “Open your legs for me.” He kisses my forehead while gingerly fingering me. “Does that hurt?”

“No.”

“Good.” Darragh exhales. “There’s no blood. We’re getting an ultrasound as soon as it’s light out. You’re due for another one, anyway.”

I nod, shaking. “Did you and Cormac share women?”

He stares at me, then looks away. “In college, a few times. We used to...trick our girlfriends.”

I don't know what to make of that. Other than, they were young. Darragh isn't that man anymore. He's claimed me so viscerally. He wants *only* me. "Did you send your wife away?"

He scoffs. "Absolutely not. Do you think I *want* my daughter living without a mother?"

I shake my head, believing him. Cormac is a world-class liar.

"Ana, listen to me carefully. I have to check on Sophie and then call Riordan." He kisses my forehead.

Nodding, I hold myself. "Katya... I want to talk to my sister."

"They haven't told her yet where you are. I'm sorry." Darragh strokes my face, growling. "Did he kiss you?"

Like that's more of an affront than trying to kill me.

"No."

"Good." He lowers his mouth to my lips. "You're mine. I will avenge what he tried to do."

I worried what Cormac did to me would start a war with my family. Now it appears I might have started a war within the O'Rourke family.

I'm lost in thought when Darragh comes back to the bathroom, the sound of his gun on the bathroom vanity jolting me back to awareness. "Is Sophie okay?"

"Perfect. Sleeping." He scrolls on his phone. "I checked her windows and locked her bedroom door."

"Where did you get that gun?"

"I bought it. Legally. I have my daughter to protect." He taps the screen and brings the phone to his ear. "Yeah, I know what time it is. Riordan, we have a problem. Cormac broke out of rehab. He came here to my house. In the middle of the night. He tried to *kill* Anastasia." He stares at me, anger brimming in his eyes. "He's fucking out of it. Uh huh. Uh huh. Look, I have to protect Sophie and Anastasia. She's going to give birth soon. *Take care of this*. I know I kept you out of the

loop and covered for him. No more.” Darragh puts his head down. “No more. I *will* kill him the next time he gets near the women I love.”

CHAPTER 17

Ana

“**HI!** Are you Sophie’s new nanny?” A woman approaches me from under an umbrella waiting for the afternoon bus drop off.

She stares at my stomach, as many people do. Since Cormac tried to kill me a few nights ago, I’m experiencing some cramping from his roughness. I feel so big and disgusting. I don’t want anyone near me. Not even Darragh. But he understands and hasn’t pushed for sex.

Thankfully, that ultrasound showed the baby is perfectly fine.

“Yes. I am.” I twirl the umbrella, fearful of strangers, not knowing who the hell knows who in this life anymore.

Add social media to the equation, and it’s two degrees of separation these days.

“I’m Lucy.” The cheery mom smiles.

“Ana. I’m helping Darragh out.” I take a breath. “And he’s helping me.”

The more upfront I am, the fewer people will speculate and gossip.

“When are you due?”

“A couple of days.” I absorb the frown because every pregnant woman I’ve come across knows the exact date and harps on it like a holiday.

“I’m guessing it’s a boy in there! You look amazing.”

“Yeah, it’s a boy. Thank you. Unfortunately, I don’t feel amazing.”

“Oh, I haven’t met one woman late in her pregnancy who does. First baby?”

I nod.

“That’s always the hardest. Say, my daughter, Avery’s, been wanting Sophie over for a playdate.”

This mom doesn’t look suspicious, but my guard is up. “I have to ask her dad. I just started working for him.” Playing this game doesn’t sit well with me. People think I’m hired help and not the center of his world.

“I have his number. I can call him.”

I cock my head, wondering how she has Darragh’s number. “No thanks. I’ll do it.” But I don’t have a phone. “When I get back to the house. I...lost my phone.”

“Oh, you need a new one right away. If the bus is running late, you get a notification.” She shows me her home screen. “See, they’re running five minutes late.”

“That’s handy. I’ll be getting a new one soon.” I take a breath. “It’s kind of freeing, you know. No phone.”

“You are so right about that. Let me call Darragh. Avery doesn’t have any activities this afternoon. I’m sure you’d love to curl up and take a nap on a day like today.”

Are women really this nice? I grew up with murderers.

“Dr. O’Rourke. Lucy Smith. Avery’s mom. Hi!” She pours it on. “I’m with your new nanny at the bus stop. And we wanted to ask you if Sophie can come home with Avery for a few hours.”

Dr. O’Rourke. Everyone in Vegas called Cormac that.

I watch the woman’s face, sure Darragh is making some kind of excuse why Sophie can’t go. He’s been even more protective of us after what happened.

But Darragh wants his daughter to have a normal childhood, too. Something we were both deprived of.

“Great. Here she is.” Lucy hands me the phone. “He wants to speak to you.”

I smile. “Hi.”

“You, okay?”

“Um, yeah.”

“You got ambushed, huh?” His tone relaxes me.

“That and I don’t have a phone so *I couldn’t call you.*” Emotion makes my voice squeak.

“Fuck, we’ll get you a phone this weekend.” He clears his throat over the muffled sounds of a crowd in the background. “I know Lucy. Sophie’s been to Avery’s house for parties. If you’re okay with it, I’m okay with it.”

I want to say I’m afraid to stay in the house alone, especially if Sophie isn’t there. Thinking Cormac is nearby and waiting for another chance to kill me. Or abduct me again.

I can’t live being afraid all the time, though. Darragh knows better. He’s thinking more clearly right now. I have to trust him. “I’m okay with it, only if you are. Oh, the bus is coming now. I’ll call you from the house phone when I get home.”

He left his cell phone number on the legal pad. “Sounds good. I miss you.” His words make my heart pound. I know he means physically, too.

“Me, too.” I squeak and feel tears. The emotions that come with this pregnancy are killing me.

“I’ll talk to you in a few.” He ends the call.

The bus lumbers up, and kids spill out. A dark-haired girl runs up to Lucy and starts chucking things at her, a school bag, lunch bag, and jacket, like her mother is that poor abused assistant in the movie *The Devil Wears Prada*.

I wonder if this kid is someone I want Sophie hanging out with. Would Darragh notice things like this? Keeping a smile plastered on my face, it widens seeing Sophie hop off the bus

last, her blonde hair that I braided is a little disheveled from when she left in the morning.

“Hey, Sophie, do you want to come home with me and Avery?” Lucy jumps in, juggling her daughter’s gear before I even get a chance to say hello.

“Um.” Sophie looks at me.

I bend down and kiss her on the forehead. “Hey, you. We called your dad. It’s okay if you want to go.”

Sophie seems hesitant, and I don’t want to push her. “Okay.”

“You sure?” I take her backpack and lunch bag.

She shrugs. “Yeah.”

“Where do you live?” I turn to Lucy, holding Sophie under the umbrella.

“Right there.” She points to a brown and tan Tudor across the street.

“Oh.” That seems simple enough, but my heart jolts. “Wait, you know about her allergy, right?”

“Yes, we do. We get a list from the school of all the students with those crazy allergies.”

I trust Darragh knows better than me about these things. “Do you have the house phone number in case there’s an issue?”

“Yes.” Lucy’s nails tap on her phone, like she’ll call Darragh again.

Panic crawls in my throat while I dig inside Sophie’s school bag for the EpiPen. “I’ll be home if there’s an issue. Just call the house.”

“Take *my* phone.” Taking pity on me, Sophie hands me her cell with a smile because she knows even at seven how embarrassing it is not to have a phone.

Lucy smiles with victory. “That works. I have Sophie’s number.”

Sophie pops open her own umbrella. I lean in again and whisper, "If you want to come home, just call." I wink.

"Okay." She smiles, like she caught my meaning. A little secret code between her and I.

I like it.

I watch them cross the street and stay right there, on the corner, the rain pelting me. I've given up being completely dry with all the rain this place gets.

Sophie crosses the street, her little face smiling over her shoulder, and I wave.

When she goes into the house, I walk back to Darragh's, but stand outside, shuddering. I held out all day, waiting for Sophie to get here. Knowing she was coming home was the only reason I stayed alone in the house without Darragh being there.

Lucy has both Darragh's and Sophie's cell phone numbers, and figuring Sophie will be at her house for a couple of hours, I decide to surprise Darragh at the hospital and get the comfort I need. Using Sophie's cell, I order an Uber.

I get anxious when an accident closes the main road to the hospital, and flooding turns the short trip into an hour-long slog. I'm ready to ask the driver to turn around. My unease about being away from the house, away from Sophie, grows. I didn't think of it before, but now I realize I should have stayed put, just in case Sophie called and wanted to come home. But then, the hospital comes into view. I get out and take a breath. It's raining harder now, and Sophie's phone slips from my hand.

"Oh, damn it," I curse at the cracked screen.

Off in the distance, wide shoulders in a dark suit and a hair of rumpled gold catches my eye under the portico.

Darragh.

I wave, but then something shifts, and I see he's talking to a woman. With a very big smile on his face. My throat closes,

remembering Cormac's comment of how Darragh got rid of his wife. That he'll get rid of me, too.

But already?

My stomach revolts. I can't watch this. Instead, I stare at Sophie's cracked phone screen, wishing I had someone to call. I can't even call Katya, because I heard Papa took her phone away. That was the only number of hers I know by heart. The only other number saved on Sophie's phone is Cormac's.

God, I feel so utterly alone.

I duck behind a pillar, watching Darragh, who looks smitten with the woman. Sure, why would he want a big ol' pregnant woman whose family will bring him nothing but trouble?

I turn to walk away when a pain even worse than the other night hits me, and I drop Sophie's phone again. I feel a little popping sensation between my legs, and warm liquid gushes down the inside of my thighs, soaking my jeans.

Jesus Christ, I think my water just broke.

I glance up nervously and sigh. At least I'm already at the hospital.



I clutch the check-in desk at the *Emergency* entrance a half block down from the hospital's main lobby. "I think I'm having my baby."

"How far apart are your contractions?" The receptionist stands up and snaps her fingers to get someone's attention.

"I don't know. But my water broke."

"Name?"

I breathe heavily, considering giving yet another false name. Darragh registered me here. They'll contact him. I don't want to see him right now, but... Sophie. No, it's not about me anymore. It's not about wounded pride that he may have been

flirting with someone. He and I are nothing. He doesn't owe me anything in that department.

I didn't come here to be his.

"Ma'am? Are you all right? Can I call your husband?" She looks down at my hand, but it means nothing. At the prenatal class, most of the pregnant women complained of swollen fingers and the inability to wear their rings.

"My name is Ana Michaels. I had a couple of ultrasounds here. I just... I just moved to Seattle."

A woman in scrubs approaches me with a wheelchair. "Ma'am, have a seat. We'll bring you into the birthing and delivery center."

"Here you are." The receptionist's eyes lift to me. "You're... with Dr. O'Rourke."

I close my eyes. "Um. Yeah."

"Does he know you're here?"

"No. I was... I was across the street. Meeting a friend. I... I don't want to bother him." I lower into the wheelchair, feeling the wetness on my ass.

"I'll page him." The receptionist barks something to the woman, who's escorting me, and it's all administrative jargon.

I'm wheeled past a set of double doors and into chaos when the pain hits again. I cry out, unable to hold anything in anymore. I'm cracked open and *done*.

"Breathe, honey," the woman pushing me says.

"*I'm trying!*" I snap, full of fear, thinking this sudden and advanced labor may be my reaction to seeing Darragh with that woman. And stupid Cormac's comment about how he'll want to get rid of me after the baby is born.

I've fallen for him, and I'm so upset, *I can't breathe!*

"I can't get a hold of Dr. O'Rourke," the nurse says.

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell her he's outside, flirting with a woman.

“Put her in bay four. Dr. Federov reviewed her ultrasound. I’ll call him.”

Federov. Russian. I don’t know him. An OB nurse named Rita did my ultrasounds.

Behind a curtain, the woman helps me change, and fear drags me under. I’m here. I’m having this baby. It’s real, and I’m terrified.

I need Darragh after all. I reach into my pocket for Sophie’s phone, but it’s...gone.

CHAPTER 18

Darragh

I LEAVE work after I managed to sweet-talk Dr. Marley into coming in early and covering for me for a few hours. I met her outside, gave her an update on a patient, and raced home.

Ana didn't voice any concerns, but I could hear the fear in her voice. It was my first day back after Cormac broke into the house and attacked her. I hated leaving her alone while Sophie was in school. Ana's been different since the attack. Silent, watchful. She continuously checks the windows and jumps at even faint noises. She soldiers on like a champ during the daylight, but the afternoon grayness, with the way the days are getting darker earlier, must weaken her strength.

I paid extra for my security company to add a secondary system. The house is more wired than ever. Still, Ana looks scared all the time. I updated all the passcodes and didn't realize Cormac knew the old ones. He must have disabled the alarm at the front gate and climbed inside Ana's room. That he knew which room she'd be in suggests he must have been watching the house.

Watching us.

I kept a smile on my face at work and amped up my usual charm, so no one knows I'm dealing with a nightmare in my personal life as far as my brother and what he's done. I spent the weekend hovering over Ana, making sure she had everything she needs, giving her extra hugs, and telling her she's safe, that I will protect her.

Traffic is backed up, and the rain isn't helping. I call the house phone, and when Ana doesn't answer, I'm perplexed. But she might be taking a nap, or a bath...

Yeah, she could use one of those lavender baths with oils that will make her body shine. And her cunt slick for me. I can't push sex with her, though. Not when she's so close to her due date and maybe sees Cormac when she looks at me.

Fucking Cormac. I never thought he'd show up at my house. Never thought he'd attack a woman, much less one staying under my roof. One I'm falling in love with. I have to think differently. He and I played by the rules since leaving Astoria.

Well, mostly.

Now the gloves are off. He's forcing me to think like my older brothers.

Once the baby is born, there will be a reckoning. I need to convince Ana's father that I did this. Not Cormac. That she's been with me the whole time. Convince Ana to tell her father we're in love. Fuck, I'm already there. I want her to feel it, too.

We can be a family. I can give her whatever she wants. If she wants a cosmopolitan life of fancy restaurants, exotic vacations, and galas, the kind of life a Bratva princess was promised, I can give her that. Even if it's everything I despise. I'll do it for her.

I get to the house, and seeing it's dark, knocks me out of my thoughts.

"Hi!" Inside the door, I yell and wait to hear her voice call back to me. Only silence greets me, and I know something is wrong.

I'm shouting her name as I take the stairs three at a time, my worry intensifying. I don't hide the desperation in my tone since I don't have to stay calm for Sophie.

For a split second, when I open the door to Ana's room, her scent hits me, and I relax. But she's not here.

Lucy may have invited her to have tea while the girls have their play date. I yank my phone out, and swallowing my embarrassment, I call my seven-year-old daughter's phone. It's supposed to be for emergencies. For her to call me.

I feel like shit for not getting Ana a phone sooner, but these three weeks have flown by.

"Hello," a man's voice answers, and rage blurs my vision.

"Who the fuck is this?" I bark.

"Hee, hee... The guy who stole your pregnant wife's phone, asshole." The line goes dead.

I spin around, putting the pieces together. Ana isn't in the house. She left and took Sophie's phone. But some man has it. I call it again, but whoever the fuck that was doesn't pick up this time.

Someone has my Ana.

My world goes tunnel vision and right now, I understand I need my brothers back home. I can't do this by myself. When my phone rings again, and I see it's the hospital, I scream into the silence, "*Fuck! Can I not have a moment's peace?*"

I ignore it, and go to call Eoghan, when the hospital rings again. Keeping my lunch down, I take the call because I have a duty.

"Dr. O'Rourke. Look, I'm—" I'm ready to tell them I'm in the middle of a personal emergency, but the hospital operator speaks over me.

"Doctor? I'm so glad I reached you. Your...um, friend is here. She's in labor."

"Friend?" My heart stops. "What? Sta... Ana is there? *At the hospital?*"

"Ana Michaels. Yes, she...walked in. She's having contractions. We have you down as her emergency contact. We paged Dr. Federov, who signed off on her ultrasound. She doesn't have an OB listed on her chart."

"I'll be right there."

Ana's in labor. She's not been abducted. Maybe she dropped the phone somewhere along the way. Wait, she's at my hospital? When did she get there? I was just there! What a fucking waste of time.

Rushing back down the stairs, I call Lucy and ask her to keep Sophie because I actually have an emergency. I hate pushing my daughter off on someone else, and once Ana is stable, I'll come back and get her.

The traffic clears up, and I reach the hospital in record time. At the parking garage, I leave my car on the apron and toss my keys to the attendant, citing an emergency. My feet pound the wet pavement, splashes of water hitting my ankles.

I jog to the emergency entrance a few doors down and shout to the admin attendant, showing my I.D. "*Open the doors!*"

They swing open, and like a maniac, I check all the bays. But it's Ana's screaming that leads me to her. I've never delivered a baby, and Sophie was born via scheduled C-Section.

"I'm here." I rush to Ana's side, and the way her red-rimmed eyes lock on mine weakens me. Gripping her hand, I push my face into hers. "I'm here."

"I came to see you, and my water broke," she strains. "God, this hurts."

"Her contractions are very close," the nurse informs me. "Dr. Federov is on his way. He said it's too late to give her Pitocin."

"Fuck," I mumble. "Okay, baby. I'm gonna get you through this. I'm sorry. I know you're in pain. I'd take it away if I could."

A gurney shows up, and she's wheeled into an emergency delivery room.

"Where's Federov?" I shout out to the nurses' station.

"He's on his way," an admin nurse at the desk answers.

A labor and delivery nurse coaches Ana on breathing. “He’ll be here, honey.”

“Don’t...want...Federov.” Ana breathes, looking at me. “Russian.”

That makes me laugh, and I whisper, “He’s not Bratva. I promise.”

But her screaming kills me. I recall the breathing we did in the prenatal class and try to keep Ana calm.

“The baby’s crowning,” the nurse says.

Fuck, this is happening too quickly.

“Help me, Darragh.” Ana sounds scared.

Even though I know this is completely natural based on my training, my sanity is out the window.

“Sit up, baby. Hold the railing.” I kiss her sweaty forehead, and I wait for her to acknowledge with a soft nod. “Move,” I say to the nurse. “I’m delivering this baby.”

She takes my place at Ana’s side.

“Okay, Ana, when I say push, you bear down.” I make eye contact with her, letting her know for sure she’s mine.

A few pushes later, I’m holding a healthy baby boy. A son.

My son.

Exhausted, Ana slumps back. I cut the umbilical cord just as Dr. Federov, and a delivery team finally arrive. Federov takes over and finishes up while I bring the baby to Ana. I smile when she automatically reaches for him.

I lay him on Ana’s chest. Kissing her again, I say, “He needs a name.”

She nods and cuddles her son, smiling and crying. It’s such a beautiful sight. I can’t get close enough to them, but I pull back to take a picture for Lucy to show Sophie.

“What... What was your grandfather’s name?” she asks me, her voice hoarse and strained. “Your dad’s dad.”

I hadn't thought about Grandpa O'Rourke in so long. He passed away years ago. "His name was James Patrick."

Ana sputters with laughter at the irony. "I wonder if my father's Bratva will kiss the ring of a pakhan named James Patrick O'Rourke."

I don't mention that I will never let that happen. I will never give my son to either my family or the Bratva.

Epilogue

Ana

With James Patrick came the sun in Seattle. That's one way for the people of this city to accept us.

I finish his mid-morning feeding to the smell of freshly baked turkey. It's Thanksgiving Day, and I have so much to be thankful for.

Mostly, the man standing in the doorway looking at me. Wearing a black T-shirt and gray sweatpants, his bulging biceps and curved pecs take my breath away.

I have to wait several weeks before we can be intimate, and I look forward to it being just us in the act.

"Smells good," I say.

"Sure does."

I laugh. "You can't mean me. I haven't showered in days."

"You're gorgeous, and I don't care how you smell. You look amazing holding my son."

I put Darragh's name on the birth certificate as the father, sealing our bond with this baby, half Irish, half Russian.

All trouble.

Darragh got several calls from his brothers with congratulations along with the warnings. We have to face the music in Astoria.

I have to face the trouble I've caused by leaving. By staging my kidnapping.

Darragh struts inside, and I hand him the baby. After a kiss, he holds J.P., as we've been calling him, against his shoulder and starts the burping process.

"Did Sophie eat breakfast?" I ask.

"If a bowl of sausage stuffing counts as breakfast." He sits next to me and pulls me against his chest as well.

We still have to tell Sophie we're a couple. Signed divorce papers from Ginny came in the mail the day I gave birth. We're free to get married. To be a family.

We also got word that Balor hacked my trust fund. He and Eoghan are working on hiding it for me, but I insisted on them sending me something. I refuse to be helpless anymore.

"Such irony," I coo. "I got knocked up by one O'Rourke, but I'll be marrying another one."

"Good thing there are seven of us. Men anyway." He kisses my forehead. "Wait. Is that your way of agreeing to marry me?"

"I guess I am." I look up into his green eyes. "I love you, Darragh."

"I love you, Anastasia." He kisses me. "So fucking much."

"Daddy!" Sophie calls out from downstairs, alarm in her voice. Perhaps she figured out our turkey was walking around on a farm a couple of months ago.

"Yeah, Soph?" Darragh spins around to leave the nursery as movement out on the street catches my eye.

"Daddy, look out the window!"

I move to the sill and push the curtain away. My heart stops, seeing several black Escalades idling on the street. "*Darragh!*"

He joins me at the window. "Oh, shit."

“Please tell me that’s your family surprising us.” My sister knows I’m alive and where I am, but I haven’t been able to speak to her.

In sync, car doors facing the house open up, and men with assault rifles get out.

“No. That’s not *my* family,” Darragh grits out.

“Oh my God.” I shudder, recognizing, not *bratoks*, the men who report to my father’s enforcer, Maksim, and who are brothers I might reason with.

No, these are Papa’s mercenaries from Russia...

The End



Thank you for reading Ring of Truth written exclusively for the Merciless Desires Anthology. You can read the extended version of Ring of Truth with the gripping conclusion as a standalone in the [Astoria Royals Mafia Romance Series](#) in February 2024.

[Follow Deborah Garland](#) for advanced notice and an early sneak peek.

Untitled

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VOLUME

Four

SCORCHED ROSE BY JANUARY JAMES

Scorched Rose

A dark re-telling of Beauty and the Beast

I wanted someone to take me out of my body. Ever since the fire, I'd hidden it beneath copious layers of clothing. I'd hidden my curves, my scars, my virginity. But I wasn't stupid. I knew it would be valuable to somebody. One woman's trash is another man's treasure, right?

So, I sold it all.

He paid ten times more than I asked for. My white knight is a monster. Dark, deadly and deformed. But he is the only one to see the darkness in me. Two souls, damaged and damned. Two hearts lost in the daylight, found in the dark. I was paid to be taken out of my body, if only for one night. What I didn't expect was to be taken out of my life, forever.

CHAPTER

One

Rose

I GRIPPED the paper so tightly my fingertips drained of blood. A perfect row of A's stared up from it, filling me with dread.

A presence shifted to my shoulder and a sharp intake of breath told me Remi was taking them in too.

“That. Is. Badass.”

I carefully folded the paper.

“I always knew you'd rack 'em up, Rose. You're the brightest person I know.”

I huffed out a sigh. “We both know these grades won't do me any favours.”

Remi tucked away her collection of A's and B's and rested her hands on the tops of my arms. “Have some faith. Maybe once your mum and Jeff see them in black and white, they'll change their mind about letting you go to Uni. Surely, they know it's not right to hold someone back whose grades are *that* good.”

I forced the edge of my mouth to curl. “Yeah maybe.” But doubt filled my mind. My mum didn't really have a say anymore. My stepfather, in the space of four years, had managed to brainwash her into believing we couldn't afford to send me to Uni.

When she first brought him home, I was happy for her. He seemed nice. Had a good job – that made a change from her usual ‘type’ – and he asked me questions, showed an interest. Again, not typical of Mum’s previous boyfriends. And most importantly, he made her happy.

So, when she announced he was moving in, I was okay with it. When she announced they were getting married, I tried really hard to be okay with it. I never once gave her reason to believe I wasn’t.

When they both signed on those fateful dotted lines, I tried even harder to be okay with it, but overnight... things changed.

“How are things at home?” Remi asked, tentatively.

I heaved my bag over my shoulder and made for the exit. “Not much has changed. Mum still spends most of her time in bed, resting. She gets a lot of migraines these days.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. And Jeff?”

“He commandeers the remote control most nights so I just grab a sandwich or something and head straight to my room.”

I turned to catch her wide-eyed expression morph quickly into a thin-lipped sympathetic one. “It sounds lonely, Rose.”

I steeled myself. For some reason, the idea of anyone knowing I was lonely was far worse than anyone thinking I was a bitch, or stupid, or fat or ugly. Or something I was far more accustomed to being: scarred. Loneliness was simply one stigma too far.

“I’m not lonely. I like my own company and I prefer studying in peace and listening to music.”

Remi breezed past me and headed straight for the road. “Do they know you applied to Uni anyway?”

The ever-present dread in my chest picked up like a choppy sea. “No. No way. Not after Jeff strictly forbid it.”

Remi faced me and narrowed her eyes. “I don’t buy that they can’t afford it, honey. He has enough money to cruise around town in a top of the range Audi.”

“His inheritance, apparently.” I shrugged. “A case for higher education isn’t a patch on the feigned grief he’s suffering over a deceased, estranged aunt.”

Remi stopped and put a hand on one of my shoulders. “But this is your future, Rose. You’ve been top of your classes the last two years. It would be a fallacy for you to not continue your education. I mean, you want to be an architect, right?”

I nodded.

“You’re not going to get there with on-the-job experience only, even if you worked for free.”

I held up my hands. “I know, I know.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

I sighed. “I’m going to find the money myself.”

She bit back a laugh. “I’m sorry honey, but, how?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll think of something.”

Her shoulders dropped, resigned. “Well, whatever you do, this is not a time to be melancholy. We need to go celebrate. I’ve told Will and Ivy we’ll meet them at The Six in thirty minutes.”

I shook my shoulders and mentally dislodged the dark cloud hovering in my head. “Okay.” I slid the paper into my coat pocket. “Let’s go celebrate.”

Remi pinned me with a grin and threw an arm around my neck, something she was able to do standing several inches taller than my meagre four foot ten.

She jostled me out of the college atrium and onto the main road. A cab rolled by with its yellow light flickering in the grey afternoon and Remi’s arm shot out.

“What are you doing?” I whipped round to grab her arm. “The tube’s just there.”

She ignored me until the cab slowed to a standstill next to us. “My treat,” she said, yanking open the door. “After getting grades like those, you at least deserve to travel to The Six in style.”

I shook my head and climbed in after her.

Twenty minutes later, we pushed through the doors of the common room-come-student bar we called home. The Six was a barely refurbished former working man's club in the armpit of south London. The furniture was mismatched and frayed, the floors sticky, and the service so aloof it felt like we were trespassing on the bartenders' personal living space. But like a well-worn sock, it was familiar, comfy and the holes were the same shape as our toes.

"Don't look left," Remi muttered over her shoulder.

I kept my face focused ahead but couldn't stop my eyes from flicking to the left to see what I was being warned away from. My stomach dipped. A blur of bright pink hair confirmed that Penelope Ross and her hardcore group of followers were seated in the corner by the bar.

"Great," I replied, my voice low.

"There's Will!"

I followed Remi's finger to where our friend sat with his back to the room talking to someone just out of view.

"And Ivy!" Remi reached back, grabbed my hand and tugged me through the scattered chairs and tables, as if I wanted to loiter in the peripherals of the girl whose favourite pastime was making my life even more hellish.

"Remirose!" Ivy gushed, standing as soon as she saw us approach. I'd given up trying to get her to separate our names. In her mind, Remi and I came as one package. Her thick-rimmed glasses cocked sideways as her wide arms caught us both in a group hug, knocking an empty glass onto Will's lap.

"Ivy, come on..." he moaned.

"So good to see you both," she gushed. "How did you do?"

"Not bad." Remi flopped down on a ripped leather club chair and pulled a knee up to her chin. "Rose did amazing, of course. Straight A's."

"Of course." Will stopped wiping the droplets of beer from his leg to shoot me a wink. "I would have expected nothing

less.”

I dropped my bag onto a stool. “Seeing as Remi got the cab, drinks are on me.” I forced a smile. I needed every penny I could get my hands on, but I couldn’t afford to live off my friends’ generosity forever. And if I wasn’t already on edge thinking about, well, the rest of my actual life, seeing my nemesis number one at the other side of the room had only deepened my anxiety.

Penelope Ross was a bully and she’d taken it upon herself to turn the majority of our college year against me. Thankfully, Remi, Will and Ivy had minds of their own and were slightly more discerning about the company they chose to keep. But all the other students in our year lapped up her lies and had given me a wide berth since I started the sixth form college.

“Do you want me to come help you?” Remi’s eyes darted from me to the pink hair across the room.

I fixed a brave smile to my face. “I’ll be fine. Three beers and a cider coming up.”

My stomach continued to sink as I approached the bar and realised there was only one space to stand: about five feet away from Penelope’s table. I gritted my teeth and focused all my attention on the mirror at the back of the bar. *Three beers and a cider. Three beers and a cider.*

“Well, if it isn’t Scarface herself.”

I recognised the name Penelope had bestowed on me two years earlier after seeing me in the showers after gym. I transferred my eyes to the two bartenders. They were run off their feet at the sudden influx of students entering the bar.

“I can’t see any scars on her face,” one of her cronies – probably a newbie – pointed out.

I practically heard an eye roll. “Ugh, it’s not *literal*. The scars are on her back. All over her back in fact. They’re vile.”

The crony lowered her voice. “What happened? Was she hurt?”

“Fire. Rumour has it she was lusting after some dirty old man, and when he told her he wasn’t interested, she burned down half his garden.”

I swallowed. She was right about fire, but the rest of her summary couldn’t have been further from the truth. The minute Jeff moved in and showed his true colours, I started hanging out at a neighbour’s house. He was older, fairly good-looking, somewhat reclusive. No one really knew he existed, which was great for me. I hid out in his artist’s studio, inhaling the smell of art supplies and the sound of quiet. Quiet was rare in south London. He started getting too friendly but by that time, home had become repellent and I had nowhere else to go. Sure, half his garden did burn down, taking him with it. But it had nothing to do with me.

“Euwww. An old guy?”

The arched brow lifted Penelope’s voice. “Uh huh. He rejected her and paid the price. But the scars are *her* punishment.”

I flicked my gaze back to the mirror just in time to catch her glide a hand over her view of my form.

“She’s repellent. Never had a boyfriend, and doubt she’ll ever have one, not with scars like that. She’ll forever be a virgin.”

“She’s a *virgin*?” Whomever asked the question made it sound like the worst condition to ever be inflicted on a human of consenting age.

“The impurest.” Penelope lifted a cocktail to her lips and glared at my reflection.

I kept my own expression neutral but didn’t force it away. I was overcome with morbid curiosity. How did someone get off being so cruel to another person? What gave her the right to openly criticise and lie about me like that? What made it okay? The one consolation I had was I need never cross her path in the hallowed halls of college again. As far as I knew, she was bound for St. Martin’s College to study fashion, whereas I

would be taking myself as far away from London as I could get.

“What can I get you?” The bartender’s question drew me back.

“Three beers and a cider please.”

“Pints or halves?”

“Pints,” I replied, my gaze darting back to the mirror where it met with Penelope’s.

“Yeah, the only way she’ll ever get laid is if she pays someone to do it with her.”

For the first time in two years, I noticed her eyes weren’t solely brown; they were flecked with green. And right then, the green glowed like radioactive slime. I swiped a thumb across my phone screen and quickly tapped a message to Remi. *Changed my mind. Can u give me a hand?*

“Better yet, she’ll have to sell herself.”

The crony half-gasped, half-laughed, oblivious to the fact I could hear everything.

“On the street? Like a hooker?”

“Yeah, why not?” Penelope’s eyes narrowed, glee dancing on her lashes. “Or, you know, there are websites that let you sell your virginity to the highest bidder.”

“Like... V-Bay?”

A scathing laugh erupted around the table. “Exactly. Not that she’d fetch much. But something’s better than nothing when you’re that ugly and deformed.”

I took in my own reflection again. I wasn’t classically pretty but I wasn’t ugly either. My shoulder-length strawberry blonde hair carried a few curls and my pale green eyes shone occasionally like glass, in the right light. I had two large front teeth which Mum would never let me fix because she thought they made me look like Brigitte Bardot, and despite being smaller overall than average, my curves were reasonably well-proportioned.

Penelope's words were pure spite and wholly untrue, but that didn't mean they weren't capable of penetrating just a little of my skin. My fair face was make-up-free, unblemished and free from any attempt to stand out; my hair was pulled back, neat and tame. Nothing about me screamed for attention or snidery, yet somehow, I attracted it anyway.

My scars had always embarrassed me, but nothing – *nothing* – made me cower and tremble like the fear of being disliked. I'd hoped the last two years would have vaccinated me against it, but the shame was as raw as ever. I sizzled with anxiety even though Penelope was several feet away and posed no physical threat.

My shoulder warmed as Remi approached and I handed the bartender a twenty.

“Why is she glaring at you?” Remi whispered. “Did you say something to her?”

I noted the bartender's nonchalant appraisal of me as I pocketed the change, then picked up one of the pints and faced my best friend. “Not yet.”

“Not y—? What are you doing?”

“Give my apologies to the others,” I said, swallowing the shakiness in my voice. “I'll call you later.”

I left Remi standing with three pints and a quizzical brow as I strode in the direction of Penelope's table. No matter how hard I tried, or how dedicated I was to avoiding her, I would never get this girl to like me. The narrow of her eyes widened as I approached and her lips pursed.

She ran her eyes over me dismissively and began to speak. “Who invited y—”

The rest of her words were drowned in the downpour of beer which I dumped over her effervescent head.

A scream cut through the din of the whole bar and about two hundred faces spun in our direction. As silence descended, the only sounds to be heard were Penelope's high-pitched wail and my feet taking me out of the building for the very last time.



The news of my snapped patience had preceded me.

I could see from the look on Jeff's face as I entered the living room, he knew exactly what I'd done. He idolised Miles Ross, the owner of the local golf club – and Penelope's far richer and far more charismatic father.

“What the HELL were you thinking?”

He sprang up from the sofa and rounded on me with shaking bones. I stepped backwards. For the first time since I'd met him, I saw a thick vein bulging out from the side of his taut, shiny face.

I backed out of the room. “Where's Mum?”

“She's resting. You leave her out of this. It will only make her headache worse.”

My heart sank. *Another headache.*

“Penelope Ross been goading me for two years, Jeff. I couldn't take it anymore.” I said, my tone pleading.

He held his phone up and showing me the last person who'd called him: Penelope's father.

“You *humiliated* her!”

“B-but, she's been humiliating me since the start of sixth form...” I said, unable to stop my voice from quivering.

His brow darkened and I looked past him to see six empty cans of beer crunched in a pile on the coffee table.

“Look, let's talk about this in the morning,” I said, holding up my hands.

“No, you're not getting out of it that easily, Rose. You just bullied my best friend's daughter. We are having this conversation NOW.”

I would have laughed out loud if I wasn't half terrified. Miles Ross wouldn't have recognised Jeff if he'd stepped on

him, and as for the accusation that I was the bully... It only confirmed that I wasn't going to get anywhere with this conversation. Not while Jeff was hammered, and not while Mum was upstairs sleeping off her latest migraine.

I took another step back. "I'm going to bed, Jeff. I'm tired."

"No you don't Rose. You stay right here and tell me how fucking sorry you are."

A small gasp left my mouth. "What?" He'd never been the perfect stepfather but he'd never sworn at me before.

He stepped right up to me, showering my face with the stale remnants of beer breath. "Say. You're. Sorry."

I stared back at the man I'd been forced to share a home with for the last four years. The man my mother had put her trust in to take on the father figure role I'd missed out on for most of my life. The man who had slowly but surely driven my mother into her room with one migraine after another, while he wielded her generous sick pay around like it was pocket money. I was suddenly infused with the piercing pain of injustice. If it wasn't enough that I'd lost my beloved father to a car accident when I was only eight years old... If it wasn't enough that I'd had to endure years of my mother's failed and abusive relationships in a bid to replace my father... If it wasn't enough that I'd suffered injuries of my own... Now I had to contend with a drunk stepfather who not only was completely opposed to me getting on in life, but he was also choosing some cheesy businessman over what may as well have been his own daughter.

I anchored my heels into the floor. "No," I said, forcefully. "I am not sorry. She was goading me, and she deserved it."

An eerie calmness came over him and he stepped forward again, his breaths long and controlled.

"You're fucking with people who are important to me, Rose. Say you're sorry."

"I thought *we* were important to you," I said, through gritted teeth. "Me and Mum."

Muddy brown eyes narrowed. “Your mum, maybe. You, not so much.”

His words felt like a slap, pinning me back against the wall. “Wow.” I breathed out, feeling the tension in my shoulders drop. Hearing the truth ripped off the Sellotape that had been holding our fake stepfather-daughter relationship together. “I can’t believe you had the guts to actually say it.”

He towered over me. “Are you saying I’m gutless?”

I craned my neck to look him in the eye and shrugged.

The back of his hand struck across my cheek, knocking my face into the wooden underside of the staircase. My skin burned with shame but the edges were tinged with something resembling triumph and relief. Finally, I didn’t have to live a lie anymore. We were all operating under the pretence that we were a happy, modern family, but that couldn’t have been further from the truth. I knew the second I told Mum he’d hit me, he’d be out on his arse. This was after all our home, not his.

A little piece of my heart broke for Mum as I climbed the stairs. She would be devastated. Not for her relationship with Jeff, but for her failure, yet again, to pick a decent man to fill Dad’s shoes. She’d be a mess for days, maybe even weeks. But if it meant getting that toxic man out of our lives, it would be worth it. I could defer university for a year while I got us back on our feet, got Mum some help for her headaches. It would all be okay. I had to hold onto that thought while she processed the news that her husband had just hit her daughter.

I heard the TV in the living room again as I pushed open the door and saw Mum’s form breathing softly beneath the bedclothes. I walked round the bed and perched on the edge resting a hand on her shoulder. Slowly, she opened one eye and groaned.

“I’m sorry, Mum. Is it another bad one?”

She nodded once and closed her eye. I ran my fingers along her scalp, just as she did to me when I was small.

“I’m just going to speak, okay? You don’t have to talk back, or react, or do anything that makes your headache worse. But I can’t go all night without telling you this, and I think you would want to know.”

She let loose another light groan which I took to mean I should go ahead.

“Jeff just hit me, Mum.”

Mum’s breathing stuttered and both her eyes opened. They were glazed but still managed to pierce me with feeling.

I reached for her hand and squeezed it gently. “I’m so sorry.”

She continued to stare at me, unblinking.

“I didn’t provoke him, Mum, I promise. Not that it matters,” I added with almost a laugh.

Mum’s eyes registered no emotion.

“You know how Penelope Ross has been bullying me ever since I started sixth form? And how I’ve just kept my head down and tried to ignore it?” I heard myself rambling and, on some level, wondered why I felt the need to explain myself. “Well, today she went too far and I... Well, I lost it.”

Mum nodded her head briefly, pressing me to finish.

“I tipped my beer over her head in the middle of The Six.”

When I got no reaction, I continued. “To be honest, it was tame compared to what I’d like to do to her, but you raised me well, Mum. I know I shouldn’t have given in to her, but it’s the last day, and I got my grades, and...”

My voice trailed off as Mum’s stare began to unnerve me.

“Her father must have told Jeff because he’s mad. He’s been drinking too, Mum. It’s been every night now for months. Anyway... he didn’t like that I did that to Penelope and he just... he hit me.”

Mum’s stare didn’t waver.

“He hit me really hard, Mum. My head hit the stairs.”

I couldn't believe I was trying to get her to empathise when the words 'he hit me' should have been enough.

After several seconds of uncomfortable silence, Mum closed her eyes again and rolled away from me.

My own breath stuttered in my lungs at the realisation she might not take my side. She was my *mum*. It was impossible. Unthinkable.

I held back the tear-laden choke that threatened to erupt and patted her shoulder.

"I'll let you sleep. We can talk about it in the morning."

I was on my feet and halfway to the door when she spoke again.

"Talk about what?"

I did a double take in the dark and my chest hollowed with the onset of grief.

"Nothing," I whispered and curled my fingers around the door handle.

"Congratulations on your grades," she said, her tone lifeless.

"Thanks." I closed the door behind me and walked away.

You didn't even ask what I got.

CHAPTER

Two

Rose

REMI CLOSED her eyes and shook her head. “I’m sorry, what?”

“I’m selling my virginity online,” I repeated.

“Um, how?” Remi was super-intelligent so I figured this was less of an actual question and more of a statement along the lines of ‘what the fuckety fuck are you talking about?’

I pressed my hands on the table between us, spreading my fingers. “Don’t freak out, it’s all legit, all above board. I’m using a proper auction site...”

Her brows hitched so high they almost popped off her head.

“And... I’ve got a bidder.”

Remi blinked again and sat forward, quite literally on the edge of her seat. “What?” She shook her head rigorously. “What’s going on, Rose?”

I took a deep breath. A lot had happened in the last three days. Too much to allow me to pause for a second to text my best friend. And news like this couldn’t be explained in 200 characters or less, which was why I’d finally insisted on meeting face-to-face when everyone else was no doubt *still* sleeping off their post-result hangovers.

She sucked on her water bottle, her eyes imprisoning me so I couldn't escape.

"Okay, here goes," I muttered, almost to myself. "When I got home from The Six the other night, Jeff hit me."

Water came flying out of her mouth all over the table and two hands grabbed mine.

"He what?" Her voice was softer now.

I'd rehearsed it so I could sum up the whole horrid episode in one sentence. The more I dwelled on it, the more it felt like was all my fault, and I simply couldn't afford to give in to that temptation. "He'd heard what I did to Penelope in The Six, and you know how he idolises her father... Well, he hit me."

Remi pressed a hand over her mouth. "What did your mum say?"

My eyebrows twitched despondently. "Nothing. She didn't even acknowledge it. Or my grades for that matter."

"Are you being serious? You mum's always been so protective of you... so proud."

"Yeah, maybe." I waved her off, not wanting to remember those days when they were so far removed from these.

"Did you try talking to her?"

I nodded. "She doesn't want to know."

I'd tried to talk to her again the following morning but she'd barely looked at me. She bustled around, her migraine clearly gone, too preoccupied to make time to speak to her own daughter. She'd behaved that way for a while, I reflected. For around three years if I really thought about it.

Remi's eyes dropped to where her thumb brushed over the back of my hand. "This is why you're selling your V-card?"

"Yeah," I replied, quietly. "I need to get away from here. I've accepted a place at Edinburgh College of Art. I can get a loan to pay the fees; I just need to earn the money to pay rent. And find somewhere to live in the meantime."

Her gaze flicked up at mine. “You have a whole summer to get through, Rose. Why don’t you stay at mine? Mum and Dad won’t mind – they adore you.”

I shook my head. “I love you for saying that Rem, but you don’t have the space, and I can’t stay around here. Not when Jeff and Penelope Ross are potentially around every corner.”

She reached out and lightly touched my cheek, only just noticing the bruise I’d tried to cover with makeup I rarely wore. “I can’t believe he did that to you.”

I swallowed back the ball of emotion hovering in the base of my throat. I wasn’t sad for myself; I was sad for my mum. Jeff had done something to her, pacified her. She had no energy these days, only damn migraines, and I was old enough to sort my own shit out. So that’s exactly what I was doing.

“Wait...” Remi squeezed her eyes shut then pinged them open sharply. “You said you’ve got a bidder? Someone has bid on your virginity? Back up a little. I need information. Where are you auctioning yourself off? How exactly does it work? And...” she squeezed her eyes closed before narrowing them back on me, “how the hell did you come up with that idea?”

I allowed a grin to take over my lips. “Well, the last one’s easy. It was something Penelope said actually, right before I threw my pint over her head.”

“I don’t recall the two of you *conversing*.”

“No. It was something she said behind my back – that the only way I’d ever lose my virginity was if I sold it at an online auction. I wouldn’t have thought of it otherwise.”

“Well, no,” Remi said slowly. “Because you were waiting for the right person. Maybe... bookshop boy?” She grinned.

I smiled. “I was fourteen years old, Rem. I’m never going to see him again.”

She frowned. “You don’t know that. And from what you told me, you two were destined to meet.”

I leaned forward and arched a brow. “I’d only just started getting my period. I thought every good-looking boy was the

one I was *destined* to meet.”

Her smile dropped. “That’s not how I remember it. How many times did you go back to that place looking for him?”

I dropped my gaze to the table, and my cheeks heated. “Every day.”

“For how long?”

“A year.”

“A *year*,” she repeated. “Why?”

I looked off to the side, unable to meet her gaze, and shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do.”

I sighed, defeated. “He was beautiful,” I said, wistfully. “His eyes... they just swallowed me up.” I flicked mine towards Remi and she nodded for me to continue.

“I remember everything about that day. Everything.”

Remi clasped her hands together and rested her chin on them.

“It was just me and Mum. We were happy. She needed to go shopping so she dropped me off at my favourite bookshop. The staff knew me there – they’d practically babysat me during all my mum’s shopping trips.” I smiled, remembering those times with such fondness my heart hurt.

I looked up at the trees swaying overhead. “You know I’ve always loved buildings and design, but my interest had really grown at that point, so I made a beeline for the design section. I found a couple of books and sat in the corner. I was planning to stay there the whole two hours, just reading and getting lost in those wonderful texts.” I darted my gaze back to Remi. “When he showed up, I was actually pissed off. I didn’t want to speak to anyone, I just wanted to read.”

“So, how did he get you to talk?” Remi smiled. She loved hearing this story as much as I loved telling it. It was like a magical fairy tale from long-forgotten times that became

instantly unbelievable when life hit you over the head with a reality hammer.

“He quoted a line from the book I was reading. Which was strange because I didn’t know *anyone* who enjoyed reading architectural texts in their spare time.”

“And then what?”

I smiled. “Then he sat on the floor, leaned his back against my chair and asked me to read to him.”

She shook her head and gazed off into the distance wistfully.

It didn’t happen exactly like that, though.



I was quietly reading when I became aware of a presence standing over me. I looked up to see the source of the heated gaze but it wasn’t pointed at me, it was pointed at my book.

“Rem Koolhaas.” His voice was deep, his tone surprisingly bored for someone whose face was far from boring.

I tilted my chin, determined to not be intimidated by someone clearly older, obviously educated and infinitely better bred than me. “A genius,” I stated.

He snorted and turned his back, pulling down a book I had toyed with reading many times but for some reason hadn’t yet.

“I’m guessing you don’t agree?”

His behaviour seemed odd. He wanted to talk, but then he didn’t. Like he wanted to be friendly but then didn’t really know how to be.

“You guess correctly.”

He turned and leaned his weight on the bookshelf, giving me a clear view of the muscular body beneath his tight t-shirt and the thick wallet inside the pocket of his mouth-wateringly expensive jeans.

I closed the book and placed it on my knees which I'd glued together to stop them from trembling. I shouldn't have felt intimidated by a boy who couldn't have been more than a few years older than me, but good Lord I was. No one who looked that jaw-droppingly hot ever deigned to *look* at me, let alone speak to me. He peered down from the bookshelf, his dark-lashed lids lowered making him look obscenely sexy. His strong, square jaw ground lightly as though he was considering a joke and it was totally on me. But I had never before seen this boy and was unlikely to ever see him again so I felt uncharacteristically emboldened.

“Enlighten me,” I said.

He folded his arms around the book he'd pulled from the shelf and assessed me with a gaze that felt like warm honey.

“Well, for a start, he's a hypocrite.”

My brows hiked. “I'm not sure I buy that but go on.”

“He talks a lot about how preservation has contributed to a kind of collective amnesia, and that we've transformed historic areas into tourist hubs while conveniently ignoring buildings that represent parts of our past that make us uncomfortable.”

I sat back in my chair and tilted my head to one side. “What's hypocritical about that?”

He pushed the book back on the shelf then fed large hands into his pockets as he regarded me with an arrogance I found weirdly, obsessively attractive.

“Because in the next breath he criticises people for not embracing change.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Aren't they two separate arguments?”

His jaw ground as he considered my question. “No. How can you accuse people of transforming historic areas – regardless of what they are transformed to – but then claim they don't like change?”

I chewed my lip nervously as I conceded, in silence, that he had a point.

“Plus, he’s egotistical. Goes in for every award instead of letting his art speak for itself.” His gaze roamed the bookshelves to my right, as though our conversation was boring him.

“Maybe he finds that creating work for competitions instead of clients is freeing.”

His eyes darted back to mine in a beat and it was then I noticed how black they were.

“You don’t need a competition to create work that is freeing.”

His gaze held mine in some strange unspoken battle of wills, then he surprised me by stepping forward and holding out another book. “Now this is an artist you should listen to.”

For the first time in my life, I felt heat flood my chest. It spread like wildfire to my face. He held up *In Praise of Shadows*, by Junichiro Tanizaki. It was a book I’d been intending to read for months but hadn’t got around to it. To be honest, I’d found Tanizaki’s work almost as intimidating as this boy standing in front of me. My gaze flickered between the dark book and the even darker figure holding it out to me. His t-shirt was a steel grey which accentuated his hooded eyes. For a casual garment the cut was as sharp as his jaw, the cotton as smooth as his lips.

“Have you read it?”

His question made me jump. My already burning face became a blistering furnace. I’d been staring at his mouth for at least several seconds.

“Um, no. Not that one. It’s on my list though.”

I reached out to take the book but he held it for a few beats, staring into my eyes with unnerving intensity before releasing it.

“Once you’ve read that book, everything else will disappoint you.”

He perched on the arm of the chair adjacent to mine.

“Then why would I do that to myself?”

He answered with another question. One that stunned me.

“Don’t you want to be astounded?”

“I-I don’t know.” I could have kicked my leg off with that inane response but I had something of an image to uphold so I pretended I wasn’t a total imbecile and continued. “I mean, yes. I do want to be astounded. Doesn’t anyone?”

He scratched at the scruff appearing on his chin. “You’d be surprised.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way but you don’t seem to like... *people*.”

His mouth ticked up at one corner and small creases appeared at the edges of his eyes. “I don’t like people who don’t have depth.”

“And what, to you, constitutes depth?”

“Most people these days like everything to be handed to them on a platter. They don’t want to have to look for the good stuff or wait a second longer than they have to. They want to be able to binge it now, have it delivered the next day. They want everything they own to be on show, to air their private lives in public. They want to be in the spotlight. Just like Andy Warhol predicted, everyone will get their five minutes of fame, and boy do they want it.”

“What’s so wrong about being in the spotlight?”

“It makes shadows seem shameful.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Shadows aren’t something to hide, or to be ashamed of. It’s not the light that makes things beautiful, it’s the dark. We seem to have forgotten that.”

I flipped the book over, finding it suddenly captivating. Haunting and enlightening. I wanted to devour it, not only to become impressive to a modern-day beatnik like him, but to acquire all the knowledge he had. To consume the same words and phrases, adopt the same thoughts and philosophies. It would be a few more years before I defiantly followed my own pursuit of the truth. Right then, I wanted his.

“We find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness that one thing against another creates.”

I couldn't tear my eyes from him. He looked so nonchalant, as though profound statements left his lips effortlessly every minute of every day.

“It's a quote from the book,” he said.

My voice was a whisper. “It's beautiful.”

He leaned towards me, bringing his warmth into my orbit. He smelled of smoke and caramel, a dizzying combination. He patted his hand on the top of the book, his fingertips lightly brushing mine. “That's why you have to read it.”

“I will,” I replied, my voice cracking with dryness.

He stilled over me and his gaze burned holes in my skin. “In fact, you can start now.”

“I'm sorry?”

“Do you trust me?”

I did. I trusted this complete stranger. I nodded.

He slid to the floor and leaned his back against my chair, his left shoulder knocking gently against my right leg, making my breath stutter in my lungs.

“Turn to page thirty-two. Start there.”

I read the whole chapter to him, and another, lowering my voice whenever customers ventured nearby. Each time they became aware of our presence they moved away as if sensing our unspoken need for privacy.

I was about to begin a third chapter when my mum appeared around a bookshelf.

“There you are, Rose. Minnie said you were back here.”

It was the first time in my life I wasn't pleased to see my own mother.

Mum's gaze darted between me and the boy, narrowing as she took in his obvious height and width and probably

assuming he was way too old for me. Although, in her eyes, everyone was way too old for me. I was still her baby.

“Come on,” she said, hurriedly. “I said we’d meet Jeff for a coffee.”

Ah, Jeff. The new boyfriend. I nodded obligingly. I would go and see Jeff to appease Mum, but I wasn’t planning to get to know him. Most often, the moment they heard she had a teenage daughter, they ran a mile.

I stood, reluctantly pulling away from the warmth of his arm. I felt his hot eyes follow me as I placed the books back on the shelves. I paused with my hand still attached to the one I’d been reading to him. I didn’t have much in the way of my own money but the way this boy had made me feel, I would spend my entire life savings on a book that might just help me relive this moment again and again.

I turned, holding the book to my chest. His expression had darkened.

“See you around, Rose.”

My name dripped off the edge of his tongue like the caramel he smelled of. I so badly wanted to see him around but I wasn’t stupid enough to think he meant it in *that* way. I was a child. Barely pubescent. But no one had ever made my stomach flutter before. No one had made me feel so heavy it was like I was glued to the seat.

Instead, I asked, “Do you live around here?” I’d never seen him before. I would have remembered.

He smiled, a ghost of sadness hovering behind it. “No. I don’t.”

The next words fell out of my mouth before I could stop them. “That’s a shame.”

He stared back at me, unblinking, until I couldn’t take it anymore. I turned to follow Mum out of the shop when he called me back.

“If you remember one thing about us meeting, make it this: *Were it not for the shadows, there would be no beauty.*”

Question everything, Rose. Don't let the light blind you."

I repeated his words over and over in my head the entire way home and every day since.



"Are you really going to do it Rose? Sleep with a total stranger?"

Remi's question drew me back to the uncomfortable present prospect I was going to do exactly that.

I shrugged. "People do it all the time. Isn't that what a one night stand is?"

She tipped her head briefly. "Well, yes, I suppose. But there tends to be some measure of attraction and lots of alcohol."

"I'm sure I can manage the latter," I deadpanned.

"Okay, so how does it work exactly?"

I settled into my seat. "I had to post pictures of myself on the website – all angles, scars included. Apparently if you aren't truthful about your appearance, you can forfeit the auction."

"And what if you're not a virgin?"

"Oh, you have to provide medical proof."

"Rose," she said, her skin paling by the second. "How does one prove one hasn't been tampered with?"

I cocked my head. "What's with the 'one' all of a sudden?"

"Just answer the question, Rose."

I sighed. "Private clinics test for that sort of thing," I said with a shrug. "It was super quick, in and out, job done."

Remi stared at me for several long seconds. "Mm. Here's hoping."

I frowned at her strange comment then blustered ahead. "So anyway, this bidder... he's bid a lot of money for me."

“For your virginity,” she repeated, as if still wrapping her head around the news.

“Yes. Do you want to know how much he’s bid for it?” I couldn’t keep the genuine amazement out of my voice.

Remi’s eyes half-lidded, like she was running all out of patience. “Go on.”

I pressed my lips together. “Guess.”

“Are you kidding me? This is too much, Rose. I don’t want to play.”

I ignored her eyeroll. “Go on, guess.”

She sighed and fell back in her chair throwing her arms up in the air. “I don’t know, five hundred quid.”

“Higher.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Eight hundred.”

“Higher.”

Her fingers curled round the arms of her chair. “A thousand?”

“Higher.”

“Rose, really? Okay, two thousand.”

“Higher.”

“Fuck. How much, Rose?”

“One hundred. Thousand. Pounds.”

She stared at me, motionless, her jaw slack. “What?”

“A hundred grand,” I clarified.

Remi didn’t move for nearly a minute.

“You okay Rem?”

“Um yeah.” She reached for her phone. “What is this website? Are you sure it’s not a hoax?”

“Are you saying I’m not worth a hundred grand?”

“Oh God, Rose, no. That’s not what I’m saying at all. And you’re worth more than that anyway. You’re... you’re priceless. I’m thinking maybe...”

“You’re not a virgin,” I reminded her.

She paused and chewed her lip. “This is true.”

Wringing her hands together, she frowned. “So, you’re going to go through with it?”

“If he pays up.”

She nodded, still frowning as if deep in thought. “Okay. Make sure you get the money first. Tell me exactly where and when it’s happening. Take a can of mace.”

I laughed lightly. “Okay, okay.”

“And remember, Rose...” She regarded me with a wariness bordering on fear. “This man is not your knight in shining armour, okay? More likely he’s a deranged freak who gets his rocks off to breaking in virgins and has way more money than sense.”

“Right,” I replied, forcing back the fear I’d managed to block out. “Got it. He’s no knight in shining armour.”

Then I tipped back my bottle of beer and drank it, recklessly, in one.



My nerves did star jumps and somersaults as I watched the auction counter tick down. I stood up for the hundredth time in ten minutes and paced through packed cardboard boxes, swigging Pepsi and chewing gum like a six-year-old who’d just consumed a lifetime’s supply of Haribo.

I hadn’t told Mum and Jeff I was moving out. As far as they were aware, I’d forgotten the hitting incident and had moved on, just slightly more submissive than before. I hadn’t ventured out of my room unless it was to leave the house altogether. I hadn’t tried to approach Mum again and she hadn’t attempted to approach me. It broke my heart that she

wasn't standing up for her own daughter, but if I was ever going to be able to help her, I had help myself first. And getting far away from Middlehurst Drive was top of my list.

I swigged down more Pepsi – the caffeine helped jump start my thinking away from my sorry home life towards the possibility of a future in which I'd have enough money to get the education I'd dreamed about. I glanced back at the screen. Then, as if time itself had stopped, I stared at the ticker, wondering why it hadn't budged for an age. I tapped the track pad and nothing happened.

What?

I hit the track pad and, again, nothing happened.

Whaaaaat? Fuck, fuck, fuck. What was going on?

I tried to close the window but the screen had frozen so I forced a shutdown and hopped from foot to foot while the spinning wheel of death taunted me from the blank window. *Come on, come on.* About a year later, the screen came to life and I restarted the browser, almost chewing my lip off in the process. The auction deadline had passed. Was I to be the proud owner of a hundred grand or was I not?

My eyes roamed the screen, unable to focus on any one thing. Then I read the line, 'Your auction has ended. Congratulations. Now meet your winning bidder.'

My heart lodged itself firmly in my throat as I clicked the button. It took me through to a profile page that contained no photograph and only one line of information: *Payment will be made to a holding company once contracts have been signed, then released on fulfilment. Instructions to follow.*

I scrolled to the foot of the page and felt an overwhelming sense of relief. The winning bid was a hundred thousand pounds. ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND POUNDS! My virginity. Sold. To the highest bidder.

The only bidder.

I closed my eyes against the inevitable 'what's wrong with me?' and 'Am I really so ugly?' inner prodding and reminded myself that others who may have been interested would

probably have seen the six figure bid and decided against it. Whoever had bid on me had put me in a league above the rest. My head swam with a combination of insatiable intrigue and dread. Who was it? And what were these instructions?

Almost immediately, a notification appeared at the top of my screen. A message had appeared in my inbox. It was from Lamont Law. I opened it and felt immediately intimidated by the very proper and complicated wording it used. I had to read over the letter three times before it made any sense.

This Agreement (“Agreement”) is entered into by both the parties described herein under as “Client” and “Provider”.

Dalziel Sebastian Edward Thorn, also described as the ‘Client’ and Rose Delilah Robinson, also described as ‘Provider’, do hereby agree to all the terms described and given below.

The term of this agreement begins immediately upon arrival at the Client’s property and shall continue until the service has been fulfilled.

The words swam but one line rose to the surface, higher than the rest. “Provider will be transported to the home of the client to fulfil the purpose of this agreement. The address of the client’s home is Blackcap Hall, Warlock Mount, Isle of Crow.”

Isle of Crow? I was going to the Isle of Crow? No one had stepped foot on that island in years. Decades. Maybe even a century. Hovering off the Scottish mainland by a few hundred miles, it was notoriously closed off from the rest of the UK. It was completely isolated and inhabited by the world’s most reclusive billionaires. Well, that figured. One of them just paid for my virginity.

Excitement and fear wrapped around the base of my spine and wound upwards until I shook with nerves.

This was it. I was going to lose my virginity to a billionaire and become rich in the process. It was too good to be true. On paper it promised to make me, but I had a nagging feeling it might break me instead.

CHAPTER

Three

Rose

I WAS a mass of trembling bones when the helicopter touched down. We landed in the centre of a tarmac circle surrounded by manicured nature and not much else. There were no buildings for as far as the eye could see, only a long, black Mercedes with opaque windows and tyres that looked like they'd been polished with a cashmere brush.

An older man dressed in a slick tailored suit held out a hand and didn't flinch when mine shook uncontrollably in his grip. He didn't even bat an eyelid. He didn't say a word either as we drove across the island to the place where I was to lose my virginity to a total stranger.

The landscape passed in a blur. The only images I saw were those in my head: potential scenarios, feelings, nerves, questions. So many questions. *What does he look like? How old is he? Is he one of the infamous Isle of Crow billionaires? Does he live in a mansion? Is he single? God, I hope he's single.* It occurred to me I might be about to sleep with a serial virginity-taker. Perhaps this was his hobby. Some men like gambling or golf, maybe breaking in a virgin was that lesser-known of billionaire pastimes.

More questions flooded my head: *Where will we do it? When will we do it? Will it happen quickly or will he want to get to know me? Will I like it? Will it hurt?*

I pressed my fingertips to my temples and squeezed my eyes closed. I needed to clear my head before I met with the man who was going to make me a woman. When I reluctantly opened them again, the car was sweeping through an enormous, foreboding set of iron gates and up a tree-lined drive that looked long enough to reach mainland Europe. My lungs filled with awe and my skin prickled. A tightening in my stomach told me if I didn't get to a loo in the next twenty minutes, I may well have had an accident on my hands.

As the trees parted, a slate grey building came into view, stretching from the ground up into the clouds. Air vacated my chest through parted lips.

"It's enormous," I whispered.

I darted my gaze to the driver whose expression didn't budge even a millimetre.

I tried again. "Is this Blackcap Hall?"

He glided the car alongside the wide stone steps leading to the main entrance. "Yes, ma'am."

I reached for the door handle but the driver's curt warning halted me. "Someone is coming for you."

I sat back slowly and waited. Sure enough, a short, quick, highly efficient-looking man strode through the doors and down the steps. My voice was surprisingly timid as I thanked the driver and stepped out of the car.

"This way please, Miss Hemingway."

"My things—" I glided an arm towards the boot of the car where my suitcase still sat.

"They will be taken straight to your rooms," the man said without looking around.

Rooms? He said rooms? As in, plural?

I hurried after him into the darkness of the hall. Instantly, the sound of my footsteps rang around the walls as my heels echoed on the polished floor. In the dim light of the chandeliers, dust floated around us, and I fell in love.

Buildings were my passion. Architects and designers, my heroes. It only took me a second after reading the contract to start researching Blackcap Hall, but astonishingly, I found nothing. I would have devoured any information I could get my hands on.

“Before we go any further,” the man said, “I need to take a few personal items from you.”

I frowned. “Personal items?”

“Yes. I need all digital devices, recording devices and your passport.”

“My passport?”

His response was to hold his face straight and his flattened palm out.

I bent down and searched through my handbag for my British passport and iPad and handed them over.

He was deadpan. “Phone.”

“What if I need to call home?”

“We’ll arrange for you to use one of ours.”

I stared at him in disbelief. He couldn’t seriously want to take my phone from me? That was my lifeline. My connection to Remi, to the university, to my mum. It held all my photos, lists and eBooks.

“I have everything on my phone,” I said, my voice pleading.

“Master’s orders.” His reply was followed by a slow blink.

With much trepidation, I handed over my phone. It would only be for two or three days, tops. I could live without it for that long. In fact, I could probably do with a digital detox, and I could always fill Remi in on my newfound womanhood when back on dry mainland.

I followed the man through the cavernous entrance hall. Darkness intensified as we entered the mouth of a corridor and followed the pale flicker of sconces along both walls. Our footsteps echoed dully as we went. Eventually, we came to an

archway that reached from the floor to the high ceiling. Beyond it was a winding staircase that curled upwards. I had to tip my head back slightly to take in the narrowness of the space we stood in. It reached up hundreds of metres but couldn't have been more than ten feet in diameter. Doors punctuated every floor, each one getting darker and smaller the further up they went.

“Where are we?” My voice was breathy as we started up the loudly creaking staircase.

“The North Tower, miss. Where you'll be staying.”

I swallowed, almost choking on my dry throat. The damp air clung to my shivering skin and the darkness shrouded any confidence I'd mustered up to that point. Now, I was, quite frankly, shitting myself. What the hell had I been thinking? I was standing in some eerie castle that was barely on a map, preparing to meet a reclusive rich man who wanted to take the virginity of a woman he didn't know. Who else knew that was the reason I was there? Did the driver? The helicopter pilot? The guy showing me to my room? Sorry, *rooms*.

My cheeks heated and I focused intently on putting one foot on one step, the other foot on the next. By the time we reached halfway I was already out of breath and thankful my bags were going to find their own way to their destination.

“Not far now,” the man said, his eyes flashing at the sound of my ragged breaths.

I gripped the curling banister for extra ammunition, then the man stopped abruptly and fed a key into a door to the side of the staircase.

“After you.” He held the door open and I stepped past him into a room that couldn't have been more starkly different to anything else I'd seen so far. Light streamed in from enormous leaded windows, silver damask wallpaper reflected the sun and the light from the imposing chandelier. An intricately carved wooden desk sat to the right, while a black velvet sofa stretched across to the left. My feet sank into thick, cosy carpet and the scents of red, pink and stone roses collided from where

they overflowed from the giant vases positioned in every corner.

My heart stopped beating for a few seconds longer than I'd have liked but I couldn't blame it. The room was breathtaking.

I twisted slowly, open-mouthed, to face the doorman, only to see the handle turn as he closed the door leaving me alone. Alone and confused. What now? I was in heaven but for how long? And where was the man who'd paid for me?

I heard a throaty cough and jumped half out of my skin. The sound drew my gaze to a doorway at the far side of the room. My feet felt suddenly heavy as I debated whether to attempt to move them or not. My heartbeat rattled in my ears, slowly obliterating all external sound.

"Come in here Rose."

I sucked in a breath before forcing it out slowly. The voice, while commanding, sounded young. Maybe mid-twenties. Not what I'd expected at all. Why would a young guy with a deep, measured, confident voice need to pay someone for sex?

"Today, if you don't mind."

Despite the cool edge to his words, the tone wasn't frosty, and they subdued my nerves enough to allow me to move my feet. The closer I got to the doorway, the harder my heart pounded. I almost tiptoed over the threshold and stared wide-eyed into the sun-drenched room. I rubbed my eyes and squinted through the blinding rays that stretched across my path.

With my feet planted firmly into more soft carpet, I focused on the silhouette seated on the edge of an enormous bed. He might have been young but I could tell from his outline he was well-built. He held himself confidently, his feet parted on the floor, his hands resting across his thighs as he looked straight ahead out of the window.

I swallowed a ball of disbelief as more details emerged through the haze. His profile was beautiful. A smooth brow tapered to a strong nose, full lips and square jaw. The shadow-

black hair was short, thick and yearning to curl. I couldn't peel my gaze away.

"I trust the flight was satisfactory."

I cleared my throat. "It was, um... fine. Great. I've, um, I've never been in a helicopter before."

I winced as the last sentence tumbled out of my stupid mouth. I sounded naïve and inexperienced. Though, I supposed that's what he was paying for. My heart rattled again, reminding me why I was there. This man was going to take my virginity. I ran my gaze over his solid body again and gulped. There were undoubtedly worse ways to go.

"Did you read the contract?"

My eyes were drawn to an object he was turning over slowly in his hand as he continued to stare out of the window.

"Yes," I replied, uneasily.

"Your payment has been transferred to a neutral depository and it will be released into your personal bank account on delivery of the service."

I bristled at the mechanical, prescriptive way he was talking about one of the most meaningful things I could ever give to a person. Sure, I was devaluing myself by allowing someone to buy it from me, but it was still a precious thing, and I only had one virginity to give.

"Yes," I repeated, my voice weakened by the thought.

"There is one condition." The object kept turning, flashing light around the walls each time it caught the sun.

"A condition?" My heart raced with both trepidation and annoyance. There'd been no conditions stated in the contract.

The object stopped turning.

"You have to want it."

I swallowed and felt it in my bones. "I'm sorry?"

He turned his head and my jaw fell open. The one side of his face I'd had several minutes to study was beautiful,

flawless. The other was... non-existent. He stared at me with one dark, captivating eye and one pale, translucent orb. His skin was a patchwork of threads and craters, stitch marks and cords. My heart hammered again but for different reasons. What had happened to this beautiful man to make him this way?

My gaze dropped to where my hand was pressed in shock against my chest. I curled my fingers and nestled them into my other palm while the silence threatened to overwhelm me.

A creak in the floor made me look up. He'd risen to his feet and was towering over me from several feet away. He was huge. No, forget huge. This man was gigantic. Like, inhumanly big. But alarmingly, every part of him was proportionate and sharply toned. My stomach fluttered.

He took a step towards me and heat blossomed across my skin.

His good eye had hardened and, now out of the bright sun, that side of his face was in shadow. Just like the mood that seemed to have descended suddenly.

“You have to *want* it,” he repeated.

I sucked in a gasp and watched his brow furrow. Then a breeze cooled me as he strode past.

He paused in the bedroom doorway. “Supper will be brought to your room this evening. I will check on you in the morning. Get some rest Rose.”

His voice tapered off at the end, as though he'd had high hopes for something and they'd just been dashed. I was rooted to the spot but I heard the door to the suite close behind him.

I sighed, releasing a torrent of tension. Then a key turned in the lock.

No.

I spun around and walked briskly to the door, the sound of blood pulsing through my temples almost deafening. I turned the handle and pulled, but the door didn't budge. I'd been

locked inside the room. I clamped a hand to my chest again and took a step back. This couldn't be right. Could it?

I scanned the doorframe looking for some other explanation for the door refusing to open. Though it was old, it was in good condition. There was no sign of warping or sticking. I bent down and peered through the gap. A large solid bolt connected the door to its frame.

Feeling the urge to hyperventilate, I stood and focused on my breathing. In through the nose, out through the mouth. In, out. In, out. My fingers pressed against my temples and I scoured the room for a telephone or call button. There had to be an innocent explanation. He wouldn't have left me in a strange room, in a strange house, on a strange island, with no phone, no passport and no access to anyone. My heart pounded, no matter how hard I tried to remain calm. I ran my hands along every surface searching for phone sockets or buzzers, but there was nothing.

I ran to the windows but they were all bolted shut. I became suddenly aware of the need for air. Very quickly, panic set in and my heart raced. I gripped a wall and slid down it, my eyes wide with fear. I pressed my hands into the carpet and closed my eyes. In, out. In, out.

An hour or so later – at least, that's what it felt like since I had no means of telling the time – I was sitting on the large bed previously occupied by Dalziel Thorn, staring out of the window at the never-ending nothingness.

I was a million miles away when the lock turned. I leapt to my feet and raced to the door. The second it opened, I yanked it towards me and heard a male voice shout from the other side. There was a clatter of crockery, and a tray of hot food slid to the floor. I stepped over it and pushed past the man, briefly noticing his butler outfit as I made for the stairs.

I was so focused on where I put my feet, I didn't see the two giant security guards barrelling towards me until a thick arm wrapped around my neck and my feet were swept off the top step. My scream echoed around the tower before a large hand muffled my mouth, half blocking my airways. Back

inside the suite I was dropped to the floor. I twisted to get a look at the two men. One had already left, while the other stood over me, scowling.

“Looks like you won’t having any dinner tonight, Miss Hemingway,” he said, with a tone of utter boredom.

“You can’t keep me locked in here. It’s imprisonment,” I rushed out.

He turned his back to me and walked through the door.

“It’s illegal!” I scrambled to my feet. “I want to leave. Now.”

I ran the three paces to the door only to feel a whoosh of air as it slammed shut. I launched for the handle but just as it turned, so did the key in the lock.

“This is AGAINST THE LAW,” I yelled. “It’s kidnapping.”

A low voice fed itself round the edge of the door. “Not on this island it isn’t.”

I staggered backwards until I felt the edge of a glass coffee table at the back of my knees. Then, fuelled with absolute rage, I spun around, lifted it off its three legs and hurled it at the wall.

CHAPTER

Four

Dax

IT TOOK everything in me to not slam the door so hard it shattered the eighteenth century frame. Rage levitated me and sorrow dragged me down. I clung to the banister winding round the staircase and clawed my way up two floors to the tower – to the room I had insisted I move to after the countless surgeries had failed to restore my face. I couldn't bear to see the pity in peoples' eyes, the questioning looks and the shocked intakes of breath. I didn't want to be reminded that my whole future had melted in seconds, just like everything south of my hairline. I needed to be as far away from *people* as I could get.

I did slam the door to my own room and stormed straight to the window. With my fists pounded into the wall on either side, I let out a thunderous curse, one so loud the glass shivered. I knew no one would've heard me. Father had installed state-of-the-art sound-proofing shortly after I moved into this room, to shield my mother from the heart-splitting cries I couldn't hold in. These outbursts had grown few and far between, but in moments like this, they simply couldn't be contained.

The second she'd appeared in the doorway, my entire being lit up. My gut softened, assuring me the photograph she'd posted online was not only genuine, it had done her very little justice. In the flesh she was... *perfect*.

She was demure in stature, yet bold in character – she would have to be to sell her virginity to a total stranger. Her hair shone gold with a strawberry hue and it fell over one shoulder just as I'd imagined it would. Her petite nose and delicate chin were eclipsed by almond eyes that expressed everything in one glance. And that's what reached into my ribcage and squeezed a little bit of the life out of me.

There was no mistaking the desire beneath the flutter of her lashes as she first took me in. When I turned my whole face towards her, she couldn't stand to look anymore. She averted her eyes and stared down at her hands. It was a reaction I'd almost got used to but, the fool that I was, I'd dreamed of something different with this woman. Ever since I'd found her online, I hadn't been able to get her out of my head. The second I laid eyes on the photo in her profile, my heart was taken.

I meant what I said. I didn't want to take her virginity if her heart wasn't in it. I wanted her to want it. I *needed* her to want it. Genuine desire was the one thing money couldn't buy. Yet, the sound of her sharp inhalation when I delivered my condition would haunt me forever, because nothing about it said she would ever willingly give herself to me. At least, not for less than a hundred thousand pounds.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the key. It was large, brass, and like everything oppressive in this house, highly polished.

I would bend her to me.

She would submit to my will.

And I felt serene confidence in this, because she wouldn't be going anywhere until she did.

CHAPTER

Five

Rose

I STARED BLANKLY at the door, my stomach growling despite the fact I didn't want to eat a thing this place tried to serve me. I assumed it was mid-morning. The dawn chorus woke me from a chequered sleep and I drifted off again for what felt like a couple of hours. I was so high up in the tower, and so far from any other part of the Hall, there were no other sounds to be heard. No trays rattling, no voices chattering, no engines running outside on the drive.

What was it he'd said? I had to *want* it. That was his condition.

How the hell he expected me to *want it* after keeping me imprisoned in a goddamned tower, I didn't know. And to think I'd found him attractive even with the scars exposed. He could screw his hundred thousand pounds. I didn't want a penny of his money, not if he needed to kidnap me to make sure I held up my end of the bargain.

I spent the rest of the day alternating between watching the door and drifting off to sleep. When the sky blackened and it became clear I wouldn't be given dinner, let alone breakfast or lunch, I climbed back into bed and stared unblinking at the ceiling until I became so bored there was no other option but to sleep.

The sound of movement in the next room jolted me awake, but terror rooted me to the mattress. Someone was inside the suite.

“Who’s there?” I forced out through croaky vocal cords.

A small figure appeared in the doorway. “Sorry miss, I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

I rubbed my eyes and narrowed them on a young girl dressed in black with a white collar and apron.

“I’ve brought you breakfast.”

“You’re a day late,” I snapped, sliding out of the bed.

She stopped mid-stride and flushed a deep red. “I don’t know anything about that, miss. I wasn’t on shift yesterday.”

I followed her to the table where she’d laid out an array of pastries, cold meats, cereals and fresh fruits. “May I pour you some fresh coffee?” she asked, holding up a metal pot.

“I trust it hasn’t been laced with arsenic.”

Her gasp made me blink. “Of course not, miss.”

I nodded curtly. “Then yes please.”

As she poured, I remembered the coffee table and glided my gaze to the back of the room. Panes of cracked glass and metal spokes had been stacked against the wall. I turned back to the maid who’d stopped pouring and was watching me with interest.

“Someone’s coming to clear it away,” she said, then smiled. “I never liked that table.”

I watched, blankly, as she poured a drop of milk into the cup – exactly as I liked it – and stirred it with a teaspoon.

I breathed in heavily. “Can you bring me my phone please?”

She shook her head and stepped away from the table. “No, miss. And even if it didn’t require that I risk my job, my life and that of my family, I wouldn’t know where to start looking

for it. I expect even Master Thorn doesn't know every nook and cranny of Blackcap Hall."

I lifted a resigned brow. "Then can I ask to see Dalziel Thorn?"

"Of course, miss. I will pass the message on to his office."

I was about to snort at the ridiculousness of the situation but thought better of it. I should have been thinking about befriending this girl. She could be the key to getting me out of this place.

I swallowed back everything my bitter heart wanted to say, and instead thanked her. I followed her to the door, half-planning to push my way out again but the second it opened, my eyes connected with the menacing glare of another security guard. The maid turned and gave me an apologetic smile before pulling the door closed.

Ka-clunk.

And there went the lock.

CHAPTER

Six

Dax

I DIDN'T BOTHER KNOCKING before I unlocked the door. Not that it mattered. I had men everywhere; there was no way she'd get out of the tower, let alone the house. I stepped into the room and a fluttering sensation picked up in my belly. God knows what it was but it made me almost nauseous. She appeared immediately, her feet planted and her arms stiff as if bracing for an attack, and she was still wearing the outfit she arrived in.

"Have you even showered?" The question was well-intentioned; I wanted her to feel at home here. But coupled with the grimace I naturally imparted, it sounded judgmental.

Her eyes bugged. "Yes, I've showered!"

"Then why are you still wearing those clothes?"

She chewed on her lip. "Because... I only packed for three days and I don't particularly want to lounge about a prison in an evening gown."

I swallowed. "You brought an evening gown?"

"I didn't know what to expect," she said, then laughed bitterly. "I actually thought it might be treated as a special occasion."

"I'll have some clothes delivered for you."

She planted her hands on her hips. “Or... you could just give me back my stuff and let me leave.”

I cocked my head to one side. “Why? Don’t you want your money?”

“Not if it means becoming your prisoner to get it,” she snapped. “That wasn’t in the contract. Now I know why you bid so much money for me. It wasn’t just my virginity you wanted, was it? You wanted a pet.”

My chest constricted painfully, propelling me across the room. Her face paled as I approached but she didn’t back away. “You’re comparing yourself to an *animal*?”

She tilted her chin upwards and glared at me. “Well, isn’t this what happens to animals? People keep them in cages and train them to submit?”

My fists clenched and unclenched without command. “I’m not training you to do anything.”

“But you’re not denying you’ve thrown me in a damn cage, are you? You think so little of me you’re happy to lock me in here and not feed me for twenty-four hours. That’s downright abuse.”

My voice trembled, unrecognisably. “Don’t talk to me about thinking so little of yourself. You’re the one who put yourself up for sale.”

“No...” She had the guts to poke a sharp fingernail into my chest, but instead of breaking the entire hand, which was what I’d normally do, I craved the pain. “I put my *virginity* up for sale, not *me*. But you don’t seem to have any intention of taking it, so you should just LET...” *Poke*. “ME...” *Poke*. “GO!” *Poke*.

I snatched her finger and held it tight as her eyes darted between our hands and my face. Chemistry combusted through my veins at the feel of her skin on mine, disorientating me. Her lips parted for a second, then she pulled back her hand.

“I’m not letting you go until you deliver what you agreed to,” I said, forcing my voice to sound less menacing and more human.

“Then take it. Now.”

I opened my mouth to reiterate my condition of purchase but her quick movements distracted me. She pushed her jeans down her legs and stepped out of them, then pulled the t-shirt over her head until she was standing in front of me wearing only a bra and pants. My errant gaze swept over her and the sight of such flawless skin and the sweet curve of her belly and hips took my breath away.

“Come on,” she demanded, although the conviction had left her voice. “Let’s get it over with.”

I couldn’t speak. It had been a long time since a woman had stood before me almost naked, and never before had one so perfect bared herself to me.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I forgot.” She pouted and rolled her eyes. “I *want* it.”

Fury exploded in my chest and before I could stop myself, her back hit the wall, her wrists were captured in mine, and my mouth was so close to hers I could taste the soft hairs lining her top lip. Seconds passed while my heaving chest met hers. Her eyes narrowed like a cat’s and she stared at me, unblinking. My thumb brushed over her pulse and felt it raging beneath the delicate skin. I had to hand it to her, she was afraid but carrying it off as defiance.

I breathed her in, all floral-scented deliciousness of her, one last time. “Don’t give up the day job, Rose,” I growled. “You’re a fucking *shit* actress.” Then I pushed myself off the wall and stepped back.

She lowered her arms, keeping her eyes on me. That was when I noticed her chin trembling. In any normal human, that should have inspired regret, shame, guilt. But I wasn’t a normal human. My skin had become thickened by scars and my purpose in life was constricted to selfish greed and nothing more. It was only through the privilege of family wealth I had more money than I knew how to handle. If I hadn’t had that, I would’ve ended my life before now. What was the point of living with the physical evidence of worthlessness when there was no money to suggest otherwise?

Her shoulders suddenly dropped, as though she was finally seeing the futility of her resistance. “How am I supposed to get into the part when you lock me in here all alone all day? If you want me to want you, you have to let me get to know you. I can’t just turn it on like a light switch.” She wrapped her arms around her middle.

I drew my gaze away and walked into the bathroom. From a cupboard I pulled out a freshly laundered bathrobe and carried it back out to the suite. Her gaze flitted about as I neared but softened when I opened the robe. She slid her arms through the sleeves and allowed me to tie the belt. My fingers brushed the cotton covering the side of her breast and we both froze.

I stood up straight. “What do you need Rose?”

She shrugged and glanced at the floor. “I don’t know... a date?”

Her awkwardness almost matched my own.

“I don’t do dates.”

She flicked her face back to mine. “And I don’t do desire-on-demand. Guess we’re going to have to compromise somewhere.”

I watched her as I took steadying breaths. “Dinner then. Here at the Hall.”

She brightened slightly. “When?”

I closed my eyes against the discomfort of having to actually spend time with another person. “This evening,” I said, with all the joy of an arachnophobe being forced into a tank of spiders.

I turned away and walked to the door, feeling her curious gaze on my back. “Clothes will be delivered,” I said, without turning round.

Then I walked out, locking the door behind me.

CHAPTER

Seven

Rose

I LAID on the bed and stared out of the window, paralysed with boredom, until a faint knock at the door made my heart thump. I reached for the bathrobe Dalziel had wrapped around me and threw it on just in time to see the door to my suite open and the maid from my second day step inside. This time though, she had company.

“A delivery for you, miss.”

I hugged the robe around myself as two men entered pulling a covered clothes rack into the room. I stepped back to let them pass through to the bedroom. Neither one of them batted an eyelid at my clothes – underwear included – strewn across the floor. Without speaking, they removed the enclosure, revealing about twenty suit bags. Deftly, they unzipped each one and hung the garments in my cavernous wardrobe. They worked so quickly, I couldn't identify what each item was but my heart fluttered at the sight of such beautiful fabrics, all in shades and tones that would complement my notoriously clashy colouring. Creams, corals and the palest of greens swayed together like a perfect sunset over a crystal sea.

I waited as the men packed up the rail and suit bags and left without any acknowledgement I was even there, then I turned to the maid.

“Master Thorn has invited you to dine with him downstairs,” she said, averting her gaze from my bathrobe.

My eyebrows shot up. “Now?”

“In one hour.” She glanced up shyly. “I’ll be waiting for you outside.”

As soon as she left, I opened the wardrobe and rifled through the clothes, both loving the textures and hating the fact I did.

There were six day dresses, each with different hems, cuts and necklines; four evening gowns in pale grey, sand, peach and coral; four stunning shirts and blouses; four pairs of trousers – two smart and two casual; and two hanging bags filled with nightwear and lingerie. I swallowed as I laid each set on the bed. My eyes were immediately drawn to a pale pink balconette bra made of the finest, softest lace, and matching pants. I caressed them before looking back to the gowns. *What should I wear?*

I did a mental inventory of the scenario. I was about to have dinner in a grand stately home with a handsome but intensely unlikeable stranger who was paying for my virginity but holding me captive until I was ready to deliver it wholeheartedly. Remi was going to have a conniption.

I selected a floor-length crepe slip in pale pink to match the underwear. It shamelessly exposed the first degree burn scar across my back. Then the realisation hit me like a falling stack of bricks. This was why he’d chosen me. I was as damaged as he was. The only difference was I had the ability to hide my own scars. Dalziel couldn’t hide his from anyone. Forget wearing his heart on his sleeve, Dalziel Thorn wore his history on the side of his face.

I wondered again what had happened to him. I knew enough about scars to be certain those were not birth marks. Those had been inflicted. It was clear to me he had too much pride and – dare I admit it – *spirit* to do that to himself. Someone had done it *to* him. But who? And why? And were they still in his life? I was likely I would never know.

I freshened up in the bathroom, fastened my hair in a loose knot and freed a few strands around my face. I kept my make-up minimal, only applying a little blush to my cheeks and gloss to my lips.

“You look beautiful, miss.” The maid’s eyes widened for a brief moment before she glanced away again timidly. The presence of two solidly built security oafs was unmissable and I felt horribly self-conscious as we descended the stairs.

We walked through a series of dimly lit corridors until we reached a dark, slate-coloured door that was almost the size of my house back home. The maid pushed it open and led me into an enormous room with unfeasibly high ceilings peppered with ornate mouldings. The walls were edged with black wood panelling and beautiful wallpaper depicting all the flora and fauna, nature and wildlife I’d read could be found on the Isle of Crow. My breath caught in my throat as I took it all in.

“Take a seat, miss.” The maid’s words cut through my reverie and I dropped my gaze to a table in the centre of the room. It was long and thin with a chair at each end. In one of them sat Dalziel, but I’d known that already. I’d felt the heat of his gaze the second I entered the room. Strangely, I didn’t feel the need to look back at him. Something about his presence felt permanent. He’d still be there to see when I eventually looked his way.

He sat back in a chair, casually, like he owned the place – which he practically did – and his pale eye narrowed on me. “You heard her. Take a seat.”

He glanced at the maid and jerked his head. His dismissal of her tasted sour in my mouth.

I frowned. “You seriously want me to sit all the way down here?”

He crossed a leg over his knee, the corner of his mouth quirking slightly. “Unless you want to sit on the floor.”

“I know how to move a chair,” I said with a pout. “But you’re supposed to be the gentleman here.”

His good brow arched. “And I thought I’d paid for a lady. What’s wrong with sitting at the end of the table?”

“I thought the whole idea was for me to get to know you. I can hardly do that when you’re a dot in the distance.”

He chewed the side of his mouth while his good eye creased in one corner. After a minute or two of stand-off, he got to his feet and walked lazily to the other end of the table, holding my gaze the entire time. He lifted the chair with one hand and carried it to the opposite end, placing it adjacent to his.

“Better?” he deadpanned.

I blew a strand of hair from my face and squared my shoulders. “Much. Thank you.”

His heated gaze followed me to the chair. I went to pull it out to sit but it wouldn’t budge. I tried two hands and it moved half an inch. I released my grip, feeling the skin across my cheekbones parch. *He’d lifted it one-handed with the ease and grace of a swan.*

“Need some help?” The smirk wasn’t visible on his face but was overwhelmingly present in his voice.

I took a deep breath and steeled myself. “Yes please.”

He stood and pulled out the chair like it weighed no more than a silver spoon. I chewed my lip and sat, transferring my focus to the table.

As if they’d been standing right outside waiting, a team of waiters trotted into the room holding trays aloft. Without making any eye contact with either of us, they bent low and served a range of delicacies onto the thinnest china plates I’d ever seen. I stared at the food, hoping saliva wasn’t dribbling down my chin, and continued even when the room was quiet again.

Dalziel lifted his knife and fork then paused. His presence was so formidable, his breathing shifted the energy around us both, untethering me.

“I do hope you’re not waiting for me to say grace.” The sarcasm in his voice was thick. “It’s been a long, *long* time since God walked these halls.”

I looked up at both sides of his face. Neither of them were bluffing.

I speared a bean and bit into it. He drove a fork into a piece of steak and fed it into his mouth. It was the first time I really noticed his lips. Only the right corner had been seared. The remaining skin was soft and unblemished. He watched me closely as I ate, the silence strangely comforting. We both cleared our plates and lowered our cutlery.

“This is a beautiful room,” I said, glancing around.

He breathed deeply beside me. “I don’t do small talk, Rose,” he said, sharply. “Either say something meaningful or say nothing at all.”

I glared at him. “Fine. Does asking you a question count as meaningful?”

His good eyebrow curved into a perfect arch. “It depends on the question.”

“Why did you pay so much for me?”

His eyes widened for a beat of a second then resumed their nonchalant normality. “I didn’t want to be outbid. When I see something I want, I do everything in my power to get it.”

His confession knocked the wind from my chest so I reached for the glass of wine I’d sworn I wouldn’t touch and drank half of it.

“In the short time I spent researching the auction site, I didn’t see any bid go above ten thousand. You could have bid twelve thousand and still won.”

He brought his own wine glass to his lips. “Where’s the fun in that? Besides, you don’t know that for sure.”

“Most bids I saw settled at a couple of thousand, and even then, the girls were beautiful – like supermodels.”

He lowered his glass slowly and placed it on the table with highly controlled care, then his head rotated towards me. “Are you saying you’re not worth a hundred thousand pounds?”

I swallowed, unnerved by the sudden depth of his voice. “I don’t really think you can put a price on anyone.

“But you put yourself up for sale.”

“Because I need the money,” I said, folding my arms.

The door opened and more waiters appeared. I felt his gaze scorch my skin as we waited for the plates to be removed and a dessert course to be delivered.

As soon as the door closed, he spoke again. “Why do you need money?”

I took a deep breath. “I want to go to university and unfortunately education doesn’t come cheap.”

“Your parents can’t pay for you?” He lifted a fork and dug into a pot of rosemary chocolate fondant.

I looked away and tried to find something distracting to focus on.

“They could. They just choose not to. Besides, I need to get myself another place to live, after my stepfather hit me...”

The clatter of a fork dropping onto a china plate made me jump, but the look on his face made me fearful. “He... *what?*”

I spoke slowly. “His best friend’s daughter was a bully. I fought back, Jeff didn’t like it, he hit me.”

“So, you don’t have anywhere to live?”

I shook my head. “No. But it’s fine. I’ll stay with friends until I get a university place.” I picked up my own fork hoping to draw a line under the topic.

“Which friends?”

I almost spat out the fondant but swallowed it instead, feeling a large chocolatey lump ease its way too slowly down my throat. I took another few mouthfuls of wine. It really was

delicious. “College friends,” I replied, eventually. “Why do you want to know?”

“Are they trustworthy?”

“Yes...” My voice had risen an octave. “Of course they are.”

He didn’t seem satisfied with my answer as he placed his cutlery down and pushed away his plate, eyeing me the whole time.

“I’ll pay for you to stay in a hotel until you find a place to live.”

I gasped. “What? But that’s ridiculous. You don’t even know me, and after, you know, we do the thing I came here to do, I’ll be out of your life forever. You’ll never see me again.”

For a second, he looked as though *I’d* slapped *him*, but the mirage was quickly replaced by a scowl. “That’s irrelevant.”

“I don’t need a sugar daddy.”

He half-laughed. “I’m not old enough to be your sugar daddy.”

“Age is *irrelevant*,” I said, throwing his own words back at him. “I don’t need a man to take care of me.”

“Maybe not. But I won’t take your virginity then send you back to the mainland homeless.”

“It won’t be your problem. I’m nobody’s problem.” I heaved out a breath and looked away. “It’s pointless talking about it anyway. We should be discussing what I came here for.”

“What is there to discuss?”

She flicked her head back in my direction. “When are we going to do it?”

“When you’re ready.”

“I’m ready now.” My voice was low but didn’t conceal the tremble in my words.

He shook his head. “No, you’re not. You said you wanted to get to know me. So, here I am. Get to know me.”

I felt hot blood rush into my cheeks. “Fine. What happened to your face?”

His jaw ticked to one side. “Too soon.”

My heart sank. “When will it not be too soon? You’re planning on keeping me here until you feel it’s the right time to tell me what happened?”

“You’re the one who thinks you need to know, in order to get to know me.”

“When will you tell me?”

“When I’m ready.” His eyes blackened and even his clear one filled with shadow.

I looked around as my mind scrambled for things to talk about, questions to ask. I raised my eyes to the ceiling, noticing for the first time a chandelier that was adorned with thousands of crystals. “Is this a... ballroom?”

His gaze roamed every angle of my face. “Yes.”

“Well then, maybe we should dance.”

“Sure,” he replied, lifting his wine glass again.

“I’m being serious.” I turned to face him. “I can’t be in a ballroom for the first – probably *only* – time in my life and not dance. What kind of a date would that be?”

“I don’t dance.”

I had reached the end of my tether and then some. “Then let me dance with one of your security men,” I said with a huff. “There are enough of them around the place and there’d be even less chance of me escaping.”

He watched the last of his wine dance in the glass before tipping it back. “You won’t be going anywhere, Rose.”

I thinned my lips, frustration bubbling up inside me, then he snapped his fingers.

Immediately, another waiter appeared and ran to Dalziel's side. He bent low and Dalziel whispered something in his ear. The waiter stood, nodded and walked briskly out of the room. In seconds, the sound of a harp filled the enormous room and the first notes of a classical piece I vaguely recognised tripped off the walls.

Breathless, I looked up to see Dalziel already on his feet holding out a hand. I took it, blinking at the same surge of heat that had infused me when he grabbed my finger. He led me away from the table and turned me to face him. He threaded his right arm slowly beneath my left until his fingers lightly touched the scarred skin over my shoulder blade. I held my breath and watched his eyes for any reaction but there was none. Only a determined focus on some distance point beyond me.

I rested my arm along his and my palm on his shoulder. I didn't need to apply any pressure to feel the thick muscle tissue beneath his tux jacket. It was so full and solid, I was surprised his body was able to breathe. He took my right hand in his left and raised it in the starting position, then the harp picked up again. It sounded like raindrops on a summer's day and so romantic my chest hummed with pain.

He moved me with disarming gentleness around the room, holding me lightly, applying pressure when my rusty steps threatened to throw us off course. As was customary, we faced in opposite directions, but after a minute or two I couldn't resist turning to look at him.

"You're a good dancer," I said, working to keep the surprise out of my voice.

"What did I say about small talk?" he replied.

I swallowed, annoyed I hadn't thought of anything more inspired to say. He led me through a lap of the room while the music danced around us.

"What made you choose this piece?"

I thought I felt his arm tense beneath mine but that couldn't have been right. The man was control personified.

“It’s my favourite.” He guided me more smoothly through a bend, his fingers lightly dusting my spine.

I suddenly wanted to know everything about it. “What is it called?”

“It’s the Waltz of the Flowers by Tchaikovsky.”

“I’m sure I’ve heard it before,” I said, wracking my brains to place it.

I felt his shoulder ease slightly and there was a softness to his voice. “The Nutcracker Suite.”

“That’s it.” I grinned.

We moved another lap around the room then he finally turned his head. “It’s believed Tchaikovsky dedicated this piece to his favourite rose.” His eyes landed on mine briefly.

My heart seemed to jam inside my chest, stuttering with confusion. There was no way on earth I felt anything for this man. He’d kidnapped me and was holding me captive against my wishes. He’d agreed to sleep with me once in return for payment, but was even withholding that, and for what? Because he needed to feel *wanted*? I should have been hating him, despising him, finding any way I could to escape, but those feelings hadn’t surfaced. It didn’t make any sense. I was in shock – that was the only explanation. Shock had rendered me incapable of seeing a way out.

The crepe skirt flowed around my ankles as we moved, but the luxuriousness of it tasted bitter. I had to get out of there and back to normality, money or no money.

“I’m ready, Dalziel,” I whispered.

He drew us to a standstill and lowered his gaze to me. “What for?”

“I’m ready for you to take my virginity.”

His nostrils flared slightly as he considered my words and the final bars of the music drew the waltz to a close.

Finally, he shook his head once. “No, you’re not.”

I withdrew my arms angrily. “Isn’t it up to me to decide?”

A vein on the good side of his face throbbed. “NO,” he thundered. “I’m the one paying. I’m the one who gets to decide if you’re ready or not.”

I was suddenly raging. “Then at least tell me what the criteria is for being ready, since you claim to know so much about me.”

He stepped forward, bringing his steel chest to mine. I had to crane my neck to maintain eye contact. “I already told you.” His voice rumbled with conviction. “You have to want it.”

“I do want it,” I said through gritted teeth.

“No, you don’t. Not yet.”

“Yes. I. *Do.*”

My hands clenched into fists at my sides. I was incandescent with frustration.

His eyes narrowed. “You’re lying.”

Feeling utterly helpless, I growled and stamped a foot. “Stop telling me what I’m doing and what I’m feeling. For God’s sake, I want to... to sleep with you. Okay? That’s what I’m here for and I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.”

He lifted his fingers to my jaw and I flinched, then instantly regretted it. Now he suspected I was bluffing. His fingers curled into my skin and he moved my face with surprising gentleness from side to side. “You have to want it.”

“I know,” I whispered. “I do.”

Holding my face still with one hand, he lifted my dress with the other. It happened too fast for me to wonder what he was doing. Then I felt his rough fingers shove inside my pink lace pants. My eyes stretched wide and I jerked my head against his tightening grip. His eyes might have been on mine but his focus was on the space between my thighs. He drove a finger into the shallow of my opening. I knew it was bone dry.

He whipped his hand back and released me with a scowl. “You’re a liar.”

My mouth dropped open and I walked backwards, hugging my arms around myself. After a few seconds, I cleared my throat.

“I can’t just turn it on,” I said, glaring at him. “You have to put some effort in.”

When he didn’t respond, I continued. “I’m no expert but I’m pretty sure it takes more than a quick dinner and dance to make a girl ready for sex. You have to work for it.”

He arched a sceptical brow. “Enlighten me.”

“Make me feel special. Touch me. Kiss me.” My pitch rose with every demand.

His Adam’s apple moved as he swallowed. “You want me to kiss you?”

Blood surged into my cheeks and I dropped my gaze to the floor.

Time stopped and all I could hear were ragged breaths that seemed to get louder in the empty, cavernous room. Long agonising seconds passed before he brushed past me and stalked to the door. The moment he left the room I had to pinch the bridge of my nose.

There was no way – no way on God’s earth – I was going to cry for this man.

CHAPTER

Eight

Dax

I STORMED BACK into the main hall and past the central staircase, heading towards the North Tower: my retreat. Anger vibrated through my legs more with each step. What had I expected? Of course she was lying. She was doing whatever it took to get her money and get out of there. She didn't find me attractive in any way, shape or form. I'd stupidly allowed myself, with each sidelong glance and each spark I felt when we touched, to gather hope. I was a stupid fucking idiot. What normal woman – let alone one with a brain like a shard of glass and looks that could command an army – would ever be interested in someone like me?

I was damaged. Deformed and ugly. A beast.

Sure, I was rich. But as it turned out, that didn't matter. In fact, my wealth had become my only allure.

I couldn't put too much blame on myself for dreaming. Guiding that exquisite woman around the dancefloor to the most ingenious piece of music ever written was possibly the highlight of my life so far. My heart swelled under the weight of her undivided attention. She listened to the few words I said as though she actually heard them. She rose to the challenge of asking meaningful questions, even though I refused to answer.

I wasn't ready to tell her what had happened. I wasn't ready to tell anyone. Even my family. My father was the

strongest man I knew but knowing the truth about where my scars came from would break his heart.

My head was full of the sight of her lips asking me to kiss her, the sound of her breath as we skated across the floor. So, when a large figure stepped out in front of me, almost knocking me out cold, I swore like a sailor with a foghorn.

“Jeez, Dax! Look where you’re going.”

My cousin, Rupert, middle son of my father’s brother Sinclair stared at me, his face fixed in shocked annoyance.

“What the fuck? Where are you going this time of night?”

He frowned. “I should be the one asking you. I haven’t seen you outside the North Tower in months. If I hadn’t been to visit you on the regular, then I’m not sure I’d recognise you.”

“I just went for a walk.” I shoved my hands in my trouser pockets.

“Dressed in a tux?”

Fuck. I forgot about that. “Just taking it for a spin.”

“You’re taking a tux for a spin?” His cocked brow told me he was not buying my bullshit. “Now look what you’ve done. You’ve got me all intrigued. I’m not going to leave you alone until you tell me where you’ve been.”

I huffed out a breath. “Fine. I’ve been at dinner.”

His eyes widened. “With whom?”

“No one you know.” Shit. If I could have kicked myself without him seeing, I would have done so several times.

“This is the Isle of Crow, Dax. Everyone knows everyone.” He brought himself closer and lowered his voice. “What are you hiding?”

My eyes searched his for any suggestion he might do something underhand with whatever information I gave him – that was generally the way with my family – but all I saw was genuine interest, laced with a little concern. Because that’s how people looked at me now. With concern. Concern for my

body, concern for my mental health, concern for my lonely heart.

I decided to err on the side of caution. “It was Gerry’s birthday.”

Rupert bit back a smile. “Gerry? Your security guy? You two a thing?”

I punched his arm but he didn’t even wince. The man was made of steel. I thought I was a battle-axe in the weights room but I was nothing compared to Rupert.

“No. But even if we were, I wouldn’t hide it. Anyway, he’s been working like a damn trojan these last few weeks and I thought he deserved some kind of recognition.”

“Why didn’t you just buy dinner for him and his partner?”

I felt the back of my neck start to sweat. Rupert wasn’t buying my story and was gleefully rejoicing in making this more difficult than it needed to be.

“Because... I wanted to show some interest in him. Isn’t that what good bosses do?”

Rupert snorted. “In any other world but this one.”

For a few seconds we shared a look of recognition, a silent acknowledgement of the fucked-up family and fucked-up way of life we’d all been raised in.

He pushed himself off the wall. “Yeah, well, I’ll let you get on.”

“Sure,” I replied, feeling my nerve endings sigh with relief.

“You look good, cuz,” he said, as I walked past. “You should do more stuff that requires a tux.”

I glared at him. I didn’t look *good*. I looked like a giant skin graft in a custom suit.

“Goodnight Rupert,” I bit out. I felt his pitying eyes on my back as I walked away.



I didn't want to wake up. My dreams had been filled with visions of Rose. Even in the depths of sleep I could feel her touch on my shoulder and the weight of her arm along mine. Our fingers were threaded together as we glided around the ballroom in a never-ending waltz. There was no conversation, only touch. Conversation seemed too lowly a thing to be permitted to intercept our little slice of time. But the sensation of touch deepened until we were moulded together as one. Her smile became mine. My body became hers.

When I reluctantly opened my eyes, the feeling stayed with me. Rose was more than just some girl who wanted to sell her virginity. She was a goddess who was only still in this tower because I'd imprisoned her.

I growled low and pushed myself out of bed into the shower. It was still early but I didn't want to wait until a supposedly respectable hour. I wanted to see Rose now. It didn't matter that a sweep of her gaze made me feel as unworthy as I was, or that her thinly veiled hatred was impossible for her to disguise. I just wanted to bask a little in her proximity. I'd never have a woman like Rose in my captivity again, so I wasn't going to waste another minute.

Freshly showered, I messaged Harrod. Ten minutes of pacing the room later, a knock came at the door. I opened it to find my butler standing at the other side, his head turned and brow raised in a look that said, 'are you sure about this?'

"Relax, Harrod." I took the tray from him and strode past and down the stairs two floors to the guest room.

One of my two security men unlocked the door for me, seeing as I had no hands free.

Her face was bright as the door revealed her, then it dimmed when she set eyes on me. Even the sight of a silver tray laden with French pastries, sliced fruits, cold meats and freshly brewed coffee failed to permeate her resentful exterior.

The door had swung wide to let me in, then the weight drew it closed with a loud clunk.

“I wasn’t expecting you,” she said in a bored tone, gesturing to the robe she was wrapped in. “If you give me a minute, I’ll change.”

“Don’t change on my account.” I wouldn’t have minded staring at the gap in her robe wondering what she tasted like beneath it. “Only if it makes you feel more comfortable.”

She held my gaze for longer than I expected, her pupils roaming my face as if looking for some hint of deception. “I think I would feel more comfortable.” Her voice cracked as she said the words.

I waited in the main suite while she headed to the bedroom to change. When she returned, I decided I liked floral day dresses way more than half-open bathrobes. I silently thanked Madame Galette, our family dressmaker. She hadn’t made all the dresses that had been delivered to Rose – she wouldn’t have had enough time to create garments to my standard – but she’d handmade this one, I could tell. It had all the signature details I’d come to recognise in the garments every female family member wore.

It had a conservative neckline that cleverly and subtly exposed the collar bone, a hint of lace beneath the hem of the skirt, a sharpness to the shoulder. In it, Rose looked like summer itself. Floral, warm... virginal.

“I brought breakfast.” The words came out quickly in an attempt to conceal the heat crawling through my pelvis.

Her long, pale eyelashes flicked up at me. “Ever the gentleman.” She pulled out a chair, ignoring the one I already held out for her, and sat.

I settled opposite her, filling the small chair with my bulk. At six foot three and two hundred and twenty pounds, I wasn’t made for parlour chairs. I caught her biting back a small smile at my obvious discomfort.

“Why breakfast?” Her question surprised me.

“What do you mean, ‘why breakfast’? Why not breakfast?”

She placed her hands in her lap and cocked her head to one side. “The way you marched out of the ballroom last night, without even a glance over your shoulder, I honestly expected to have been sent packing on a boat by now.”

I lifted the cloche, revealing a plate of warm croissants, and took one. I sliced it open then stroked a butter knife across its spongy flesh. “Didn’t you hear what I said, Rose?” I dipped the knife into a small pot of freshly cooked jam. It had always been my favourite, so Chef always made sure he had a small batch on the hob. I streaked it over the open croissant then cut it into small pieces. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“Until you take my virginity,” she clarified.

I placed the knife down and gave her my full focus. “Yes.”

“Which you will only do when you’re satisfied that I want it.”

I passed the plate to her. “That’s correct. Now, eat.”

“What jam is this?” she asked, without glancing down.

“It’s strawberry jam made with rose water. This morning in fact.” I poured two cups of coffee and lifted the jug of cream along with a questioning brow.

“Yes please.” She nodded. “And you’re eating with me, why?”

I shrugged. “You said you wanted to get to know me better, so here I am.”

“I was getting to know you just fine last night before you stormed out on me.”

I bristled. “I didn’t storm out on you. In my mind, the conversation had ended.”

“I’m guessing conversation isn’t your strong point.”

“Maybe not, but I don’t have much call for it these days.”

“Don’t you work?” She popped a piece of croissant into her mouth, chewed briefly, then stopped. My eyes were glued to her lips. They were the same colour as the jam. Slowly, she resumed chewing, swallowed, then popped another piece into mouth.

“Yes, I work. But in my line of work, not a lot of conversation is needed. I have people do that for me.”

She curved an eyebrow. “You have people converse for you? Oh my, how the rich live.” She nodded to my empty plate. “Aren’t you eating?”

I reluctantly reached for a slice of toast. The thought of sitting in front of this beauty as she watched my deformed face consume food made me feel physically sick.

“On the contrary, in my experience most rich people love the sound of their own voice.” I spread butter and jam on my toast and took a small bite.

“So, what do you do?” she asked, brightly.

Every bite felt exaggerated, as though the entire building could see and hear the motion of my chewing. I swallowed and reached for a napkin. “I work in real estate.”

“As in, you buy and sell buildings?”

“Buy, sell, flip, break up, manage.”

“Break up?” She popped the last piece of croissant in her mouth and I reached for another, this time going a little heavier on the jam.

“Yes. If a building is in the right location and the market demands it, I will break it up into smaller dwellings, then sell or rent them out.”

She stilled for a few seconds. “But, what about the character? If you break up a beautiful six storey town house into apartments, it takes away the building’s character.”

“Not the way I do it.” I cut the second croissant into pieces then handed it to her.

“So, how do you do it?”

I narrowed my eyes. “You really want to know?”

She nodded quickly. “I want to be an architect someday, so forgive me for wanting to geek out on this stuff.”

My heart stuttered. “You want to be an architect?”

“Yes. Eventually. I love interior design too, so I’m hoping to get some part time work doing that while I study.”

My whole torso stiffened, bracing around my heart. This woman was becoming more and more perfect with every damn breath. Not only was she scarred like me, but she was also sharp, gorgeous and shared the same passion I had for buildings.

“If things were different, I’d be using my architecture degrees too.”

“You’re qualified?” Her eyelids popped open. “Why don’t you practice?”

I shook my head lightly, enamoured at the sight of her eating food I’d prepared for her. “In my family, art is deemed somewhat... frivolous. Why spend my days drawing pretty pictures of houses when I could be charging barely affordable rents to people who want to live in those we already own?” I glanced at the table, not even able to smile off the bitterness in my tone. “We have something of a portfolio, let’s say, that needs managing. So, that’s what I do. I manage property.”

She thinned her lips in a sympathetic smile and I mentally shook it off. There was no way anyone could feel pity for my professional situation – not when they’d probably used up all their pity credit on the right side of my face.

“So, architecture. Where do you hope to study?”

She picked up a napkin and wrung it in her hands while looking off to the side. I studied her profile. She had wide-set eyes and a small nose that curved up slightly at the tip. Her lips were full but petite, leading down to a dainty chin and long, swan-like neck. I had to focus on hearing the words that came out of her mouth.

“I’ve got a place in Edinburgh.”

“That’s a good college. Your mum must be proud.”

“She might be, if she knew. But I’m not so sure anymore.”

She hung her head and every part of me wanted to reach out to her. I only permitted my hand. I let it slide along the table, slow and trepid, until the tips of my fingers touched hers. They instantly warmed. Not just a hint of warmth, or a slight glow. It was a heat that took me by surprise. It made me want to both snatch my hand back and eclipse it beneath hers. She slowly raised her head and shone wide eyes at me, her lips parted.

Thankfully, I remembered what I was planning to say. “Then you should be proud of yourself. I’ve seen your CV, Rose. It’s beyond impeccable. You deserve a place at Edinburgh.”

“You really think so?”

Her question threw me. She didn’t truly care what I thought. Usually, I would have waved off a comment like that – yeah, sure, whatever. But this time, I cared less that she couldn’t possibly be genuine; I just wanted her to believe in herself.

“Yes, Rose. And I’ve been in this business long enough to know talent when I see it.”

A dusky blush crept along her skin. “Thank you. That really means a lot, Dalziel.”

Her fingers crept along mine and dipped beneath the knuckles, seeking cover. The warmth spread up my arm, across my shoulders and down my back.

“You can call me Dax,” I said, breaking another of my rules.

She blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“Dax,” I repeated. “It’s short for Dalziel. Most people call me Dax.”

“Oh, right. Dax.”

My name settled in her mouth like it was meant to stay there, and my heart ached. I wanted nothing more than for her to whisper that name in the throes of a climax, but I wasn't sure I could give that to her. First of all, it wasn't likely she'd ever truly want me, so an orgasm was unlikely. Further, according to my research, it was practically unheard of for a virgin to have an orgasm the first time. Chances were high that I would never hear my name fall from this woman's lips in the way I wanted.

That thought ripped my hand from hers and I tensed instantly. I remembered Uncle Sinclair's famous words: if you're always on the attack, you need never play defence. This was my attack: to be impenetrable, to not show emotion, to not open myself up to ruin. I took from his catchphrase whenever I needed to feel strength or to justify when I'd been particularly hard on a tenant, and rarely more than that. Rupert and his younger brother Hector pretty much turned a deaf ear to it. But Ossian... Ossian Thorn, primary heir to his father's fortune, and without doubt the most avidly avoided human on the island... he lived and died by that theory.

"Will you ever allow me to leave these rooms?" Rose's face had hardened.

I frowned and looked around. "Why would you want to leave these rooms?"

Her eyes bugged. "To get some exercise? To breathe some fresh air? To feel for a few seconds like I might not be a total prisoner?"

I stared at her. The furnishings in this place cost the equivalent of a twin-engine aircraft. I'd made sure of it. The second I won Rose at auction, I had the entire suite ripped out and redecorated in the finest paints and furnishings.

"Where do you want to go?"

She sat back sharply. "Well... um... I'd like to see other parts of the house. Maybe if you have a library..."

"A library?"

I must have looked quite confused because her lips quirked at the corners. “Yes. You know, a place that houses books?”

I huffed. “I know what a library is. I’m just trying to understand why, when you’ve travelled all the way here, you want to visit a place you likely have access to at home.”

Her shoulders dropped. “No two libraries are ever the same. The editions, the variety, the smells... And think of all those stories hidden behind the spines.”

She shivered.

“Are you cold?”

“No. I’m just imagining what it feels like to stand in a library I’ve never visited before. It’s like making a new friend.”

Her tone was wistful and her eyes soft. In that moment I wanted to give her all the libraries in the world.

“We have one or two,” I said. “Or... five.”

She breathed in sharply. “You have five libraries?”

“For different purposes.” I waved a hand. “We have specialist libraries for things like business and professional interests. Mother has one of her own filled with what I can only imagine are romance novels, though I’ve seen a few dragons on the spines.” I mused with a shrug. “Father and Uncle have collections in their offices. And of course, there’s the master library.”

Rose licked her lips. “A master library?” she whispered, almost drooling like some drug addict.

“Yes. It’s where we house most of the first editions and collector’s items. We have all the classics, all the Booker prize winners, many contemporary works. I can show you if you like?”

“Sh-show me?” Her hands were braced on the edge of the table as she leaned towards me, sharpening my senses.

“Yes. That’s what you said you wanted, isn’t it?”

“Well, um, yes! I just... I just didn't expect you would let me see it.”

Something dark and thorny squeezed my heart. I stood and metaphorically straightened my spine.

“I'll come back this afternoon. Be ready.”

CHAPTER

Nine

Rose

I WATCHED HIS RETREATING BACK, feeling a mixture of fondness, awe and downright pissed-offness. Why was this man incapable of sticking around to finish a conversation? Oh, wait. He didn't do conversation, did he? He had people to do that for him. I rolled my eyes and popped the last small crumb into my mouth. I hadn't wanted to enjoy the croissant he prepared for me as much as I had. I picked up the small jar and dipped my little finger into it. Five minutes later, I'd shamelessly devoured it all.

I ran a hot bath and leisurely readied myself for what felt like noon. I still had no way of telling but I'd learned where the sun cast the shadows of the trees around the time my lunch was usually served. Sure enough, the second I rested my freshly manicured hands on the windowsill and pressed my lightly made-up face to the glass, a knock sounded at the door. I resisted an eye roll at the fact there was really no point in knocking since I couldn't open the damn thing anyway. Then a key turned in the lock and the door opened inwards.

Dax stood at the other side. His form and face looked darker somehow than that morning, even though he hadn't changed. I walked languidly towards him, feeling his gaze travel over the new dress I'd picked out. It was another day dress – a pale silk, knee-length slip that swished around my hips and thighs, reflected the light from the windows. It was

far more glamorous than anything I'd normally wear to a library, but hell, it was the only place I had to go, so why not dress up?

I walked half a pace ahead of him, down the stairs. At the bottom, he brushed his fingers against my back, directing me through the main hall towards yet another enormous wooden door. He pushed it open and drew a tormented gasp from my throat.

Fairy tales. Those were the only places that featured libraries like this one. Rows upon rows of shelves lined each wall, stretching from the floor to the double height ceiling. The room felt like warm spice and decadent musk thanks to the array of rich, burgundy spines and smell of aged paper and leather. I stepped inside, raising my head to breathe in every page.

I counted no fewer than three long ladders stretching up to the highest shelves and a cluster of leather club chairs provided a calm reading spot by a cathedral-style window. It took me right back to the bookshop I used to sit in while I waited for my mum to finish shopping. The memory made my chest warm.

“Do you, um... have the book, *In Praise of Shadows*, by Junichiro Tanizaki?” My words sounded timid and slight and as I flicked my gaze back to him, I noticed his good eye had widened a fraction.

“It's about architecture,” I explained. “It's pretty niche but you may have heard—”

“Yes,” he rushed out, walking briskly past me to a shelf on the east side of the room. “It's right here.”

He slipped a book from the shelf and handed it to me. His gaze made my skin sizzle as I stroked a hand over the well-worn cover.

“It's a beautiful book.” I glanced up at him. “Have you read it?”

His throat constricted. “It's my favourite.”

I blinked and felt time slow. “Mine too.”

His stare was intense until he broke it and walked to the window. "I haven't read it since... well... my sight isn't so good now."

My body was drawn to him in slow motion and I settled into one of the chairs.

"Would you like me to read it to you?"

His silhouette seemed to expand in the glow of the afternoon light. "You'd do that for me?"

"Of course. Sit."

He turned and his mouth curled into a mischievous grin. It was the most I'd seen him smile. He rested his back against the curved window and slid to the floor at its foot.

I arched a brow. "You're sitting over there?"

He patted the floor beside him. "No, *we're* sitting over here."

"But these chairs..." I gestured at the unfeasibly soft club chair I was sitting comfortably in.

"But this view," he fired back.

He was referring to the one outside the window but his gaze was glued to me.

I stood and walked to the window, then held my dress as I sat, making sure my knees were covered. I'd never liked my knees. I glanced nervously sideways at him. He'd tipped his head back and closed his eyes.

Stifling a small smile, I opened the book at page thirty-two and began to read.

By the time I'd turned the page to chapter four, my side had become pressed into his and his arm had somehow snuck around my back to rest against my right hip. His chin rested on my left shoulder, his breath warming my collar bone. My own breath became tight as I tried not to move.

As my pause lengthened his eyes opened slowly.

I lifted my hand and rested the tips of my fingers against the dips and swells of his scars. He flinched slightly, then gently held my wrist as if to say it was okay that I touch him.

“Who did this to you?” I whispered.

His breathing became heavier, deeper, and a full minute passed before he answered.

“Only the person who joins herself to me forever will know. She is the only one I will trust.”

His gaze flicked to me as I tried to cover the disappointment in my features. I knew what he meant by those words. I wasn't that person. I wasn't her. So I would never have the privilege of knowing his most haunting secret. I felt the sharpness of a blade against my chest and mentally shook it away.

The next words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. “Who is she?”

His gaze panned back to me and his head tilted backwards as though the proximity to me made him uncomfortable. “I don't know. I'm not sure I've met her yet.”

My heart sank even further. He didn't even know who he was looking for. But he was so strong-willed, so clear of thought, and so determined, he would know her the second he saw her.

For some reason, that thought loosened my inhibitions. I wasn't the one for him. The pressure to have him like me, weirdly, was relieved. My lips fell as loose as my tension.

“I think these scars are beautiful.”

I ran my fingers over them, awestruck at the intricacy of the patterns and the crevices.

“What?” His tone was harsh and I felt his torso stiffen, but it didn't affect me now I knew I wasn't even in the running. I continued to trace the lines of the skin grafts and where his skin had tried to heal itself.

“Doesn't it *amaze* you what our bodies can do?” I whispered. “Your skin doesn't care what it looks like. It only

cares that it can protect you. That's why it's healed in this ridge-like formation. It's learned that there is evil out there and it's given you tougher armour. Do you know how loving that is?"

He turned away from my hand and I let it drop to the book in my lap, but I wasn't finished.

"Something inside of you is so strong it wants to you to carry on. It wants to keep you protected so you can do whatever it was you were put on this earth to do."

I gently turned his face towards me, ignoring the redness in his eyes. It was either sadness or fury, and I didn't mind which. Dalziel Thorn was a furnace of emotion. If he held it all in for much longer, he would spontaneously combust.

"You shouldn't hide away from it, Dax. These marks are proof that you can conquer anything. We've been conditioned to think only a certain look can be labelled 'beautiful' but if you look back over centuries of art, many different forms have been given that moniker. Really, the only person who needs to think you're beautiful is... you."

He stared at me for a long, heart-wrenching moment, then lifted himself up to his knees to face me.

"What about you, Rose?" His voice was gravelly. "What about your scars?"

I was backed up against the window but I felt bold. "I know my scars are why you chose me. You thought that if I felt flawed too, I wouldn't be as choosy as another woman. I'd feel grateful, even, to have been selected when I have such hideous scars across my back."

He paled and sat back on his heels. "That's not true."

I let the book fall to the floor and reached for his hands. "Don't feel bad about that. It's human nature to try to appeal to someone you feel is in your league. Nobody wants to be rejected."

A dark shadow crossed his face. "You... you think you're in my *league*?"

Embarrassment engulfed me. Had I just declared I might be in the same league as formidable, striking, multi-billionaire architect Dalziel Thorn? *What the fuckety fuck, Rose? Shut the hell up!*

“No, no, that’s not what I mean. Please don’t misunderstand me. I have a lot of respect for you, as an architect and as a burn survivor. Believe me, I do. But as far as leagues go, we are miles apart.” I ventured a weak smile and looked away.

For almost five minutes we sat, our bodies mirroring each other like magnets, but our faces turned in opposite directions. I knew I should probably ask to return to my room, the awkwardness justified it. But I didn’t want to leave his company.

I became aware of his chest rising and falling, faster and deeper. It warmed something feral inside me and I didn’t dare move.

“Can I see your scars, Rose?”

I almost jumped out of my skin at the suddenness of his question.

“You... you want to see my back?”

As our eyes connected, I noticed veins at the sides of his head swollen and throbbing. He swallowed.

I nodded wordlessly and his eyes followed me as I stood, my back turned to the window. For a second, I worried someone might see but not one soul had passed by in the hours we’d been sitting there. Any fear I had was quickly overridden. I felt warm all over like this was going to be the most loving, giving thing I would ever do.

Slowly, I reached around the back of my neck, found the zip and tugged it downwards. My blushes intensified with every inch. When the zip reached all the way down, resting at the crest of my bottom, I turned tentatively.

The only sound I could hear was Dax’s breathing getting shallower and almost furious. Maybe burn survivors’ reactions to other peoples’ injuries differed. While I saw nothing but

beauty in Dax's scars, maybe he saw a reminder of the fear he felt when whatever happened to him happened.

"Turn your back to me," he said, his tone soft but his voice rough.

I did and braced myself for the sharp intake of breath and sudden zip closing up my dress. I squeezed my eyes closed in anticipation.

Nothing happened. I slowly opened my eyes and ears. His breathing slowed like silk, and his fingers touched the top of my spine where there was a patch of undamaged, virgin skin. He gently stroked downwards, feeling every lump and bump that I'd tried to hide over the years. It was one thing to tell another person their scars were beautiful. It was a whole other thing to believe the same of your own. I pressed my fingertips to the glass and held my breath as his fingers drew pictures down the length of my spine. It felt as though he was writing something, but ever since my skin had taken on different crevices and terrains, I wasn't sure of what I felt anymore.

I heard a low rumble from his lips. "So pretty," he said, in a soft murmur.

Something hardened in me. He was crazy. A mad man. He'd locked me in a damn tower. I shouldn't be letting anything he said go to my head. But there was no denying that the touch of his fingers set my skin ablaze. I felt whole again. No, not just whole. Renewed. My scars were a part of me, and they made me stronger, just like I said Dax's scars made him.

My head spun with the realisation and at the same time, Dax reached up and gently pushed the dress over my shoulders. With nothing to anchor it at the waist, it fell to the floor, exposing all of me. With my back still turned, all I could do was listen. Dax was borderline hyperventilating, and if I stopped to self-analyse, I was too.

"Rose..."

That one whispered word called to the centre of my soul like a prayer and I suddenly yearned for him to see all of me. Every inch. I turned fully to face him just as he swallowed

loudly and dropped his jaw. His good eye was wide and glistening; his damaged one dimmer but still alive with curiosity. They both raked over me, slowly, starting at the the dip of my collarbone, warming it under his gaze. He then moved down over the rounds of my rose-pink lace-covered breasts, widening at the hardened nipples beneath. Greedily, they lowered, caressing the skin across my stomach, to the apex of my thighs. My whole being heated up from the zenith of my core, radiating out through my flesh and bones to the surface, making my skin prickle. He didn't let up, gliding his gaze down over my hips and thighs, cresting my knees and calves, until it landed on the slender curve of my ankles.

By the time Dax's eyes had roamed my entire body, I was a pulsating mess, hoping to God my pants were at least a little absorbent. No one had ever worshipped me with their eyes before, and that's exactly what it felt like.

My head spun with the absence of any knowledge of what was going on, what he was about to do. The confusion only deepening when he leaned down and wrapped a hand around my right ankle. I jumped a little, even though his touch was soft. The contact was unexpected, but no less needed. He bent his whole body forward, as though he was going to bite into my skin, but he stopped, his nose a millimetre from the hairs of my shin. What happened next challenged every idea I'd ever formed about intimacy.

Even more slowly than he'd guided his gaze, Dax lifted his head up to my knee. The only contact were the hairs standing on end everywhere on my leg and those lining his top lip. But the impact was powerful. Even the smallest sensation set a part of my body on fire. Then I realised that, as he did so, he inhaled deeply.

My eyes almost popped out of my head. Was he... *smelling me?*

A satisfied moan meandered from his lips and my heart thumped. His hand stroked upwards and he continued his exploration of my scent along the base of the thigh. My whole body tensed the closer he got to the top of my legs, then he stopped.

My head almost exploded with questions. *What do I smell like? Do I smell bad? Why has he stopped? What have I done wrong?*

He opened his mouth and hot breath fanned across my sex.

“Breathe, Rose.”

I released a complete lungful of oxygen from my chest, then panted at the realisation I’d been holding it in for what felt like a year.

I forced my breathing to slow, trying to acclimatise to the fact Dax Thorn was kneeling before me with his mouth less than an inch from my vagina. While he stared at my privates, I glanced down at his head. Despite the obvious scarring across his crown, his hair was full, jet black and obviously tamed by some probably extortionately expensive barber. I had a sudden urge to run my fingers through it, but through the insane lust and wanting came a small dart of fear. All I really knew about this man was that he was capable of locking me up. He jolted when I touched his scar with permission – what would he do if I touched the top of his head without it? I didn’t want to find out.

He remained at my core, taking deep meditative breaths. With each one, I softened, to the point I thought I was going to melt into a puddle at his knees. Thankfully, he continued his perusal of my sweat-coated skin, rising to his feet as he reached my breasts. He bent his head to inhale the tops of my shoulders, my neck, my jaw and finally the soft skin covering my temple. I throbbed painfully beneath his presence.

Then he moved his mouth an inch to the shell of my ear, the heat from his lips almost blistering the skin.

My heart stopped when he opened his mouth.

“You smell just like my dreams.”

He lingered for several seconds and could probably hear my rabid heart clattering around, out of rhythm.

My chest rose and fell with laboured breaths and I continued to stare dead ahead. I wasn’t cut out for this. I was a virgin. I had no idea what I was doing. Or, more to the point,

what *he* was doing. It was clear Dax Thorn was experienced, because who else could turn a woman on to the point of pain simply by smelling her? I was simply no match for him. I was wet between my thighs. Completely wet. And he was so utterly in control of himself. Shame and humiliation washed over me slowly, relishing in my discomfort.

My rambling inner dialogue was instantly halted when two large, warm hands clasped each side of my face and his body pressed against mine. His lips were still hovering at the side of my face, but when they pressed hot against my skin, I gasped, goosebumps erupting all over my skin. With each inhale, my breasts pressed into his chest, but his lips didn't move. As awareness of my body returned in pieces, I also became aware of a pressure against my pelvic bone.

Was that...? Fuck.

Like a wanton hussy I pressed my hips forward a fraction. His lips left my skin and I heard a sharp intake of breath. Then he stepped backwards, allowing a chasm to open up between us. Cool air licked at my grateful skin and I immediately looked at his face. I thought I'd seen pain before, but never before a whole world of it ingrained into the colour of his cheeks and the crease of his forehead.

He looked away quickly as if the image of me had stung him. Then he bent down, lifted my dress up and covered my shoulders. Avoiding my gaze, he gently turned me around and drew the zip closed. I was glued to the floor in shock so felt almost thankful when he slipped my hand into his and walked me to the door.

I felt strange, as though my body was behaving brazenly of its own accord. This must be what lust feels like. My legs shook as we walked back towards the tower. Back towards my luxurious and decadent prison cell. I had just bared myself to him, let him trace every part of me and let him work me up into a literal frenzy, and he still hadn't taken me. Did he have any intention of taking me? Was it all a ruse just to get a prisoner he could toy with? Because that's exactly what he was doing.

I suddenly felt homesick. Not for my house, but for Mum and Remi, for my room, the road I lived on, things I could trust. As we neared the tower and its steep circular stairs, my heart did somersaults in my chest. I'd just been crazily turned on by someone who'd basically kidnapped me. I knew what this was – there was a well-known reason for behaviour like this. I was suffering from Stockholm Syndrome. It was textbook. God, I was so unoriginal.

I didn't feel anything for Dax; it wasn't possible. I was protecting myself. My mind was playing a trick to help me process the trauma of being locked in a tower. *A fucking tower.*

I glanced around. One of the security guys was up ahead on the first floor. The other was right behind Dax, and Dax was right behind me. I looked down as we climbed, seeing the floor below inch further and further away. I felt along the wooden banister, then before I could second guess myself, I reached for the other side of the handrail, flipped my legs over and dropped fifteen feet to the ground. I crumbled in a heap, the pain only muffled by the sound of shouting. Dax was ballistic, yelling at the two men while scrambling down the stairs. I tried to get to my feet but my left leg wouldn't work. I looked over my shoulder just in time to see Dax shove his security guard into the wall before practically throwing himself down the stairs. Fear punctured my lungs making it hard to breathe.

Why won't my leg work?

I flipped onto my hands and knees, half-crawling, half-running back in the direction we'd come from. I'd seen the door I'd arrived through. That was my exit. I bit back a scream as what felt like daggers sliced my leg from hip to ankle. It was worse than excruciating. Thundering footsteps closed in on me and my heart banged at the base of my throat. I stumbled again, landing back on my left leg, the pain leaving me blind.

Warmth coursed through layers of skin into my tissues and bones. There was still pain but it was distant, as though it was outside of my body, not right in its core. I was floating, weightless, curled into a cocoon, feeling safer than I remembered ever feeling. A wave-like motion lulled me into a delirious bliss and I allowed myself to sink into this momentary departure into insanity. That had to be what this was, because there was no other explanation.

My lids fluttered as if in a dream and I saw movement beyond them. There was darkness directly before me and flashing colours in the periphery. Just beautiful.

“Breathe for me Rose.”

The deep voice jolted my lids open and with the realisation I was still very much in the middle of a nightmare came the pain. My leg burned with agony, and not the good kind of burn, the burn I felt everywhere else on my body. It was a bad burn. I'd broken my leg. Possibly in several places.

Now I really wasn't going anywhere.

A spasm pierced through my knee and I willingly blacked out.

CHAPTER

Ten

Rose

WHEN I AWOKE AGAIN, I didn't bother opening my eyes. Instead, I allowed whoever was in the room to believe I was still sleeping while I got a grip on my surroundings.

I heard breathing. Deep, steady breathing. It was coming from someone less than five feet away. I tuned out the sound to focus on others but after a minute or two I had to surmise there were none.

“I know you're awake, Rose.”

The voice made me jump and with a fair amount of disgruntlement, I opened my eyes. Dax was sitting in an armchair, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees.

“Your eyes move differently when you're sleeping.”

I turned my face away, confused by the feelings raging around my chest. I wished I could blame the instant dryness of my mouth on the fact I hadn't drunk any water for hours, but that wasn't the reason. *He* was the reason. Seeing him fill out a chair that *was* made for him, seeing the concern tattooed across his brow and seeing his shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows, scars decorating his right forearm, made me light-headed. At the same time, I felt the weight of dread in my stomach, anchoring me to the bed. I'd tried to escape and it

hadn't worked. It would be the last time I'd ever leave this room.

"You suffered a bad sprain," he said, with a softness that surprised me. I'd just tried to run away from him. Even after we'd shared... I didn't know what to call it... a moment? I still struggled with what that was. He was my captor. It wasn't right that I near as melted into a puddle under the swell of his gaze.

"I'm surprised you didn't break any bones. You fell fifteen feet onto an ancient stone floor."

I kept my face turned away, mortified that my attempt to escape failed before it had even begun.

"I'm not going to ask why you did it, Rose. But I am going to ask you not to do it again."

"Why?" My voice cracked.

There was a long pause before he took a slow, deep breath.

"Because I'm so close to being broken myself, if anything happened to you while you were in my care, I would... die."

"Then let me go." The second the words were out, I felt empty, as though I'd stored them for so long, they'd puffed out like rice.

He breathed out slowly and I thought I heard a stutter in the back of his throat. "I have."

In disbelief, I turned to face him. "What?"

A muscle in his left eye flickered as it narrowed. "You're free to go."

My eyes were drawn to an object turning in his hands, propelling me back to the day I found him sitting on the bed delivering his ultimate condition. He followed my gaze and stopped turning. When he held it up in the space between us, I noticed it was a key. The key to my room.

"This is yours." He leaned towards me and took my hand. A current spread through it and I lost all human feeling. He placed the key in my palm then folded my fingers around it,

before pulling away. I yearned for him to take it back, just so I could feel his skin on mine again.

“What drugs did you give me?”

He blinked. “Just... painkillers. Why?”

“The pain has disappeared completely, and my skin feels strange.”

“The pain has gone because I gave you Basidiomine – a pain reliever we develop here on the island. It’s only just gone out to market but it’s the most potent pain relief pharmaceutical in the western world. As for your skin feeling strange... I can’t answer that.”

I kept my voice level. “Will I be able to walk?”

“Yes, but we’ll give you crutches and any help you need.”

I watched his eyes for some suggestion he was bluffing but saw nothing but sadness. I pulled my arms back to push myself up but his hand pressed down on my shoulder.

“You need more rest, Rose.”

I stared at him. “You said I was free to go.”

“You are. But I think you should stay one more night. Just to get some rest. Please?”

A beat passed between us. “Are you going to take my virginity?”

He hung his head and shook it slowly.

“No. I’ve put you through enough. You should save it for someone who deserves it. Someone who deserves you.”

Even in my drugged and weakened state I managed a small frown.

“You didn’t care about being deserving before.”

He lifted his head and gaze to the ceiling. “I didn’t know anything before. *Anything.*” He huffed a laugh to himself. “Now I know too damn much.”

My head spun with everything he was and wasn’t saying and I didn’t have the mental capacity to make sense of it.

I turned my face back towards the ceiling. I was going to be out of this place in the morning, but nothing about that thought lightened me. I was tired. My body had been through more in the last twenty-four hours than possibly my entire life. It had gone from being alive with lust to broken.

I sensed him rise to his feet and felt the shift in the air as he did. It whipped a little bit of oxygen from my lungs.

“Harrod will check on you first thing and help you to the car. You can be home by lunchtime.”

I didn’t reply. I couldn’t find any words to explain my cacophony of disturbed feelings. He left without another word and I let my eyelids fall shut.

It would all make sense in the morning.



I managed an hour of broken sleep then twisted restlessly in the baking hot sheets. I couldn’t shake the sensation of Dax’s skin brushing against mine, or the feeling of being worshipped as he inhaled me from head to toe. I shivered even though my skin was burning, and a relentless throbbing returned to my core.

I moaned and flipped my head from side to side. It was useless, the vision of him wouldn’t leave. I tried to think of anything that wasn’t Dax Thorn – the journey home, how on earth I was going to make it to university now, what Remi would say when I announced I still had my V card... but it was no use. Nothing worked. Dax Thorn seemed to be inked on the underside of my eyelids. When I gave in to the image of his towering height and thundering depth, the throbbing between my legs intensified. It only stopped when I rushed my hand towards it and cupped my sex.

Oh.

I pressed down hard, as if that would contain my desire for a man who’d captured me for a pet. All it did was fuel my need. My eyelids drifted closed and I circled a finger around

my stiffened clitoris. I might have been a virgin but I knew how to make myself come. I just hadn't done it in a while. I gasped as lubrication coated my fingers. I knew I was turned on but it usually took way longer than this to ease the way for my fingers. I bucked against my hand, suddenly needing something more. I didn't dare push a finger inside myself, so I stroked around my entrance, my thighs parting involuntarily.

I felt Dax's lips at my ear and a wild moan escaped my mouth.

I returned my fingers to my swollen nub and circled it again, massaging it with firm sweeps. I didn't know what I was doing but it felt nice. Actually, nice had nothing on what I was feeling. It was amazing. Starlit. Combustive. My fingers moved of their own accord as my hips swirled desperately.

Oh God.

I pictured the same lips that had kissed my temple move to my mouth, just as the nerve endings in my pelvic bone united with fiery tension. My jaw fell open and I cried out his name, safe in the knowledge the walls were so thick there wasn't a chance in hell anyone would have heard. My hips bucked with violently blissful spasms and I surrendered to the rush of heat as it washed over me, dragging me under.

I continued to shudder long after the orgasm had subsided. Something I had never done before. When Dax entered my vision again, I wasn't so annoyed about it. I was too loose and too soft to be annoyed about anything. Promising myself I would only do this once, I let his name fall from my lips in a grateful whisper, then I closed my eyes, and slept.



Something woke me up with a shock. As I looked around, trying to make sense of my surroundings in the darkness, I heard it again. A muted, muffled crash which drew my eyes to the ceiling. It sounded like the roof of the tower had fallen in.

In my half-asleep, delirious state I thought I heard footsteps outside my room and doors banging elsewhere in the

tower. I listened, holding my breath for a few minutes. There were no more loud crashes and no more footsteps. I peeled back the bedcovers and lowered my feet to the floor. I had to know exactly how much damage I'd done to myself and how hard it was going to be to get out of this place. I also had to know if Dax had told me the truth: that I could indeed leave if I wanted.

A shard of pain shot up my left leg as I put weight on it, so I hopped, wincing, out of the bedroom, through the main suite to the door. I took a sobering breath as my hand rested on the handle, then turned it slowly. I fully expected resistance when I pulled it towards me, but it opened, as light as a feather.

With my breath caught in my throat, I looked around the door onto an empty landing. No security guards. I tiptoed to the threshold and bent my head around the frame. If there had been people running up and down the stairs, they were long gone now. I toyed with the idea of leaving right then but it would have been pointless. There was no one around and there was no way I'd get to a port or helipad on foot. Literally, on one foot.

Softly, I closed the door and retreated back to the bedroom. The second my head hit the luscious pillows, I was out like a light.

The next time I awoke, it was morning. The sound of a silver tray and breakfast ware alerted me to the fact someone was in the suite. I slid out of bed and wrapped the bathrobe around myself before hobbling out of the bedroom.

"Oh, miss, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you." The maid was looking back at me with guilt etched across her features.

"Don't worry. I think I've slept in a little. What time is it?"

She smiled. "Almost eleven-thirty, miss."

"Okay." I shrugged. "I slept in *a lot*."

"I hope you're hungry." She lifted the cloche from a serving platter, revealing cooked bacon, sausages, baked tomatoes and mushrooms, as well as cold meats, cereals,

pastries and fruits. “Master Thorn said you might have an appetite today.”

I sighed. “Right, yes. Because of the accident.”

She frowned. “He said it was because you’d had a restless night. What accident?”

“My, um, ankle,” I managed. “I fell and sprained it.” The words sounded impressively clear give my inner dialogue was stuttering around, confused and alarmed. Why did he think I’d had a restless night? As far as he knew, I’d been dosed up on Bas-whatever-it-was-called. If he had any inkling I hadn’t slept soundly, he...

My eyes darted around the room looking for anything that might resemble a camera but landed on nothing obvious.

“Is everything okay, miss?”

“Yeah, um, fine,” I replied, still scouring the corners and crevices.

“Master Thorn also asked me to give you this.” She handed me an envelope with just my name scrawled in a spidery hand across the front.

“What is it?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, miss. All he said was it’s the least you deserve.” Her cheeks flushed as though that one sentence had made her privy to not only her boss’s private business, but his private emotions too. “Tell me when you would like to leave and I’ll arrange for a car to collect you right away.”

I took a deep breath and forced it back out along with every morsel of misplaced want I’d felt for Dax Thorn. “I’d like to leave in one hour.”

She bowed her head and began to back away towards the door. “As you wish, miss.”

“Wait...”

She stopped and her head flicked upwards.

“Thank you,” I said, softly. “You were kind to me and I really appreciate that.”

Her eyes darted nervously to a spot above my head. “You’re welcome,” she said with a timid smile, then left me holding an envelope that seemed to become heavier with every passing second.

CHAPTER

Eleven

Dax

MY HEAD HURT.

Not from the bottle of whiskey I knew I'd downed without even opening my eyes, but from knowing everything about my life from now on was going to feel empty. I was never going to be complete. I'd found my other half, yet I'd done everything in my power, willingly or not, to repel her. And rightly so.

I was ugly, ruthless, damaged goods.

A barbarian.

A beast.

My neck groaned as I lifted my head off the carpet and gazed around at the room. It was blurred mostly, for which I was thankful. I knew a mass of blur would be preferable to the total destruction it masked. Memories of the previous night came back to me like falling shards of glass. I'd witnessed the most beautiful thing anyone had done for me, believing for a split second I was worthy of it, and I hadn't even been looking at the camera.

The live feed from Rose's room had run continually ever since I installed her inside. It gave me ample opportunity to study her like a rare specimen no man had ever caught. I'd spent night after night watching, listening, marvelling at the rise and fall of her bedsheets as she slept, smiling in one corner of my mouth as she pattered barefoot from one room to

the next, sometimes naked, sometimes not. I thought I knew every inch of her body, just from having watched it move around from every angle. But I knew nothing. Holding her flesh in my hands, so close to my lips, driving me despairingly mad, showed me how little I really knew. Seeing a woman's naked flesh from a distance was a shallow turn-on. Having it displayed so warmly, openly and closely stoked a desire so deep it could wound the most cavernous man.

And I was wounded.

I thought my heart had broken as we walked back up the towers stairs, until I heard her cry out when her leg took the brunt of her fall. I acted on pure instinct, shoving anyone and anything out of my way to reach her. My gut twisted at the agony on her face. Her pain was my pain, and it was excruciating.

Letting her go wasn't just the right thing to do, it was the only thing. I'd been fooling myself – she was never going to want me. It felt wrong to say she just wanted the money because there was so much more to Rose than that. But it would have been a stretch too far to imagine she wanted me *and* the money.

It took an otherworldly amount of strength to walk away from her bedside, knowing I would never see her in the flesh again. I should have switched off the feed; it would only serve to torture me further. I was sitting at my desk with only the dim orange glow of an antique lamp illuminating the drawings I'd laid out. Drafting concepts for buildings that would never see the light of day was the only pastime guaranteed to distract me from anything else. But then I heard her.

At first, I thought she was having a bad dream. My instinct was to rush to her room and soothe her, but her moans turned to soft little gasps and luscious breaths. My body rose from the chair without command and moved across the room to the screen. I pressed the volume button and watched the bedclothes moving gently. Her eyes were closed and her lips were moist and parted. My stomach clenched possessively and I fought the urge to beat off – I needed to apply my whole focus and commit it to memory for the rest of my life.

Then she said the one word I never thought I'd hear fall from the mouth of any woman, let alone the woman of my darkest, most delicious dreams.

My name.

I cranked up the volume as loud as I could, keeping my eyes glued to the screen.

Oh God, Dax...

I then heard a heavy thud and realised it was the sound of my knees slamming onto the floor. Her head fell back as her spine arched, and a long, untethered cry filtered through the screen. I was still staring open-mouthed at the feed long after she'd rolled over and fallen into a deep sleep.

The first thing I did was pour a large whiskey. I needed a drink after that, Jeezus. Then I paced the room trying to come up with a reasonable explanation, because I'd got it wrong. I had to have got it so completely wrong. I'd locked her up against her wishes. I'd forced her to have dinner with me, read stories to me, strip for me. And all of it she was forced to do in an attempt to save herself. It all became starkly, horrendously clear. If she had been turned on, it wasn't by me, it was by the situation. And I was damn fool to ever have believed otherwise.

The more I thought through the ridiculousness of my hopes and dreams and the fact a small part of me had faith in them, the angrier I became. Before I knew it, my rooms were unrecognisable. Chairs and tables were upturned, their legs beaten and broken; curtains were torn and ragged. The entire contents of my drinks cabinet, cut crystal glasses and vintage port worth hundreds of pounds had been smashed to pieces. And three thousand rock crystals from my seventh century chandelier had scattered in every direction. My writing desk with the architectural drawings was the only thing left unscathed.

I peeled myself up off the floor and walked to the window. The mid-morning sun illuminated the south-facing lawns; it made Blackcap Hall appear almost pleasant. Very soon, a black Mercedes would be cruising down the long drive

carrying my heart. I pressed my fist and my forehead against the glass and let long seconds pass as my skin cooled.

Behind me, a door handle turned and almost instantly, another person was inside my rooms and running up behind me. I turned just in time to feel a red hot slap across my unscarred cheek. When I turned my head back to face her, she had never looked more beautiful.

“How DARE you?” she shouted.

She raised her hand again but I caught it in a thick, tight grip. My eyes narrowed while my body expunged the shock of her entrance.

“You brought me here, hid me away, made me discover myself, made me *want* you. And for what? So, you can hate yourself even more? So, you can force me out without getting what you paid for? Without giving me what I want?”

I shook my head. “You don’t know what you want.”

“STOP TELLING ME WHAT I WANT!” She tried to yank her hand back but I didn’t let it move an inch.

I didn’t know what hurt more, the lies coming out of her mouth, or the shock of seeing her again after I thought I’d drunk and smashed away the worst of my heartbreak.

“Just go home, Rose. Take the fucking money and go.”

She stilled and steadied her breath. “I don’t want the money.”

“What?”

My grip loosened and she pulled her hand away, wrapping her other hand around the wrist.

“I don’t want the money, Dax,” she said, her voice soft but deadly serious. “But I do still want you to take my virginity.”

I closed my eyes to keep from letting her words penetrate my skin. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

Opening them again, I watched her lips curl inwards.

“I know exactly what I’m saying. I want you. Why won’t you believe me?”

I dropped my gaze to the floor. “I kept you here too long...”

“Two weeks.”

“You’re vulnerable...”

“I know what I’m doing.”

I clamped my hands over the back of a chair and released a low, tight growl. “I will NOT take advantage of you.”

She stepped towards me and curled a fist into my shirt. Her proximity, the volunteered touch, sent a spasm of desire shooting down my spine. “You won’t, Dax,” she said. “I’m giving myself to you willingly.”

My eyes felt raw with the need to look at her but I forced them not to waver. When she leaned in, I could feel the perspiration rising off me in waves. If the sight of my suite in total ruin hadn’t already convinced her of my madness, my capacity to cause irreparable damage, surely my inability to make eye contact cleared up any doubt.

She dipped beneath my lashes, placing herself right in the centre of my eyeline. Her cheeks were pink, her lips soft and parted.

“I want you, Dax.”

She wrapped a hand round the back of my neck and pulled her face up to mine until her lips brushed the scars across my cheekbones. My own lashes drifted shut and a loose moan issued from my lips.

“Please,” she whispered against the raised ridges of my surface. “Take my virginity. I want no one else to have it but you.”

I became aware of nothing but the heat of her breath and the tightness of my clothes. My shirt felt ready to burst and my boxers and trousers felt like a vice around my cock and thighs. I wanted to touch her. I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to fuck her gently through her very first time, then fuck her hard every

day until the last. And knowing I couldn't do any of that made me want to kill myself.

"Please Dax," she said. Her voice was all choked up. My cock weighed heavy and throbbed. "I need this."

I need this.

My knees sang as they thudded again to the floor and my mind emptied of every argument it had created to fight this feral, unbridled urge.

My hands found their way to the crest of her hips. As they rested there, her quiet sigh caressed the top of my head. I pressed my forehead softly into her stomach. She had to stop me. I was a bad, bad man who'd tricked her into wanting something that didn't exist. Sure, I had money, sure I lived in a damn castle. It didn't change the fact I was no knight in shining armour. I was a beast. A scarred and deformed beast.

Her fingertips drew sketches across my crown and teased through my hair. Her breathing had slowed and steadied. I had to keep my heart as far from the thought I might have caused that as possible. I could give her what she thought she wanted, but I couldn't let this madness become belief.

As I breathed her in, a sweet scent touched my nose, infusing my vision. Her need rose through the air making me dizzy.

I held my breath, then ran my hands down her hips and legs to her ankles. I wrapped my fingers around them and gently caressed the skin, almost weeping at how right she felt. Even slower still, I stroked my way back up her calves, pausing briefly in the dips behind her knees. She rocked on her heels, stabilising herself.

My breath quickened and my pulse raced when my fingertips trailed up the backs of her thighs. I stroked along the crease of her bottom to the outer edge of her thighs and the lace of her pants. With a loud sigh, I pressed my face into the fabric of her dress. It was the only thing separating my lips from her pussy.

The silk dragged against my face and I leaned back to let it pass. As my gaze flicked upwards, I caught a glimpse of fire in her eyes. My breath caught as I broke contact to see a small triangle of beautiful rose pink lace presented to me. The skin beneath wasn't quite bare, which I liked. I wanted a virgin, not a child. In a beat I was overtaken. Her sweet scent, the shadow of her glance imprinted on my eyelids, and the heat of my need collided and I pressed my tongue to the lace. She gasped audibly and shuddered, which sent a ripple of shock down my neck and across my shoulders.

She couldn't have faked that.

I'd given her no warning.

Something ripped me from the inside out, like a caged demon burning hell to smithereens. I looked up at her again and assessed the darkness clouding her eyes. She couldn't actually want this, could she?

Her lips parted and mouthed a word. "More."

My heart stopped, my stomach clenched and my cock leapt.

And I let the madness take me.

CHAPTER

Twelve

Rose

HIS EYES BLAZED and he leaned back in towards me. A traitorous moan escaped my lips releasing the heaviness of my craving. His tongue flattened and made a wave motion against my lace underwear, dancing across my clit in delicious slow ripples. More soft gasps rolled off my lips as I savoured every sensation his tongue provoked. Just when I thought I couldn't take anymore, his thumb reached across and pulled the lace to one side. His hot, wet flesh against my clitoris made me shake. Suddenly, my pants disappeared, and as if I wasn't already in heaven, his kisses and licks made my head spin. They were slow and teasing, always keeping me on the edge of bliss.

“Oh wow,” I gasped, resisting the urge to rotate my hips and chase his tongue. Each time I pressed forward slightly, he pulled back, enforcing full control. If he wanted me to feel the flat of his tongue, he'd give it to me when he chose to. If he wanted me to feel his lips sucking gently on my clit, he'd do it in his own time. The tension in my legs made me weak. I needed to come but I didn't want this to ever end. He hadn't given in yet, I could tell; he was simply giving me something he knew I desperately needed.

He paused briefly, his lips resting on my pussy. “Do you need to come, Rose?” His voice had deepened to almost unrecognisable depths.

“Yes,” I gasped. It took every ounce of effort to speak. “But I still want you inside me, Dax. I still want you to take my virginity.”

He stilled for several long seconds before flicking out his tongue again, making me jerk.

“Promise me. Please.”

He lifted his head and gazed up at me through thick black lashes. His lips were shiny with the evidence of my arousal. He grabbed handfuls of my bottom and fisted, the pain heightening my arousal even more. My skin bruised as he lifted me off the floor and sat me on the chair he’d leaned his weight on only minutes before.

“Relax,” he ordered, stroking the skin he’d just wrung out like a cloth. “I promise.”

He pushed my thighs apart and fed his tongue into my heat, planting a palm against my stomach when my body involuntarily bucked towards him. He alternated between burying his tongue inside me and sucking on my clit until the room turned white.

“Jesus Rose, you’re so wet,” he murmured as a fresh wave of lust poured out of me.

“You made me this way,” I choked out as the crest of the wave approached. I reached one hand behind me and grabbed the back of the chair while the other gripped his hair pulling him even deeper onto my clit.

God.

He clamped his mouth over me and sucked hard, swirling his tongue round and round until every single muscle in my stomach clenched hard. My jaw unhinged and a feral noise ricocheted off the walls as I shuddered through an intense orgasm.

I held him tightly as I rode it out, violent spasms almost folding my body in two. My heartrate barely had time to settle before I was lifted again and carried into his bedroom. Our eyes connected and held onto each other fiercely, not breaking as he laid me on the bed. My gaze flitted between his good eye

and his white one, both appearing otherworldly and utterly perfect. He pressed one arm into the bed while he unzipped his trousers and pushed them down his legs. Without tearing my gaze from his, I unbuttoned his shirt until it hung open revealing a flash of scar tissue from his right shoulder to his belly button.

He settled between my legs, his cock hard and angled towards me, then he lowered his lips. He reached a hand into my hair and fisted it hard before kissing me softly. Everything about him screamed contradiction. One side hard, one side soft. One side blessed; one side damaged. He was yin and yang personified. Without war there can no peace. Without scars there can be no perfection.

Without shadows there can be no beauty.

He licked my lips and tongue with gentle urgency, biting, nibbling and sucking while the head of his cock pressed against me. Instinctively, I lifted my knees, opening myself up. His cock slid into my entrance and Dax stilled. Even his lips stopped moving as though he'd been turned to stone.

“Yes, I’m sure,” I whispered against his warm skin.

He released a pent-up sigh and kissed me deeply, his cock burrowing another inch. I held my breath anticipating pain, but so far, I had only felt slight discomfort and unfamiliarity. He was stretching me from the inside out but nothing about it felt wrong.

Dax found a rhythm I could cope with, pushing himself in a little then kissing and caressing my lips while I acclimated. “Are you okay?” he asked between short breaths.

I nodded, not trusting the words that might come out of my mouth. I was more than okay. I felt amazing. Womanly and strong.

“This won’t make you come,” he said, in a voice so quiet I had to concentrate to hear. “Not the first time.”

“I know that.” My throat was dry with nerves.

He paused and stroked the back of his hand down the side of my face. He was only halfway inside but it felt as though I

couldn't take any more of him.

“But I'll do whatever I can to make this good for you, okay?”

His eyes were almost black and his brow lightly furrowed. He seemed to be holding something back, but I nodded.

“Have you done this a lot?” I said, then baulked at the question – both the subject matter and the ridiculous timing of it. A small dimple appeared on his left cheek and his eyes danced, though he didn't smile. He didn't mock my naivete.

“Not lately.”

I pouted. “Well, that's a little non-committal.”

His eyebrows rose. “You want to talk about this *now*?”

I closed my eyes feeling the blood rush to my cheeks. “No. I'm sorry.”

His fingertips stroking my forehead made my eyelids ping and this time he was smiling.

“I've had a few relationships – not serious. But...”

His eyelashes cast downwards and I ducked to peek under them.

“...not since the incident.”

His choice of word made me still. He'd said *incident*, not *accident*. Someone had done this to him on purpose. My chest tightened and my pelvic area stretched, just as Dax's eyes widened.

“Fuck,” he breathed.

“What?” I panted slightly at the increasing pressure between my legs.

“You just pulled me in, Rose. I'm almost fully inside you. Are you okay?”

I reached up and grabbed the collar of his shirt. “I'm absolutely fine.” Then I drew his lips onto mine and focused on the dance of our tongues as he pushed in the rest of the

way. My back arched, trying to escape the pressure, but I clung to him as if he was the key to keeping me safe.

His forehead dropped to my shoulder and a long slow breath warmed my neck.

Seconds passed before he spoke.

“Why do you have to feel so damn good, Rose?”

I had no response. I couldn’t believe my walls would feel good to anybody.

“Why do you have to be so perfect?”

I placed my hands either side of his face and lifted it. His dark eyes bore a blood red halo and he looked as though he’d just been to hell and back, not bliss.

“I’m not perfect, Dax,” I whispered. “I’m far from perfect.”

He studied my face intently. “You’re perfect to me.”

He bent down, took my lips in his and moved. Each time he thrust into me it felt like a deep, dark kiss. Each time he accompanied it with a low grown it felt like a prayer. His hips glided through my inner thighs and his chest grazed my nipples, sharpening them into diamonds. His mouth and tongue were relentless, constantly demanding my attention, pulling it away from the pain that increased inside me.

He pulled away once, to catch his breath and whisper out what sounded like poetry. “This is what heaven feels like. *You* are what heaven feels like.”

Sliding a hand under my bottom, he lifted me a couple of inches, sliding even more deeply into my body. My eyes rolled back with unfamiliar sensations. My virginity had well and truly gone now.

“Fuck, Rose,” he said, hoarsely. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Dax—” I gripped him tightly between my thighs and slid a hand round the back of his hot, damp neck. “I’m amazing. Trust me.”

“I can’t believe it. I’m going to come already.” He sounded downright pissed off about it.

“You don’t have to,” I said with a whimper. “I’m not in any rush.”

He snorted. “It doesn’t work like that, Rose. For a guy, once you’re on that train, it’s near impossible to get off.”

“Can’t you think of something else? Like, I don’t know, work? Your family?”

“You think I can picture anything other than you when you’re finally beneath me? I’ll be damned if I start picturing other people while fucking the most beautiful girl in the world.”

My chest fluttered at the easy way he said the most vulnerable and generous thing I’d ever heard. “Then fuck me Dax. I want to feel you come inside me.”

His eyes suddenly glazed and he blinked several times like he couldn’t believe I’d just uttered those words.

“Well, here it comes my queen.”

My stomach stiffened as I braced myself. His thrusts became deep and quick, and his jaw hardened. I focused on his full bottom lip as it was pulled between his teeth in concentration. Something about that lip was familiar. As soon as the image came to mind, I banished it. I was never going to see Bookshop Boy again; I didn’t want him encroaching on this moment that was proving to be one of the most memorable of my life. But his lips...

Suddenly, his eyes squeezed shut and a pained expression crossed his face. He pushed himself deep inside me and shuddered forcefully. “Fuuuuck.”

In a beat of my battered heart, he thickened and burst, semen thrashing against the wall of my womb. His cock pulsed, releasing more jets. Then he relaxed.

His eyes opened briefly before he buried his face into my neck, panting and shaking with the aftershocks of his climax. He was right; I hadn’t orgasmed. In fact, I couldn’t ever

imagine having an orgasm doing that, but I was still overcome by a sense of bliss.

“Dax—”

He shook his head against my neck. “I just need a minute.”

He needed a minute? Who would need a minute after fucking me? It’s not like I contributed in any way, at all. I’d just laid there while he did all the work.

I nodded silently and pushed my fingers through his sweat-damp hair.

Several minutes passed and I felt his lips open against the soft skin covering my throat. “I meant what I said.”

I tugged gently at the strands of his hair. “Which part.”

“Every part, but especially that you’re a queen.”

I warmed shamelessly, feeling his hardness remain inside my body.

“And I would do anything for my queen.”

His admission emboldened me. “In that case, I want you to fuck me again in the morning.”

His breathing stopped and the weight of his chest lifted almost imperceptibly. Just as I began to feel concerned, he raised his head and peered down at me with a heat that bordered on blinding. “Forget fucking you in the morning, I’m going to make you come again now.”

My body clenched around him of its own accord as he pulled his thick length from my depths. He placed his hands on my waist and flipped me onto my front without effort.

“Do you trust me?”

Do you trust me?

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Open your legs for me.”

I buried my face into the bedsheets, acutely aware my bottom was right in front of his eyes. I forced my thighs apart and heard a soft moan behind me.

“I’m going to slide into you again, okay? I’ll be gentle, I promise.”

Slowly, he fed his length back into me. His come made it slide in more easily the second time. When he was fully embedded, he slid a hand beneath my stomach and pushed it down to my clit, then he fingered it tenderly.

“Beautiful,” he muttered, laying just enough of his weight on my back for me to feel dominated but not threatened. He moved inside me more easily this time, his lips tickling the nape of my neck. My eyelids fluttered closed at the feel of his thick fingers massaging my nub. I loved feeling his tongue and lips at my core, but feeling his firm fingers massaging me along with his thick cock stroking my sore insides, blew that sensation out of the water.

“Are you okay?” he asked, for what felt like the millionth time.

This time I could only nod, because the heat radiating out from my core rendered me speechless.

“I can hold out for longer now.” His voice was even deeper, scraping at the foot of his lungs. “So, tell me if it’s too much.”

I nodded again, my mouth buried into the sheets. “Mm-hm.”

“So slick,” he mused. “Like a damn rose petal.” His breath thickened. “*Fuck.*”

I somehow managed to move my head enough to free my mouth. “So good, Dax.”

He throbbed above and inside me. “So good, baby.”

Long, slow lengths massaged my newly broken walls while his talented fingers worked miracles over my clit. My entire body fizzed and coiled.

His bows nestled into my neck and his hot breath skittered across my back. “Jeez, I’m close again. What have you done to me?”

I squirmed beneath him, needing a release, needing something. Tension gripped my insides so tightly I couldn't tell where the desire was coming from or how that layered thirst could be quenched. He was massaging the outside of me and the inside of me; I was going to burst from one of those things.

“Oh my God. Oh my God.” The proclamations began as whispers but they seemed to spur him on. His cock pushed deeper and his fingers worked harder. “Oh my God. Oh my God. *Oh God.*”

“Shit Rose, you're gonna make me come.” His breath hit the shell of my ear in ragged pants.

“Dax—” I gripped the bedsheets and buried my mouth in them, my eyes squeezed shut. *What the hell?*

He thrust hard and flicked my clit with a roar. I had an animal on top of me, inside me, releasing me. My whole body froze, then shook, tightened then released. Pleasure rippled from my centre to my skin and I screamed into the sheets as Dax unanchored a long stream of curses.

His thrusts continued even after he burst inside me. He fucked me slowly back to earth, wrapping his arms around me and whispering sweet words in my ear. “Just beautiful. The perfect rose. The sweetest smell. The softest bloom...”

And I was in heaven.

CHAPTER

Thirteen

Rose

I **WOKE** up from the deepest most blissful sleep I'd had in a long time, with an actual smile on my face. I was probably not the first girl to think this after her first time, but I genuinely believed it. I was in love.

It didn't matter that he'd locked me up in a tower until he could make me his. In some dark, fucked up way, I understood. We were both scarred. We both knew what it was to feel less than, and nothing less than petrified at the thought of not getting the one we want. How much more perfect could this be? I wanted him. He wanted me. I went into this arrangement for the money, not for a second expecting to find love. But love was worth so much more than money; I would take the jewel of a heart over a wad of cash any day.

I opened my eyes and took in the beams of light streaming through the ripped curtains. Memories of the shattered chandelier and the broken pieces of ancient furniture came back to me in fractured forms. It had passed in a blur when I stormed into his rooms because I had only one thing on my mind, and that was to give him a piece of it. The envelope the maid had given to me held a single piece of paper. A cheque for one hundred thousand pounds. He had planned on paying me for something I hadn't given him and sending me on my way. It had stoked every single one of my insecurities. Had I been such a disappointment? Was I not what he'd hoped for?

The way he'd stared at – and smelled – my nakedness only hours earlier had convinced me of his attraction, so how could he just dump the money on me and run? And more to the point, how dare he? He might not have thought it, but he'd wooed me. From the second he invited me to dinner. I was blisteringly angry when I stormed up those stairs. I failed to see how broken he was and how broken his rooms were. I was too blinded by the humiliation of rejection and the unfairness of being locked up and released on a damn whim.

I slowly turned my head, expecting to see the unscarred left side of his face that he'd so painstakingly laid me next to, but I saw nothing but a ruffled sheet. I ran my hand over the indentation left by his body. It was cold. He must have left a while ago. My eyes ran from the contoured dip to the pillow where they landed on an envelope. I reached across and opened it, my heartrate picking up boisterously.

Dear Rose,

I don't know where to begin so I'm just going to start with where my heart is. My heart is with you, Rose. You captured it the second it saw you and it's held out for you ever since. But things have changed. I'm not a good person and you've seen the worst of me. I cannot and will not inflict that on you again.

You gave me a precious gift last night. More precious than an organ, than a heartbeat. It was life. You showed me what true trust is and I will not abuse yours any longer.

You are going to go so far, Rose. Your passion for architecture, for design, for miraculous potential, is beyond measure. I'm privileged to have known you. Like a small bird I kept you locked up against your will. You had wings all along, I just clipped them, like I do with everything. You're free now Rose.

It was the architect Louis Kahn who once said, “The sun never knew how wonderful it was until it fell on the wall of a building.” Your beauty and wonder eclipsed everything when you discovered yourself last night. I feel privileged to have been your wall.

I paused to look around the damaged room. The light exposed the worst of it, but wherever shadows fell, only the charge of emotion remained.

A quote I’d committed to memory penetrated the lines. Were it not for the shadows, there would be no beauty.

I sat bolt upright. Every word in his letter – in fact, every word he had ever spoken to me – had the same tone as... the boy in the bookshop. The recollection hurtled back to me like a tidal wave. Over the years it had dimmed, taking on new, made-up forms. His eyes had become blue, his shoulders slightly more sloped, his mannerisms softer. But this time I was able to picture the exact boy, and he was freakishly familiar.

Dax Thorn was the bookshop boy.

You captured it the second it saw you and it’s held out for you ever since.

And he’d known all along.

The room began to spin.

How had he known? How had he found me? Had he thought about me the way I had thought about him for the last four years? And if he had, why was he letting me go?

My eyes searched the room as more became visible. I could hardly go storming into his suite; I was already in it. Where would he be? I dropped my gaze back to the letter.

Take this money, Rose. Do it for me. Spend it on university and getting the education you deserve. It’s the least I can do in return for you giving me the most precious gift you could ever

give. I didn't receive it lightly. It will stay with me for the rest of my life.

A car will collect you at noon and take you to the helipad. You'll be back in London before you know it and all this will be a distant memory. All I ask is that whenever you think of the time you lost your virginity, you remember how grateful I was (am) and how utterly, incomprehensibly, undeserving.

All my heart,

Dax

I glanced down at the envelope which trembled in my hands. The same cheque fell out, mocking me. The envelope itself was fast becoming drenched in my tears. How had I made such a mess of everything? If he really was that boy, where had he been and why had he held out until now? And more pertinently, if he truly felt this way, why was he running now he had me?

A clock somewhere in his suite that had miraculously survived the assault dinged eleven times. The car would arrive in one hour and I'd be taken from the island forever.

I sprung out of bed and flew through the room, out of Dax's suite, down the winding stairs and into my room. I splashed my face, brushed my teeth and changed into a pair of exceedingly expensive jeans and a loose vest. I wrapped my hair into a bun on the top of my head, grabbed a pair of trainers, and ran out of my room into the cavernous Blackcap Hall.

At the foot of the wide staircase, I collided with Harrod, Dax's butler.

"Hello sir," I gasped. "Have you seen Master Thorn?"

His eyes popped as he stared at me, ruffled by my obviously panicked and uncouth display of anxiety. "About an hour ago, miss. He was heading for the stables."

Stables?

“And, um, would you mind telling me how to get to the stables?”

He snapped his feet together as though he was a member of the cavalry and tipped his chin upwards. “I wouldn’t mind at all, but if he has gone for a ride, you’ll have missed him. And I do believe a car will be here for you in... forty-five minutes.”

“Just... tell me,” I said, fighting exasperation.

He sighed like a petulant child. “Fine. Go out the *back* doors, take a diagonal right across the gardens, round the upper edge of Lady’s Paddock, to the double gates. Beyond that are the stables.”

“Thank you,” I gushed, then ran a few steps before spinning round again. “Um—“

“The back doors are that way.” Harrod pointed in the opposite direction to which I was running.

“Thank you.”

His smile was more genuine and I took that as a total green light to pursue Master Dalziel Thorn.

I ran through the back doors, along the gardens, round the paddock. I leaped over the gates and sprinted for the stables. But apart from three impeccably bred Irish Greys and a lame Cob, the place was deserted.

I landed heavily on a bale of hay and sank my face into my hands. It was entirely possible I would never see Dax again. I was convinced I’d found the boy of my dreams after all these years and I’d blown it. I sobbed quietly into my palms, afraid to lift my head in case the cold harsh light illuminated all my pain and failings. I yearned for shadows. Shadows were warm, protective, nurturing. If I had the choice of sunshine or shadows, I would take shadows any day.

I felt so sad and so confused I didn’t register the sound of hooves softly entering the stable block, despite the fact they

echoed around it. It was the sound of a soft whinny that made me look up.

CHAPTER

Fourteen

Dax

“WHAT ARE YOU STILL DOING
HERE?”

I couldn't help the bite in my tone. I'd worked hard in the last couple of hours to dispel any hope that Rose Hemingway might genuinely feel something for me and want to stick around.

The sex we had and the climaxes we shared were like a dream. An unbelievable dream. I'd had sex many times before last night, but those two times with Rose felt like the first time I had ever connected, and that was almost more potent than the climaxes themselves.

I had to remind myself she was suffering from Stockholm Syndrome. I had caused that. The output – her orgasm – wasn't about me or the pleasure I gave her; it was about the fact she felt safe in an oppressive situation. She had learned – very quickly – to identify with her captor for the sake of her safety. It meant less than nothing.

She looked up, and something about her expression unnerved me. It was as though she was seeing the real me, not some persona I'd created to make me feel like I actually belonged in a charismatic billionaire family.

“You knew, didn't you?”

Her words froze me but her tired, accusatory tone cut through the ice.

“Knew what?”

“We met years ago. I was fourteen. How old were you?”

There was no point in denying it. “I wasn’t lusting after a child if that’s what you’re implying,” I said, with an edge in my tone. “I was nineteen. And to be frank, you were the brightest, most interesting girl I’d ever met. Your age only made you more impressive.”

“Did you know who you were bidding on?”

Her voice was so level I couldn’t be sure if she was accusing me or mocking me.

“Yes.”

“How?”

I sighed, defeated. “After your mother yanked you from me, I needed to know who you were, so... I had you followed.”

She arched a brow. “For how long?”

“Long enough to find out your name, where you lived, who with. As long as I knew who you were, I could track you down whenever I wanted. I had eyes on you at various points over the years,” I said. “You may have forgotten me but I never forgot you.”

Her eyes softened. “I never forgot you.”

That response made my temperature rise and my hope soar. We stared at each other, re-learning everything we thought we knew.

“In fact, I’ve thought about you a lot since we met in that bookshop. I went back there every day for a year, hoping to run into you again.”

I stood in my stirrups, swung my right leg over the saddle and dropped to the ground. Rinka, my Andalusian mare, bent her neck to nuzzle my arm. I obligingly drew a handful of

mints from my pocket and fed them to her, then turned back to Rose.

“I know.”

Her eyes widened. “You knew?”

I led Rinka into a stall where she occupied herself with a net of hay. I felt Rose’s gaze follow me.

“Why didn’t you come back?”

I pushed my hands into my breeches and leaned a shoulder against the wall. “There was no point.”

She slowly shook her head. “You hadn’t been injured then, so don’t try the self-esteem excuse on me. You were so confident back then, so charismatic. I would have melted into a puddle if you’d shown an interest in me. And you knew it.”

“It’s not that.” I released a sigh. I hadn’t expected to have to tell this part of the story, but since she’d asked... “The Isle of Crow is run by a consortium of families. Mine is one of them. We have... traditions. One of them is that the children of the premier families can only marry within the consortium. We can’t marry anyone outside of it, and that includes anyone on the mainland. It’s a protective measure to keep all the wealth on the island.”

For a second, I thought her skin had paled.

“So, you’re told who you can and can’t marry?”

I scrubbed a hand over my face. “Usually, yes, but... after the incident, it was agreed I wouldn’t be bound to the same rules.”

Her brows knitted together. “Why?”

I focused on her face and not the pain of this admission which still felt like a fresh, open wound. “Because...” The back of my neck began to sweat. *The families don’t want to subject their daughters to a freak like me.* “After enduring what I did, they thought the least they could do was give me some freedom.”

She stood and walked towards me. When she raised her hand, I didn't flinch. She could slap me again and it would feel like a kiss. When she stroked her fingertips down the scars on my cheek, I held my breath. "What happened to you, Dax?"

I took her wrist, bringing her fingertips to my lips. "I don't want you to know."

Her big eyes looked softly up at me. "Why?"

"I don't want you to be burdened with it. I want you to go home and live your life." I pressed a kiss to the pad of her ring finger.

"I'll be burdened if you don't tell me."

I narrowed my eyes on her.

"I care about you, Dax. Ever since we first met, I haven't been able to get you out of my head. I never thought I'd see you again, and now that I have, I want to know everything. I don't want to lose you again."

Her words were so determined and her expression so sincere, something inside me cracked. "I'm not going to hurt you, you know."

She recoiled slightly. "I know."

"You are free to go, Rose. You're not my prisoner anymore."

"I *know*," she repeated. "I don't want to go."

I shook my head in disbelief. "I don't understand. Why?"

She pressed both palms to the sides of my face. "Haven't you heard anything I've just said? I have wanted you since that day in the bookshop. Now that I've found you... After everything we shared last night, I'm not letting you go."

The crack in my heart widened, letting in a beam of light. "But... my scars."

"They're who you are. Just like mine are who I am." She breathed steadily, still holding my face. "What happened?"

I sucked in a deep breath. I hadn't told anyone this. "It was acid. Someone threw a bucket of acid over me."

Her expression contorted in slow motion. "What? Who would do that?"

The wall of my chest thickened. "That's not important. You wanted to know what happened. That's what happened. And no, it wasn't provoked. It was done to me on purpose. I was a victim." I sighed angrily. "It takes a lot for me to admit that."

Her gaze searched my face, her pupils widening. Her lips were soft and wet. I wanted to slip my tongue between them. Then something else cut through her gentle features. Hatred. For whoever had done this to me. I changed the subject.

"What about your scars? How did you get those?"

She closed her eyes as if retrieving a memory stored in the very depths of her mind. "I was hanging out with a guy who lived close by. It wasn't long after I met you. My stepfather had moved in and was kind of taking over our lives. I used to hang out at this guy's house just to get away from it all."

"Who was this guy?"

She looked away for a brief moment. "No one important. A local artist. I used to hang out in his garden studio. One time I was in there studying and the place went up in flames."

My insides twisted with venom. "Was it an accident?"

She closed her eyes again. "No."

An inexplicable charge of rage darted up my spine.

"The fire wasn't meant for me. I managed to escape but he didn't. He died in there."

"Do you know who caused it?"

Her chin tilted and she gazed up at me. "Does it matter?"

I ground my teeth together before replying. "Yes."

"Why?" she asked, the corner of her mouth curling upwards.

“Because I will kill them.”

The corner of her mouth flattened like she couldn't believe I'd just said that.

“I mean it Rose. If I ever find out who did that to you, I will fucking kill them.”

Her eyes darkened and she stared at me.

“If you care so much, why are you sending me away?”

I ground my teeth. “Because you deserve better.”

She stood abruptly. “Do you really believe that?”

“With everything I am.”

“And I can't convince you you're wrong.”

I cast my gaze to the floor. “No.”

Seconds passed and silence stretched between them. I closed my eyes, unable to look at her, even for one last time. I only looked up when her quick footsteps carried her towards the barn exit.

“Where are you going?”

She spun around and shrugged, her arms flopping in defeat. “There's a car waiting for me. I'll be back in London before I know it, right?”

My heart pierced with pain. “That's right.”

“Goodbye Dax.” She spun back around and stalked out of the stables.

I was numb when I returned to Rinka. I went through the motions untacking her and sponging her down. Usually, it was a groom's job but I insisted; it helped strengthen the bond between horse and rider. And considering I was destined to bond only with animals, it was all I had left.

CHAPTER

Fifteen

Dax

HALF AN HOUR LATER, I climbed the tower stairs. The place felt deserted. The security men, maid and butlers who'd been hovering around over the last few weeks were gone. There was no need for them now. I felt nothing as I pushed open the door to my rooms. They'd already been straightened out. Broken furniture had been replaced, the whisky cabinet restocked, the chandelier mended. If I was capable of feeling anything at that point, it would be cold, hard guilt.

I was drawn to the bedroom, even though it would be etched on my mind forever as the place I learned how to truly love another person. The first thing I saw was the envelope. I knew it held the cheque I'd tried to give her but I was drawn to it anyway. I held it up and out fluttered the cheque and a small scrap of paper. I unfolded it and read.

Dearest Dax,

Carl Jung once said, "There is no light without shadow and no wholeness without imperfection." I just wanted you to know that ever since the fire, I've lived in the shadows. Meeting you again has brought me out into the light. The rest of the world sees our scars as imperfections but in your arms I felt whole.

I may not have taken what I came for, but I'm leaving with so much more: a capacity to love that I never knew existed.

I'll remember you always.

Rose x

My throat was dry. I hadn't swallowed since I entered the room and I didn't recall breathing either. Now, all I could feel was pain. Splinters of agony breaking out across every surface of my skin. The furnace of grief made me shake.

Before my head could catch up, my heart propelled my feet out of the room, down the stairs, across the hall and out to a waiting car. I didn't care which of my cars it was – I hadn't driven so much since my eyesight had worsened – but realising I was sitting in a Lamborghini didn't hurt. I pressed the accelerator and burned down the drive, through the gates and out onto the coastal road.

According to my watch, I had three minutes to reach the helipad if I were to stop her. I called the pilot but it rang out continually with the deafening noise of whirring propellers drowning out the sound. She'd be sitting in the helicopter already, strapped in and ready to go. I couldn't let her leave. The whole way there, I chewed on her words. I made her whole; I brought her shadows into the light. I couldn't have put it any more accurately myself. She had put into words the exact same feelings I was battling with.

I crested the hill and the helipad came into view. I pressed my foot to the floor, racing to the aircraft which was poised for take-off. At the edge of the tarmac, I ignored all the safety signs and ploughed onto the field, swerving to a halt about three millimetres from the nose of the helicopter. The car engine hummed as I leapt out and yanked open the aircraft door. Rose's mouth dropped open.

I stretched out my arms, the wind from the propellers whipping my shirt collar up around my neck.

“Rose, come here,” I called out over the din.

In slow motion, she unbuckled her seat belt and clambered across to me. I wrapped my arms around her small body and yanked her from the aircraft. Bypassing my car, I carried her to the sun-warmed lawns where I placed her gently on the ground. The pilot thankfully got the message no one was leaving and switched off the engine. As the propellers slowed and Rose’s hair settled messily around her shoulders, I pressed my palms to her cheeks.

“I’ll tell you everything,” I whispered.

Her large eyes rippled like freshly poured whisky.

“What?”

“I’ll tell you what happened to me. What caused my scars. I’ll tell you everything you want to know, if...”

Her head tilted to one side. “If what?”

“If you agree to join yourself to me forever. If you agree to that, I’ll let you in.”

“I-I don’t understand.”

I couldn’t hide the smile from my marred face. “I’ve met her Rose. I’ve met the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. I’ve wasted the last four years hiding myself away, hoping I would get just one more glimpse of you – one more chance. I don’t want to waste any more time, Rose. If you’ll have me, then I will take you now. You will have my unwavering attention, my unbridled devotion, for the rest of your days.”

Her head shifted from side to side. “But, what about my mum...”

“Tell her,” I said. “Tell her you’ve met someone. Bring her here, let her see for herself how happy I can make her daughter.” I kissed her forehead with urgency. “I know I’ve gone about this in an unconventional way, but I will make you so happy Rose. You’re my purpose now. If you leave, I will

track you down. I've seen the love in your eyes. As long as it burns there, I won't ever give up. So, you can either leave now and have me stalk you every day for as long as you live, or you can give in to me and let me make you mine."

Her voice weakened, like her fight. "University..."

"You can attend classes from here. I'll pay your expenses." I rang a hand through her hair and gripped it hard, steeling my gaze on hers. "You don't ever need to worry about money again."

Her face paled. "But... I—"

"I know you don't want this for the money Rose. The cheque for a hundred thousand pounds lying on my bed is proof of that. But I have it, so if I can use it to help you fulfil your dreams, let me."

"Dax..." Her eyes brimmed with unspilled tears. "I don't know what to say."

I let out a breath, releasing all the demons that over the years had taken up residence in my bones. "Say you'll be my wife."

Her face bloomed with shock.

"Say you'll be my Rose Thorn."

She pressed her fingers to her lips and stifled an adorable giggle. "Seriously? That will be my name?"

I wrapped an arm around her neck and pulled her into me, feeling my cock stiffen as I held her close. "Fuck yes. And you will be the most beautiful, most fragrant, most lethal Thorn that ever lived."

She peered up at me and her expression darkened. Shadows amidst light. Imperfections against wholeness. She was multi-dimensional, multi-faceted – the full package.

And I knew then, not only had I met my soulmate, I'd met my match.

The End



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About the Author

January James lives in East Sussex, UK, with her husband, daughter, crazy sprockapoo, Ralph, and the occasional errant grass snake. Until recently, she inhabited the fast-paced, adrenalin-fuelled workplaces she writes about as a communications professional. Now she spends her days dreaming up new characters and stories and trying her best to avoid indoor soft play.

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VOLUME

Five

MY DEBT TO PAY BY MERISSA BARTLETT

He has to have me. And what he wants, he gets, at any cost...

Marcella is well-versed in the workings of the criminal underworld. She keeps her head down and takes care of her younger sisters. But when her father sells her to the head of the infamous Cortese mafia, everything changes.

Matteo is ruthless, a king among pawns, destined for an empire just out of reach. The only thing standing in his way is the stipulation that he needs a queen to rule his kingdom.

He draws Marcella into his tangled web of darkness and desire. He soon realizes that his deepest obsession could become his greatest weakness if he's not careful.

In the world of Matteo Cortese, debts are often paid in blood.

CHAPTER

One

MATTEO

WARM BLOOD SPLATTERED across my face.

The man who had stolen from me screamed, but I wasn't looking at him.

I was looking at Adriano Moretti.

Moretti was merely a made man I wasn't familiar with, but the fact that he had come to me asking for help caught my attention. Since he had been brave enough to admit he needed help, I would allow him the chance to work something out.

I twisted the arm of the useless man in front of me, hearing another bone snap. I couldn't be bothered to remember his name. He was insignificant.

Moretti's face was twisted with terror. He knew that if our meeting ended poorly, his fate was entwined with the man's at my feet.

I released my grip, letting the man slump forward. My associates swept in, and once I nodded, they dragged him out of the room.

Wiping the blood from my face, I sat across the table from Moretti. He couldn't look me in the eye. His gaze darted around the room, but I stayed silent until I had his full attention.

"What are you willing to offer in exchange for living beyond your means, Moretti?"

"Please," Moretti began and shook his head. "I'll do anything. Please... My family..."

"Anything?" My brow tweaked up with intrigue.

"Anything." Moretti echoed softly, followed by the defeated sigh of a broken man.

After his request to meet, my associates had gathered information about Moretti. About his situation, his routine, and his family.

His *family* had caught my attention.

“A bride,” I stated.

Moretti blinked. “A...a bride?”

I settled further into my seat. “Yes, a bride. You have three beautiful daughters, Moretti. Isn’t that right?”

I knew it was right. I wanted to hear him say it.

“Yes...”

“Then you have something I need. In exchange for making your debt disappear, you will provide me with a wife.”

Moretti was silent. He finally ripped his gaze from me to stare at the table, searching the wood grain for an answer.

There was only one answer I was willing to accept.

“I can’t...” Moretti whispered.

That wasn’t the right answer.

CHAPTER

Two

MARCELLA

“YOU’RE NOT DOING IT RIGHT,”

Annabella grumbled.

I swatted her hand away from the braid I had started along her temple.

“Shh,” I chided. “Yes, I am. Can you braid your own hair?”

“No,” my youngest sister whined.

I breathed a chuckle and continued to Dutch braid her smooth long hair. Mamma preferred to keep Annabella’s hair in a braid because it was easier to manage that way. She wanted all of her girls to have long hair.

“There.” I tapped my sister’s shoulders when I finished her braid. The ends of her hair still brushed against her lower back. “All done.”

“Thank you.” Annabella grinned at me in the mirror. “Will you make me risotto?”

“Again?” I flicked her braid over her shoulder. “You’re going to turn into risotto if you keep eating it every day.”

Annabella followed me out of her room and down to the kitchen, begging me the entire time to make the cheesy tomato risotto that she loved. She didn’t like the way our chef, Silvia, made it, even though I was certain Silvia followed the same steps I had.

Silvia wasn’t in the kitchen. A different woman was there, smiling at us like she knew who we were. She was stretching pasta like it was second nature to her.

“What can I do for you?”

Annabella peeked over at me. “I want risotto.”

“I can make it for you,” the woman said, dropping the pasta onto the floured counter. “What kind would you like?”

“Marcella makes me cheesy tomato risotto...”

The strange woman in our kitchen wiped her hands on her yellow apron covered in cherries and nodded. “Cheesy tomato risotto, *delizioso*.”

Annabella sat at the island counter and scrutinized the woman as she made risotto. The woman had short silver hair and warm brown eyes. She wore earrings that were almost the same color as the cherries on her apron, like she had purposefully tried to match them.

I stayed in the kitchen with my youngest sister while she waited for her lunch. My job was to look after my sisters, and I would have been punished for leaving Annabella alone with this stranger.

Where the hell was Silvia? She had worked for our family for sixteen years, well before Annabella was born, and while Mamma was pregnant with Gisella. She *was* our family.

“Marcella.”

Papà stood in the whitewashed stone archway with his hands in his pockets. He nodded at me, a silent command to follow him.

I peered over at Annabella and then back at Papà before I leaned over to kiss the top of my sister’s head. “I’ll be right back.”

I rose from my seat and did as Papà requested, trailing behind him until we reached the den. He turned toward me with his face twisted in a grimace that he wiped away with his thumb.

“You will accompany me to an important supper tonight.”

“Yes, Papà.”

“I need you to be on your best behavior, Marcella. This is a *very* important event that we will be attending.”

“Yes, Papà.”

Papà's jaw set firmly. "There is a new dress for you. On your bed. Wear that. Be ready at six."

I agreed a final time, and he walked away. Our conversation was finished. He wasn't normally this...cold. He was a harsh man—strong-willed, as he liked to say—but he had always been warm, especially toward his girls.

Mamma had said that Papà's heart was split into four equal sections, one for each of his girls. He had loved us all equally, but I wasn't sure if that was the case anymore. He was distant, and I couldn't tell if it was because of work...or because of Mamma.

Gisella lingered on the stairs, grinning when she saw me leave the den. "What was Papà saying to you?"

I ignored her, knowing damn well she had been listening in on my clipped conversation with Papà. She already knew.

"You're going to a supper? What supper?" Gisella was hot on my heels as I moved down the hall, stopping at my door. "Who is going to be there? Who is going?"

"Gisella," I groaned. "I don't know."

She forced a frown. "Papà didn't mention anything to me. He didn't buy *me* a new dress."

I reached forward and pressed a finger against the tip of her nose. "Because you're too young."

"I'm fifteen," she whined, following me into my room. "How old were you when you started going to these...things?"

"I wasn't fifteen."

I had been sixteen. The first time my papà had taken me to any sort of event for the organization had been a nightmare. Men more than twice my age had been watching me, their gazes lingering far too long on my teen body. The next time I had attended an event was after I turned eighteen.

Gisella darted across the room and plucked the backless red dress off my bed.

“Oh. my *God*.” My middle sister held the silk dress against her slim body with a groan. “Papà is going to let you wear this?”

I shrugged and turned to my dresser, trying to pick something to wear under the dress that wouldn’t be on display thanks to the unforgiving fabric. “He picked it out, so he must approve of it.”

“I’m going to check my room to see if he left a dress out for me!”

“You do that.” I chuckled and crossed the room to close the door and lock it. Gisella would only distract me and make me late.

I wasn’t sure how we were even related. Maybe it was because I was older and had more responsibility than she would ever have to bear, or maybe because I knew more about what our family did than her. She was just so...*free*.

My heart ached to be like her, to feel like that. Maybe one day I would. I’d get away from this life, but I couldn’t leave my sisters. Not yet.

Not knowing who would be at this supper, I exfoliated from head to toe, a little excited at thinking I could meet someone there. I knew that was not how it worked in our family, but some of my cousins had picked their husbands, or at least that was what they had said happened.

I could possibly *sway* Papà’s decision on the man I married if I met someone who wasn’t a complete power-hungry asshole. Those men were few and far between in our world, but they weren’t unicorns.

My cousin, Marzia, married a man who *was* a unicorn, and Uncle Nino surprisingly approved of the relationship. He was far sterner than Papà, so there was still a chance for me.

I curled the ends of my hair, since it was so thick and heavy that the curls would be almost straight by the end of the night. I kept my makeup light, as Papà would often request, and pulled on the slinky dress.

It took nearly ten minutes just to pick out shoes that would match. I had quite a few options to choose from since these events happened often enough.

Sneaking down the hall with my heels in my hand, I tiptoed into Mamma's room and kissed her forehead. In the hall, I stepped into my heels and clicked my way down the echoey stone space to the staircase.

Papà was waiting on the first floor of our home, wearing an all-black suit...and a frown.

"Do you not like it?" I stopped on the second last step. "I can change, Papà."

"No," Papà blurted. "No, Marcella. It is perfect. Come, now. We don't want to be late."

CHAPTER

Three

MARCELLA

THE GATED mansion with sleek white pillars creating a carport where our driver stopped wasn't a home we had visited before. The driveway wrapped around a marble fountain decorated perfectly with flowers and shrubs.

I didn't dare question Papà on whose home it was or why we were here. I knew better than that, so I carefully stepped out of the car and accepted Papà's waiting hand. He led me toward the front door that opened as we neared, and into the extravagant foyer that made our home look cheap.

The foyer was a mix of black wood and pristine white stone. A curved staircase on the left drew my attention to what I could see of the second floor of the home. The back wall was opened with black railing and pillars.

A man stood at the center of the railing, and he was simply observing the people on the first floor below him. I didn't recognize him. I didn't recognize any of these men.

I was the only girl.

Even the staff were men, catering to every request from the men around them, who expected no less.

"Be good," Papà commanded and leaned forward to press a kiss to both of my cheeks.

"Yes, Papà."

Be good meant be silent. *Be good* meant be unseen. *Be good* meant do not speak to anyone unless spoken to.

So, I did exactly that. I accepted the glass of wine Papà had ordered for me, and I slipped through the crowd of harsh mafioso men to find somewhere to sit. To be out of the way.

The only place to sit was in the center of the foyer. A large round black seat that looked three Victorian chairs glued together sat empty. I settled myself on the velvet surface and

kept my spine straight, knowing damn well that wherever Papà was, he had his eye on me.

I needed to make a good impression; otherwise, Papà wouldn't have invited me. Whoever lived here was important enough that Papà needed the attention to be off of him. That was my purpose. To be a distraction.

Slowly sipping my wine, I listened to the conversations around me. About money, about blackmail, about murder, and about a man named Cortese. The name sounded familiar enough that I should have known who Cortese was, but I didn't. I had more important things to deal with, like taking care of my sisters, than to know every Don in the business.

Another glass of wine arrived, carried to me wordlessly by a waiter in a burgundy button-down. I handed him my empty glass and searched the space for Papà before taking a sip. I couldn't see him, but this was not the place to worry about where my drink had come from. My papà was a good man on a bad path in life, but he was well-liked in the syndicate.

I leaned against the back of the seat, realizing that no one was looking at me. Not a single one of the men who mingled in this space had cast a glance my way. The only man who looked at me was Papà. He came into view again, speaking with the man who had been upstairs when we had arrived.

Papà peered over his shoulder at me, then nodded. I stood and smoothed out my dress as Papà walked toward me with the man who most likely owned this house.

“Marcella,” Papà began as he neared. “I would like to introduce you to Matteo Cortese.”

Matteo Cortese was as handsome as he was lethal. He ran a hand through dark hair and adjusted his expensive black suit. When he looked at me, I was almost surprised. Every man in here had pretended I didn't exist, but the way Matteo gazed at me, it made me feel like I was the only woman to ever exist to him.

Everything about him screamed *danger*. It was a warning I was willing to obey.

Papà took my wine glass from me as Matteo stepped forward and swept my free hand into his.

“Marcella.” The way he said my name, like he was testing how it tasted on his tongue, was enticing. “It is my pleasure to have you here with us tonight.”

Flipping my hand, Matteo bent and kissed the middle of my wrist against my pulse point. He drew me forward to then press his warm mouth against my right cheek, then my left.

“Your home is lovely,” I whispered against the side of his face as he lingered after his last kiss.

“Tell me what you like of it.”

As he leaned back, Matteo watched me carefully, his honeyed hazel eyes burning a trail across my face as he took in every detail.

“I have yet to find anything I don’t like, Mr. Cortese.”

“Matteo,” he corrected quickly, and his gaze met mine once again. “That can’t be true. There must be something you dislike.”

I slowly looked away from him and took in the black and white foyer that bled into a den that was equally monochromatic. “There isn’t much color.”

“I will add more. What are you drinking?” Holding a hand toward Papà, Matteo accepted my almost-empty wine glass and raised it to his lips, draining the contents.

“Malbec.”

“Hmm,” Matteo mused, and a ghost of a smile spread across his lips. “I have much better. Do excuse me.”

I finally exhaled when he let go of my hand and stepped back. His gaze slipped across my body quickly, and that smile was back before he turned fully and walked away.

“Marcella...” Papà began, but his words were cut short as a Cortese staff announced that supper was about to begin.

Papà shook his head and reached for my hand, squeezing as we walked toward the dining room.

It was no surprise to find the dining room just as monochromatic as the rest of the house, with black chairs and a table covered in a pristine white tablecloth.

Papà pulled out the farthest chair on the right side of the long table. He sat to my left, and as the room stilled, Matteo settled himself in the seat at the head of the table...directly to my right.

When I peeked up at him, he was already looking at me, and he pushed a glass of wine forward.

“Try this, *amorina*.”

Sweetheart.

The only woman in a room full of men. The only touch of color slowly swallowed by all the black.

As I reached for it, unable to look away from Matteo whether out of fear or curiosity, I wrapped my hands not around the glass, but around *his hand*.

“Oh,” I breathed.

With a dark chuckle, Matteo slipped his fingers from below mine.

I brought the deep ruby liquid to my lips and took a small sip. It wasn't as sweet as the glass I'd had earlier, but it was far more flavorful, tasting like blackberries and spice.

“What do you think?” Matteo asked as I placed my glass down.

“It's good. What is it?”

A half-smile lifted Matteo's mouth on the left side. “Bordeaux. 2005...” His hand was over mine, coaxing the glass from me, then taking a sip. “It's my most expensive bottle of wine.”

“You didn't have to open it.”

He breathed a laugh, swishing the wine around in the glass. “I don't mind opening my eight-thousand-dollar bottle of wine...for you, *amorina*.”

“Are you having a glass?”

“Would you like me to have a glass?” Matteo turned the question back on me with a ferocious gaze.

I couldn't tell if he was flirting with me or trying to get me comfortable to then brutalize me in front of all these men. I nodded slowly. Matteo raised a hand, and that action alone summoned one of the men serving an appetizer.

“Fill this glass with more Contrada, and get a new glass for Marcella,” he commanded smoothly.

His staff left and returned before I had the chance to exhale. Matteo took the glasses from his staff without breaking eye contact with me. He placed the glass on the table in front of me and motioned down to the antipasto I hadn't noticed had been placed in front of me.

Careful conversation began around the table as the men ate. They still weren't looking at me, avoiding my side of the table entirely.

When I peeked over at Papà, he forced a tight smile. “Eat, *cara*.”

“How is it?” Matteo asked.

I looked up from my plate at him, but he was staring down at the pile of radish slices I had plucked out of the antipasto and set aside.

“It's lovely, thank you.”

“You don't have to eat what you do not like. You don't like radishes?”

He finally looked back at me, and I shook my head.

“We will not add radishes again.”

“Okay...” I said slowly, knowing damn well I wouldn't be accompanying Papà to this man's home again.

He was too harsh, too critical of every movement I had yet to make. Matteo Cortese was a brutal man, and he made sure everyone knew that.

My antipasto plate was swept away, replaced with a slice of beef pinwheel and red sauce, and my wine was topped up the moment it emptied.

Matteo stood, a commanding motion that silenced the room in an instant. “I’m sure most of you are wondering why I have invited you into my home today.” He began, not waiting for a response from his men around him. “It is a rather special evening. I would like to announce my engagement to Marcella Moretti.”

My lips parted and I sucked in a shallow gasp as all but Papà applauded Matteo’s stupid words. I glanced at the men around the table, but none of them met my gaze. Not even Papà.

He wouldn’t look at me, or maybe he couldn’t. Not after he had done *this*.

Papà...had *sold me*. To Matteo Cortese.

Disgust coiled in my stomach, mixed with an emotion I’d never thought Papà would make me feel: *betrayal*.

The man who I was now supposed to marry guided me to stand with a warm hand that I accepted. I let him draw me forward, and I let him press a kiss to my cheeks.

What the fuck?

I was seething, poorly restrained rage boiled within me as I tried to steady my breathing. Matteo grinned down at me. He was *enjoying this*. What a sick bastard.

As I sat, I turned a glare toward Papà.

“What the fuck is going on?” I hissed.

Papà faced me with a frown that only made him look *weak*.

“This is a transaction,” Matteo responded for my papà, his tone low.

I spun my glare toward him, watching as he sliced into his supper like what he had just said was entirely normal. In our world, technically...it was.

“A transaction for what?” I spat.

Breathing a laugh, Matteo grinned slyly at me, meeting my gaze fully.

“I’m sorry, *cara*,” Papà whispered.

I twisted to look at him and reached for his arm, holding on as tightly as I could.

“What is going on? Please, Papà, just tell me.” I felt the sting of tears that I tried to blink away. “Who will look after Mamma? Annabella? Gisella?”

“I have hired staff to take care of your mamma and sisters,” Matteo answered for my papà again.

“Not everything can be bought,” I hissed and glared at him over my shoulder.

That stupid fucking smile spread across his face. “But *you* can be bought.”

CHAPTER

Four

MATTEO

MY BRIDE SAT STUBBORNLY at my left for the remainder of our meal. She didn't touch her beef bracoile, but her papà managed to get her to eat a bit of the panna cotta with lemon and cherries.

As my men were dismissed and all stood to leave, Marcella pushed away from the table and quickly followed her papà into the foyer.

Serafino Genovesi, my consigliere, stood to follow her, but I raised a hand to stop him. Marcella couldn't get far. I rose and entered the foyer, watching as my fiancée held onto her papà's arms.

She was begging him not to leave her.

"Please, Papà! Please take me with you! Take me home, please!"

"I can't, *cara*," Moretti replied coldly, refusing to look at his daughter.

He wasn't a strong man. Brave, yes, but not strong. Moretti tried to remove Marcella's hands from his arm, but she just gripped him tighter.

Moretti hadn't told his daughter of our...exchange. That had been my idea. An idea I wasn't entirely proud of now as I watched her cling to her papà, but it had been for the best. Had she known, it was entirely likely that Marcella would have done something to prevent the arrangement from even happening.

And I wasn't going to let that happen. Not when this was a strategic movement as much as it was fuelled by my intense curiosity about the eldest Moretti daughter. She kept to herself, attended events on her papà's arm, but she wasn't as involved as some other made men's daughters. As much as I knew about her, I craved *more*.

More of her, and less of the interaction in front of me. I was starting to feel uncomfortable, and I almost felt like this hadn't been the right way to go about it.

Almost.

"I love you, Marcella," Moretti sighed, and with a swift yank, he pulled his sleeve from his daughter and left her here.

With me. Where she now belonged, whether she liked it or not.

When our home was entirely empty of the guests I had invited, Marcella turned to stare at me with a rage that burned across my skin. The click of her heels against the marble echoed in the cold space as she marched her ass toward me, stopping inches away.

"You can't do this," she seethed.

Like hell I couldn't.

"It's already done," I reminded her, and took the opportunity to check out her deliciously curved body in the blood red dress I had bought for her.

It was the same color as the wine I had opened to announce our engagement. I had a few more bottles of the 2005 Contrada. Maybe I would only open them for us for special occasions...like our wedding.

"All that is left is a quick engagement followed by an extravagant wedding you will plan, a few heirs, and a lifetime of security."

"Like I would *dare* sleep with you."

I leaned in. "Oh...you will, *amorina*, and you will like it. I'll make sure of it."

Marcella's cheeks warmed, and I chose to believe it was at the thought of the kind of pleasure I could give her. *Good.*

"What about happiness?" Her question was clipped and delivered through gritted teeth.

That made me frown. My mamma wasn't happy with my papà, which was now why he was on his...seventh wife? I

would not be like him. How could I find a woman that would be better than Marcella?

“You don’t have to like me,” I said slowly, unwilling to admit the truth of our predicament. “But you will have to marry me. This transactional marriage benefits both parties. Your papà needed assistance...”

I paused. Was she aware of their situation?

“And I offered my help.”

“Assistance with what?” she asked.

But I didn’t reply. I was too busy staring at the flecks of gold in her brown eyes.

“You can’t make me marry you.”

“I can.”

“You can’t keep me here.”

“I can.”

“I won’t go through with all of this.”

“You will.”

Marcella blew out a steady breath. “I’ll never love you, Matteo.”

It was the first time she had said my name. Each syllable rolled off her tongue; my name fit perfectly in her pouty little mouth. I wondered what else I could fit in that little mouth...

“I won’t ask that of you, but this wedding is happening, whether you wish it to or not,” I said with a sigh, realizing this was going to be far more difficult than I had hoped it would.

Marcella was going to fight me on every aspect of this marriage. As much as I wanted to rip that satin dress from her until it was shredded ribbons, it seemed like the only time I would be inside her would be to get her pregnant.

Her chest was heaving up and down with each heavy breath. I greedily watched the movement for longer than I should have and forced my gaze higher until it met hers.

“Now...why don’t you have a look at your bedroom?”

“I’m not sleeping in the same bed as you,” she replied quickly.

I couldn’t help but chuckle at her defiance. “Which is why you will have your own room. Have a look, and let me know if it is to your liking.”

“I’m not going to look at *any* room because I’m not staying here.”

With an annoyed growl, I bent and scooped her up with ease, tossing her over my shoulder.

“*Che cazzo?!*” Marcella howled, pounding at my back. “Put me down, you asshole!”

“No.”

She kicked at my stomach as I began to climb the stairs. Her left shoe slipped off her foot and tumbled down to the main floor. That stilled her for a moment, but she quickly resumed slamming her feet into my sternum, not stopping when her other shoe fell.

With a nod to my men, who I had assigned to guard Marcella, they pushed open the double doors to her bedroom and pulled them closed behind us.

Crossing the space, I tossed my bride-to-be onto the plush bed. I was breathing heavily, not because I had carried her, but because I was poorly restraining an immense amount of lust for the woman who was *mine*.

Marcella’s left leg raised in a weak attempt to kick me, but I grabbed her ankle before she could. Unbuttoning my suit jacket, I watched her, trying to determine her next move.

She used my grip on her as leverage and brought her chest up, but I wasn’t having that. I gripped her throat and placed a knee on the edge of the bed between her legs, pressing her down into the mattress with my full weight. Sliding my other hand higher up her leg, I grinned at the sound of the dress ripping as I pushed her legs apart.

Marcella swallowed a gasp, and I felt the strain of the action against my palm. Her lips parted, and I wanted to

squeeze her throat further, see if I could get a sound from her to know that she enjoyed it.

I would figure out what she enjoyed soon enough, and I would use that against her.

I wasn't going to ask her to love me.

I was going to *make* her love me.

She didn't have to like me, but she needed to love me.

"Stop," I hissed and tightened my grasp around her throat.

Marcella stilled beneath me, her squirming finally coming to an end. I removed my hand from her throat, but I stayed above her.

That rage she'd felt had been replaced with fear.

Shit.

"It seems like you need a moment to get settled. Come find me when you're ready, and we can discuss logistics."

I expected her to question what I meant by logistics, but she didn't. She didn't do anything. Not as I leaned back, not as I let go of her, and not as I got off her bed fully. Marcella didn't move, even as I left her bedroom and my men closed the doors behind me.

"Let me know if she leaves this fucking room."

CHAPTER

Five

MARCELLA

LET *me know if she leaves this fucking room.*

Great. So those men were going to be stationed outside the room. The room that was apparently *my* room.

Matteo was right. This was happening whether I wanted it to or not. It was just how things worked in our world. As much as I had hoped Papà wasn't going to arrange a marriage for me, I'd known it was bound to happen.

I pushed my hair out of my face and ran my fingers across my throat. Would he leave a mark on me? Intentionally? Was I going to live in fear for the rest of my life? In fear of my husband?

My husband. Oh, my *God*. I was going to be married soon...to a monster.

I stared at the ceiling and tilted my head when I noticed the single pink glow-in-the-dark star. It was exactly where it had been at home.

What the hell?

I sat up a little too quickly, my head spinning, and I stared around the space that was familiar. Far more familiar than it should have been.

This room looked like my bedroom at home, but with a major upgrade.

My pajamas that I had worn last night were across the back of the vanity chair where I had left them, my gold hoop earrings were on the nightstand, and the shoes I had tried on before I came here were exactly where I had kicked out of them earlier today.

What the actual fuck?

I stood and pushed open the door that led to my own bathroom, finding all of my products in the shower, and even Annabella's gold bracelet on the edge of the luxurious bathtub.

A sob ripped from my throat as I darted toward the tiny bracelet with pastel flower charms. This wasn't mine. It needed to be with Annabella. *I* needed to be with Annabella.

I couldn't stay here. I needed to be at home. I'd marry this monster, but I needed to be at home. I needed to look after Mamma, and I needed to look after the girls. That was my job. My sisters would fight every person who came into the house, and how would the staff know when Mamma needed her medicine? Or how much? Or which kind?

It couldn't have been mandatory for me to be here with him just yet. I should have a moment to get familiar with being engaged.

I should have been given the chance to say goodbye.

I crumbled to the cold, cream-colored stone floor and cried. How long had it taken Matteo's men to gather all of my belongings and place them in this damn room?

They managed to do it during the supper. What did my sisters do? What did they think?

There was no way this could have been done in just a few hours. This was *planned*.

Papà had known he was giving me to Matteo tonight. He'd *known*. He'd known for a while.

And yet he hadn't stopped to think about just how *wrong* this was.

It was a transaction, and I was the payment.

CHAPTER

Six

MATTEO

MARCELLA HADN'T LEFT her room in over a day. Was I that poor of company to keep?

Each dish sent up was returned untouched, and that was starting to piss me off. She needed to eat. I didn't give a shit if she thought this was some sort of punishment if she refused to eat what my cooks prepared for her, but starving herself wasn't the solution.

Her papà had told me as much as he could about his eldest daughter as he signed the contract I had drafted for our exchange. What she liked, what she disliked, and what I should expect until she warmed up to me.

If she warmed up to me.

Gaining her love might be a challenge, but it was something I was willing to work for.

I asked my cooks to leave the kitchen that I knew Marcella would state needed more color. Blacks and whites and grays were much easier to pair together when no additional colors were included. Now I had an emerald foyer that bled into the dining room and a sapphire den.

I wanted her to see the changes I had made for her. Wanted to see her face when she looked around the space that she had critiqued for being colorless, and for her to see that *she* was what would bring color into our home.

I wanted Marcella to know I was willing to make this work if she was.

Pounding chicken breasts until they were flat, I let them marinate while I prepared the breadcrumb coating. I was making chicken cutlets for her, something her papà said had been her favorite meal since she was small.

I wasn't sure if this was going to be enough to get her out of her room, but I was willing to try.



Pushing through her bedroom door, I found my wife-to-be beneath the blankets. She stiffened as I sat on the edge of her bed and again when I coaxed the plush comforter off her face.

Marcella's eyes were red and puffy, and she wouldn't look at me fully.

"Eat," I commanded, holding the plate toward her. "You haven't eaten anything my cooks have prepared for you."

Marcella's lip curled. "I wasn't hungry."

"Are you now?" I asked.

She hesitated, so I continued.

"I made this for you, *amorina*."

Slowly, Marcella took the plate and sat up. She stared down at the cutlets and roasted vegetables and sliced into the chicken. I watched as she raised the fork to her lips and finally ate.

"Was that so hard?"

"Yes," she murmured, and I was certain I saw a hint of a smile. "Your chefs use too much garlic."

"I will hire new chefs."

Her smile slipped away, and she peered down at her dish. "Since you hired someone to look after Mamma...are you responsible for hiring a new cook for my family?"

I frowned. "The safety of your family is important to me, *amorina*."

"And Silvia is important to me. She *is* our family."

Cazzo. The cook was one of the few who didn't pass the background check.

“She has worked for us for as long as I can remember. You need to get rid of whoever is there now and get Silvia back,” Marcella stated and peered up at me as she chewed a roasted carrot.

Clearly, she was very determined when it came to her family.

“I do, huh?”

“Yes. Happy wife, happy life, right?” She was grinning again.

Good.

“Is that how the saying goes, *amorina*?” I leaned closer. “Then what do I need to do to get you out of this room?”

“Let me go home,” she replied quickly, and frowned when I sighed.

“I can’t.”

“You can,” Marcella countered and placed her plate to the side.

She got to her knees, the blanket falling away entirely. She was wearing a deep pink tank top with little black dots and matching shorts.

She was going to be the death of me. I knew she was beautiful, but *this*...the fact that she was mine was enough to drive me insane. I’d spend the rest of my days obsessing over every inch of her if she gave me the chance.

“I need to be with my family...” Marcella began, reaching for me. She gripped my shirt and turned me fully to face her. “Please, Matteo.”

I could get used to hearing her beg, especially when she was begging my name.

“If I say you can visit, will you come downstairs?”

“Why do you want me downstairs?”

I placed a hand over hers. “I have something to show you.”

“When can I visit? Today?”

I shook my head. “It is too late, *amorina*.”

“Tomorrow, then.” She countered and drew me in. “You’ll let me go tomorrow.”

“I’m not keeping you as a prisoner...”

“Then let me *go*.”

“I’ll see if my men are available.”

Marcella shook her head. “I don’t want to go with your men. I want to go alone.”

“I’ll take you.”

She scoffed. “I’m not letting you *near* my family.”

“Who says I haven’t already been near, *amorina*?”

Marcella ripped her hands from beneath mine. “*Vaffanculo!*” She snarled and backed up against the headboard. “Stay the fuck away from my family.”

“*Our* family,” I reminded her, which only pissed her off further. “If you want to visit your family, you will go with *me*.”

I stood and exhaled slowly, rounding the bed toward the door.

“Come downstairs when you are ready to talk about this further. Until then...you will eat what I make for you, *amorina*.”

CHAPTER

Seven

MARCELLA

ON THE NINTH day of being in this prison of a mansion, I was sick of re-reading books I had once loved. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a moment to sit down and read an entire book, but it didn't feel the same as it once had. Not in this house.

Creeping out of my bedroom, I stared up at the two men on either side of the doorframe. They were broad, and they were bored. I wasn't sure if they were the same men who had been stationed here the day Matteo tossed me on my bed. I hadn't really been able to see anything through my hair, and I'd been too busy trying to get Matteo to let me go.

One reached for his phone, and I shot forward to grab his arm.

"No. Please don't call him," I begged, unsure how this would even play out.

Would they actually listen to me because I was Matteo's fiancée?

With a slow exhale, he tucked his phone back in his pocket. When I turned to look at the other, he was talking. On the phone. To Matteo.

"Yes, she's out. I'll let her know." He ended the call and faced me with a grim expression. "Mr. Cortese will see you in the den, Mrs. Cortese."

"Miss Moretti," I corrected, glaring at the idiot who'd given me away. "I am not his wife yet. Don't address me as such."

"Yes, Miss Moretti," the guard behind me stated in an accent I didn't quite recognize while the other rolled his eyes.

I didn't know where the damn den was. I had only seen the foyer, dining room, and my prison cell of a bedroom. As I

descended the stairs, I glanced around at all of the green accents in the foyer. All of the *new* green accents in the foyer.

Matteo had listened. He'd added color.

I didn't like that. I couldn't like him, and I'd never love him. He needed to be mean to me. He needed to be distant. That was how it worked. Marriages were rarely happy in our world, and mine would be no different.

Don't get so damn excited over a shade of green, Marcella.

The black chair where I had been sitting when I first met Matteo now had plush deep green pillows that matched the rug beneath it. It was a start. It wasn't enough, and it would never be enough, but it was a start.

This house would never be my home.

I could hear the low rumble of my future husband's domineering voice. I hoped he would never speak to me that way, but if I wanted this to be a loveless marriage, maybe I would need him to.

I pushed further into the home, watching as the greens blended into blues in a gorgeous sunken den with plush black velvet couches. The rug beneath a coffee table with two glasses of wine was soft against my toes and a sleek sapphire, matching the pillows that still had tags on them.

Matteo stood near a floor-to-ceiling window, gazing out at the hazy morning sun. He was in another tailored suit without a jacket; a white button-down clung to a hardened frame below that I wouldn't mind occasionally feeling when we tried for children.

Children.

I was to bear an heir for Matteo, a boy to rule this world when my husband could no longer. And if I didn't give him a son, he would find someone else who could.

I had heard stories of capo wives who were shunned for bearing only girls. They were taken care of because capos looked after their wives, past and present, but they were no

longer welcome within the syndicate. The syndicate that I would need to learn now since I would be more involved.

Papà had glossed over the entire world in which we lived in, giving only the information required to keep us satisfied. But what really went on, what Matteo dealt with, was far more than that.

With an abruptness that made me jump, Matteo ended the call and rested both hands against the window. He sighed and his entire body tensed, muscles flexing and shifting below the white fabric. I would have to learn to go to him and be his comfort, but for now, I would just watch.

He turned, tucking his phone in his pocket, and crossed the room to me.

“*Amorina.*” My nickname was breathy on the lips that I let press against my cheek and linger as he wrapped both arms around me. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, Matteo.”

A quick nibble on my skin that he soothed with a kiss had me yelping and pushing at him while he chuckled. “You slept well?”

“As well as I could in an unfamiliar place.”

Matteo peered down at me with a frown. “Your room was crafted to resemble the one you had at your papà’s. Is something missing?”

Love, I wanted to say, but I knew that answer would only shift the conversation toward us and away from the fact that I wasn’t comfortable here. I wasn’t sure if I ever would be.

“No.” I shook my head. “Nothing is missing. It’s a different...”

House? Life?

“Bed.”

“I’ll buy you a new one.” His hands left me as quickly as they had wrapped around me, and I stumbled slightly. “Glad to see you out of the bedroom.”

“What do you need me to do?” I asked as I sat on the couch.

Matteo glanced at me over his shoulder. “You don’t need to do anything for me, *amorina*.”

“To be able to see my family.”

“Would you like to see your family today?”

He turned fully to watch me nod.

“Then have a meal with me.”

“What would you like me to make for you?”

He breathed a laugh. “I’m going to cook for you, Marcella.”

“You’ve made me a few meals already,” I countered and stood. I moved carefully toward him, keeping enough distance that he couldn’t touch me.

Matteo nodded once. “To get you to eat. That is still my intent.”

As he side-stepped me, I grabbed his arm, feeling him tense beneath my grip. He slowly turned his head to look at me.

“Will you let me cook for you?”

He sucked in a shallow breath. “Yes.”

I let him go, but he snatched my hand in his and led me through his—*our*—home to the kitchen. It was larger than the kitchen at Papà’s, and there wasn’t a strange woman stretching pasta there, but it was black. Everything was black.

“What will you make me?” Matteo turned and leaned against the gigantic island counter, drawing me forward.

I didn’t want to like the way he touched me with a gentle firmness, the way he had strategically angled his bent knee so it would be between my legs, or the way he tilted his head as he waited for my response.

Cazzo.

I needed to have some sort of control over this stupid situation. I wasn't going to be putty that he could mold exactly how he wanted me. Each time he pushed, I had to push back.

So I leaned into him, grinning coyly when he stopped breathing. "What do you want me to make you?"

Matteo's hands pressed into my back, bringing me closer, and I dug my nails into his chest. "Make me your favorite breakfast."

I chuckled. "That would take hours."

"I have time."

"Is that so?"

"I'll always have time for you."

I pushed away from him. I had to.

"Look who is being such a caring captor. My favorite breakfast is strawberry granita and brioche, so I'll make you the brioche."

"Then I'll make the granita." Matteo swept past me and opened a door to the largest pantry I had ever seen.

Every single dry ingredient imaginable filled the organized shelves. Matteo grabbed sugar and yeast and placed them on the island. He unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled up his sleeves. Slowly. Because I was watching the motion, wondering why the hell such a simple act could be so attractive.

Maybe it was just him. Maybe it was because everything he did was attractive, and it wasn't fair. He was so put-together, so imperfectly perfect, that I seriously needed to up my game to be on his arm.

I was wearing a light green dress covered in tiny white flowers that Gisella had picked out for me because I'd had a feeling Matteo would like me in dresses. And by the way his gaze slipped across my chest and down to my legs, I knew I was right.

I couldn't lift my gaze from the tattoos that wrapped around his forearms. Roses blended into snakes and scorpions,

the beauty in the brutality.

“What do you need, *amorina*?”

I needed Silvia’s recipe for brioche.

Silvia was from Sicily. When I was eight, she’d told me that when she was a child, she had a different flavor of granita for breakfast every morning. I hadn’t believed her, and the next morning I was greeted with strawberry granita and fresh brioche. She made me a different flavor of granita every day that week.

“My recipe.”

Matteo nodded once and bent to grab a bowl from the cabinet behind him. I took a moment to admire his ass before I went back upstairs to get the recipe book I kept in the top drawer of my nightstand.

It had been Mamma’s book, and I wanted to keep it safe, so I kept it close.

Returning to the kitchen, I skidded to a stop at the sight of Matteo. Shirtless. At the stove.

He glanced over his shoulder at me, and a slick grin cracked across his lips. “Didn’t want to get dirty, *amorina*.”

Liar.

More ink that had been mercilessly hidden by his shirt covered his chest, back, torso, and arms. He was covered in tattoos of skulls and script and daggers, a mash of everything that made him.

Matteo and I moved around the kitchen clumsily, almost as if we were both intentionally trying to touch the other. As I pulled milk from the fridge, Matteo was directly behind me, our chests colliding. When he bent to grab a pan for me, I stood so close that he practically slid up the entire length of my body with intent.

Neither of us spoke. There were no words needed. We were simply cooking together...

The brioche buns were barely cooled when Matteo snatched one from the pan and pulled the smaller top bun off the bottom bun. Steam poured from the warm pastry, but that didn't stop him. He popped the smaller bun in his mouth and chewed.

"You're going to burn your tongue," I chided.

"*Amorina...*" Matteo sighed, and I frowned. "These are perfect."

I nodded toward the freezer where the granita was chilling. "Wait until you try it with the granita and cream."

"Does it have to be strawberry?"

"What?"

"The granita. Is your favorite strawberry?"

"It's a tie between strawberry and lemon."

With a grin, Matteo rounded the island toward me and pressed against me with a coy *oops* before continuing to the freezer. Reaching past the granita he'd made, he pulled out a container...filled with lemon granita.

"How about I make us some fresh cream while you scoop some granita for us?"

"Deal."

I ate my favorite breakfast in the kitchen of my new home, with the man I would have to marry.

But I couldn't let my guard down.

Matteo Cortese would ruin me, that was something I was certain of.

CHAPTER

Eight

MARCELLA

“IT’S...JUST US?”

Matteo gazed at me with a wicked smile. “Yes, *amorina*. Just us. Thought that was what you wanted?”

He motioned for me to get in the passenger seat of his newest luxury car, whatever it was.

And he was right. I had said I didn’t want to go with his men, so that meant I would be going with him. I just thought it wouldn’t be the two of us...alone...in a confined space.

The attraction between us was obvious. Sure, I was attracted to the man who towered over me with a dark grin. I would have had to be dead to not be attracted to Matteo Cortese.

I was as attracted to him as I was afraid of him. The man had zero issue taking me from my family, exchanging me for money. He *paid* for me. When it was all boiled down...Matteo Cortese had *bought* me. From my own papà.

And now he was urging me to get into a car with him. He wasn’t going to dispose of me this quickly, was he? What *was* I to him other than a purchase? An item?

Did he need me, or did he simply want me?

“*Amorina...*” Matteo sighed and peered up at the sky. “Must you challenge me on every request?”

I lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “Sounds like fun.”

His head snapped down, and that evil grin only widened. “Oh, I’ll show you fun...”

My body blazed at the simple words, a promise for something more. And it annoyed me.

You will not like him, Marcella.

Staying silent, I slid onto the cool leather seat and watched the man who owned me as he rounded the hood, his gaze never leaving mine.

“Seatbelt.” Matteo commanded as he started the car.

I barely had myself buckled in before the car bolted forward, pressing me into the seat.

“I hope you don’t mind...but I like things *fast*.”

Don’t read into that one.

The gate swung open as we neared, and we slipped onto the winding stretch of private road. The car maneuvered perfectly around each twist and turn. It was the *car*, *not* the man behind the wheel. Turning onto the freeway, Matteo shifted to the highest gear and then rested his hand against the back of my seat.

He peered over at me with a satisfied grin. “You’re the first person to sit in this car with me.”

“Lucky me,” I muttered. “Watch the road.”

“You are safest with me, *amorina*.”

“You’re good at lying.” I gripped the armrest on the door tighter as he wove around cars with ease.

“I won’t lie to you unless it is to protect you. That, I can promise.”

“You say a lot of nice things for a man who doesn’t do nice things.” I chanced a glance at Matteo, and he was already watching me. I was going to die in this damn car.

His jaw was set, and he chose not to reply.

Good. I was finished with this conversation. I needed to put all of my energy into reminding myself to breathe as he drove.

Matteo downshifted and guided us toward the exit that led to my home. I didn’t have to prompt him. He knew.

Had he been in my home before? In my room when I wasn’t there?

How long had he known that he was going to own me?

How long had he watched me? Learned my routine to figure out exactly who I was?

If he had...then why would he take me away from where I was needed most?

Matteo punched in the code to our gate, and I knew then that he had been here before. Papà had given him his own code. *Cazzo*.

A car followed us into the driveway and two of Matteo's men checked the surroundings before we got out of the car.

"We're at my *home*, Matteo. There is nothing to worry about." I unbuckled my seatbelt, but before I could get out, Matteo pressed his forearm against my chest, holding me against the seat.

"This is to protect you more than me, Marcella. And your family. I can take a bullet. You can't."

I wanted to tell him that my family's home was safe, that I didn't need his protection, but I kept my lips pressed firmly together. If there was someone hiding here who intended to hurt him, I didn't want my family caught in the crosshairs.

When the property was cleared and his men motioned us out of the car, Matteo got out and rounded the hood. He stopped my door as I pushed it open and crouched down, glaring in at me.

"You don't open doors around me, *amorina*. That's my job."

"I'm capable of opening my own doors, Matteo. What else is your job, hmm?"

Shit. That wicked gleam sparkled in his eyes again, but I halted his naughty response with a groan and a hand against his chest, shoving him away.

Matteo placed his hand over mine and drew me out of the car fully, turning me toward the house that would always be my home, whether he liked it or not.

As we walked to the door, his fingers trailed from my hand across my elbow until they rested on my hip.

“You no longer live here,” Matteo reminded me when I reached for the handle to open the front door. “It would be rude to enter without knocking.”

His words made me frown, but he ignored my distaste for his coldness and knocked on the right door.

The left opened, as I knew it would, and Matteo’s eyes widened when Annabella answered the door, not one of his hired *staff*.

“Marcella!” She yelled and wrapped her arms around me, attempting to tug me away from my fiancé, but Matteo’s grip simply tightened. “Papà said you wouldn’t be coming home. Are you coming home?”

“Visit,” Matteo muttered through gritted teeth.

“I’m just visiting, Annabella. I...I live with Matteo now.”

“With *who*?” My sister leaned away and tilted her head way back to stare up at Matteo. “You’re tall.”

Matteo chuckled.

He *chuckled*?

I was aware I didn’t know this man, but I was certain he didn’t like children. He just gave off that vibe. A child-hating underboss.

“I am,” he agreed.

“Cool.” Annabella grinned and walked away. Probably on her way to get a snack or something. My youngest sister was a bottomless pit, never satisfied, always moving.

“This is how your family greets their guests? Leaving the door wide open for anyone to wander in?” Matteo hissed as I stepped inside and closed the door behind us. And *locked* it.

“She’s eight, Matteo.”

“She shouldn’t be answering the door. There are people who are *paid* to do this.”

“Paid by you? Maybe it’s a shift change. I don’t know.”

“She could’ve been hurt.”

I turned a glare toward him. “Don’t say that. Don’t...*say* that.”

“I’m sorry, *amorina*, but it’s true. Your life has changed now that you’re mine. I need to make some calls to...figure shit out.” His hand slipped away from me, and he pulled his phone out.

“Oh, yeah. Um, you can go in Papà’s office.” I guided him toward the room that I was certain he had already been in.

I wanted to see if papà was in there, or if he would avoid me the entire time I was here. I hoped he was filled with guilt for what he had done, and especially for how he’d chosen to do it.

Papà wasn’t in his office. Matteo settled himself at Papà’s desk and brought his phone to his ear as I pulled the pocket doors together, closing them.

Annabella was grinning, about to walk up the stairs with chocolate gelato on her face.

“Anna...” I began, and my little sister turned to me with a frown. “Let me clean your face.”

She pulled her frown even deeper, but she followed me into the first-floor bathroom.

“He’s cute, Marcella,” she whispered, peering past my shoulder as if Matteo could be standing there.

I didn’t bother to turn around. He was probably too busy yelling at someone on the phone about the fact that Annabella had the nerve to answer the door because one of his goons wasn’t there to do it for her.

“You’re too young to think boys are cute.”

“Am not! I have a boyfriend, you know.” Annabella crossed her arms.

“Oh, yeah? What’s his name?”

Annabella's cheeks reddened. "Fredrick."

"Fredrick?" I ran a washcloth under warm water.

"Yeah...Fredrick."

"And where did you meet Fredrick?"

"At the hospital."

Every part of me chilled, and I stared down at my little sister. Dropping the washcloth in the sink, I crouched in front of Annabella until we were eye level.

"Why were you at the hospital, *tesorina*?" I asked slowly.

Annabella shrugged. "Mamma."

"*What* about Mamma?"

Trying to get information out of Annabella was beyond difficult. She was a trove of secrets, faithful to the bitter end, and stubborn as hell.

"She was breathing funny."

My heart pounded in my chest. Standing, I wrung out the washcloth and practically threw it at Annabella.

"Wash your face, please," I muttered and spun around.

I crashed straight into Matteo. He gripped the back of my neck and tilted my face up, holding me still as I squirmed.

"*Amorina*? What is it?"

I wiggled out of his grasp and motioned toward my sister. "Stay here with her. Make sure she's not...sticky and get to know her."

"Marcella!" Matteo called after me, but I waved him off.

Please *stay with Annabella. Don't follow me. Don't see... her. Not like this.*

"Hey, stranger," Gisella teased when I nearly ran straight into her at the top of the stairs. "*Cazzo*, what is going on?"

"Language," I growled. "Where is Papà?"

She shrugged. "I'm not his babysitter."

I rolled my eyes and stepped past her, making my way to the end of the hall. Pushing open the door carefully, I exhaled through my nose when I saw Mamma in her bed, thankfully alone.

Papà often made things worse. When Mamma was awake, he'd tell her all the things we were doing wrong, worrying her that he couldn't handle three daughters on his own. Her heartrate would spike, the machines would go haywire, and she'd spend days recovering.

Mamma was coherent and frowned when she saw me. "Marcella?"

"Mamma," I whispered and crossed the room to sit on the edge of her bed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She turned her head away from me. "My daughter is now engaged and planning a wedding. I didn't want to worry you."

"*You* are my top priority, Mamma. I'll drop anything to be here for you. Wedding included."

Mamma faced me with tears in her eyes. "I don't want that, Marcella. You have the chance to have a new life, *tesoro*, and I will not hold you back."

"You'll never hold me back. You keep me steady, Mamma," I admitted.

Mamma forced a tired smile.

"Now, will you tell me what happened?"

"Who told you?"

"Anna. She was talking about a boy she met at the hospital."

Mamma cursed under her breath. "That girl..." She pressed her lips together. "I'm fine, *tesoro*. The new night nurse told me I needed to go, but I think she worries too much."

"You have a night nurse?"

Mamma nodded weakly. "Yes, and she's wonderful. There are a lot of new faces around here. I don't know what is

happening. Your papà must be trying to replace you.” She reached a cold hand up to press against my cheek. “He’ll need to hire fifty more to replace my *tesoro*.”

“Fifty-five,” I countered, smiling when she laughed. “I worry about you.”

“I know you do. You’re too much like me, Marcella.” Mamma’s hand fell to her lap, and she tilted her head. “Tell me about him.”

I smoothed out the skirt of my dress across my thighs, giving the action my full attention. “I don’t know him yet, Mamma.”

“All I know is his name. Matteo. There must be more to him than that.”

He’s Papà’s boss and he bought me, Mamma.

“He’s nice...” I lied.

I didn’t know what else I could tell mamma. Matteo had all but locked me in a room the night he bought me?

“He likes lemon granita.”

Mamma smiled. “My favorite.”

“I want you at the wedding, Mamma.”

Mamma’s smile dropped away.

“I’ll be there,” she said, but I knew she didn’t believe those words.

Unless Matteo and I got married at the end of her bed this very instant, I wasn’t sure if Mamma would make it to my wedding.

“I never thought it would be like this...”

“I know you wanted things to be different, but this is how it works, *tesoro*.”

I shouldn’t have had to choose between my family and the man I was told to marry. If Matteo asked me, I would choose my family over him. He wouldn’t like that.

“Will you call me the next time you’re feeling unwell? Or have your nurse call me? Please?”

Mamma slowly sighed. “Yes, Marcella.”

“Alright,” I mumbled, not entirely satisfied, but I needed to let her rest. Leaning forward, I kissed her pale cheek. “I love you, Mamma.”

“And I love you, my Marcella. Be good. Be kind. Be patient, *sì?*”

I nodded and stood, pausing to check her vitals before I left her bedroom.

Of course, Matteo was on the other side of the door.

“Get away from this door,” I hissed and pounded a fist against his chest.

“Where you go, I go, *amorina.*”

“Oh, so you’ll follow me to the bathroom? *Che cazzo...*” I closed the door and shoved past him.

Matteo grabbed my shoulders and drew me back roughly. My body slammed against his and the air slipped out of my lungs.

“If I feel the need to go with you, then *yes.*”

“And *why* would you need to go with me?”

I was teetering into dangerous territory with that question, barely balanced on the edge of disdain and desire.

A low growl rumbled through him, and he shoved me forward. He yanked open the door to the closest room which was, conveniently, a damn bathroom.

Matteo thrust me into the tiled space and slammed the door shut behind us, locking it. I froze, which made me easier to handle as Matteo lifted me and placed me on the vanity between two sinks.

Planting his hands on either side of my hips, Matteo leaned in and leveled me with a lethal glare. “When I decide I want to *fuck* you at an event, an associate’s house, or wherever we are,

I'll follow you into the bathroom, Marcella. Is that clear enough for you? *You. Are. Mine, amorina.* I'll follow you wherever the hell I want to follow you."

"Why would you fuck me in the bathroom?"

"Because I intend to fuck you every single place I can. You're the one that chose the bathroom."

"You're insufferable," I sneered.

Matteo leaned in, his breath warming my lips. "No, *amorina.* I'm insatiable. There's a difference."

CHAPTER

Nine

MATTEO

I WANTED to fucking kiss her.

Smash my lips against hers to shut her the hell up.

But I couldn't. Not...yet.

And not when someone was knocking on the door.

“Marcella?”

Che cazzo. Her papà.

“I'll be out in a minute,” Marcella replied shakily, still glaring at me. “You are *not* fucking me in Papà's bathroom.”

“Didn't know it was his,” I grumbled and took a step back.

I held my hand out to her, surprised she took it to slide off the counter. Her dress skimmed up her thighs, but not nearly enough.

“I'll be sure to select a more...*appropriate* bathroom next time.”

“*Vaffanculo,*” she hissed, but a ghost of a smile played at the side of her mouth.

Fuck you?

“Now, why would I do that when I can just fuck you?”

I really needed to shut up. Didn't want to, but needed to. As I reached for the door, Marcella elbowed me in the stomach. It was a weak attempt. I'd need to show her a better strategy for protecting herself.

Again...something I didn't want to do, but needed to. Whatever target was on my back would be on hers when those who wished me dead found out about her. I would not let her become my weakness. I'd much prefer her to be my source of strength.

Marcella opened the door to her papà's pissed off face.

“Marcella...” he warned, but his defiant daughter made a noise.

“I no longer live under this roof since you sold me to this guy.” She thumbed in my direction. “So you can’t tell me what I can and can’t do, Papà. I wouldn’t listen anyway.”

“Did he need to...accompany you in there?”

“I’m sure you’re well acquainted with my shadow. Wherever I go, he goes, *apparently*.” Marcella flicked a glare at me over her shoulder. “Or so I’m told.”

“Why are you here?”

The glare melted into a frown, and Marcella faced her papà again. “To see my sisters...and Mamma. You didn’t tell me.”

“It’s not your concern anymore. We have assistance. Real assistance.”

Marcella’s shoulders slouched. Her papà was digging whatever knife he had stabbed in my fiancée deeper and deeper with each word that left his mouth.

I wouldn’t let this continue any further. “Come.”

Marcella backed up and pressed her palm against my leg, searching for my hand. I slid my palm between my leg and hers, and Marcella threaded her fingers with mine.

“Bye, Papà.”

“Marcella!” her papà boomed as we moved down the hall toward the staircase where I had met Marcella’s middle sister.

My fiancée stiffened, but I urged her forward. She didn’t answer to him anymore.

She answered to me.

We paused in the foyer so Marcella could say goodbye to her sisters, but I wasn’t focused on that. I had my eye on the worthless man who thought he didn’t need to do his fucking job. He was hired to guard the fucking door, not let an eight-year-old get shot. *He* was supposed to get shot.

He was expendable, and I made sure he knew that when I broke his fucking hand in Moretti's office.

The broken hand was behind his back, and the scared asshole was quivering as we neared. He reached for the door with his good hand, but I shook my head. Slowly, he opened the door with his unwrapped broken hand.

"What did you do to him?" Marcella hissed as I opened my car door for her.

"I made sure he remembered his place."

"Which is what? Below you?"

I backed her against the car and caged her in. "No, *amorina*. You're the only person I want below me. Do I need to fill in the blank, or do you know what I mean?"

"You need to be neutered," she grumbled.

I barked a laugh. "That won't change anything."

"It's worth a try."

Sliding down the front of me, Marcella sat in the passenger seat and received a face full of cock barely restrained behind my slacks. Her startled gasp made me even harder than I already was.

I needed to reel it in. There was a plan that needed to be followed. Certain expectations that needed to be met.

Like introducing my new fiancée to my papà.



I hadn't been surprised when Marcella had all but run upstairs when we had arrived home after visiting her family. I also wasn't surprised when I didn't see her for a few days, as she actively avoided being in the same room as me.

I was easy to avoid when I wasn't around.

Even though I wasn't a fan of leaving Marcella home without me, I knew she would be in her room and she would

be fine. But that didn't stop my knee from bouncing up and down as I sat and watched my papà continue to interrogate Timofey Dmitriev, who was believed to work for Dominov.

Viktor Dominov was head of the Russian syndicate who was slowly enacting his revenge. Papà had ordered the execution of Viktor's brother, Sergei—our own retaliation against the Russians for the murder of papà's consigliere, Angiolo Vecoli, last year.

Dominov had already killed three of our men since March, and with two more men going missing only a few weeks apart, the Russians were starting to pick up speed.

"Tell me where he is," Papà commanded around the cigarette in his mouth.

Dmitriev just laughed and spat blood from his now-toothless mouth onto the concrete floor at my papà's feet. "Fuck. *You*."

"So you do speak," Papà mused. "Then you might still have some use yet."

With a snap of his fingers, made men Calbresi and Neri appeared and began beating Dmitriev until he was unconscious. They then carried him away to rot in one of the cells until Papà was ready to question him again.

"You are distracted," Papà stated, not even bothering to look at me. He lit another cigarette, the flame from his lighter illuminating his weathered face. "Why, *figlio*?"

"I am not distracted, Papà."

Vittore Cortese stood and tucked his lighter into the pocket of his dark grey slacks. He turned to me and nodded once. "You are, Matteo."

I slowly exhaled. "I have a wife."

Papà's eyebrows raised. "I must have missed the invitation to your wedding."

"It hasn't happened yet."

He breathed a chuckle. “So...you have asked a woman to marry you. Who?”

That was the question I was dreading. Papà had been using my eligibility as leverage, a weapon to use against families who disobeyed, or families he believed would be beneficial to form alliances with. He wanted me to marry the daughter of a powerful family. A rival family.

Not the daughter of one of our associates.

“Moretti,” I began. “Marcella Moretti.”

Papà crossed the room toward me and offered me a cigarette. I accepted and leaned forward when he held his lighter toward me.

“That name is not important enough to be familiar.”

“Her papà works for us.”

As the words left my mouth, I knew they were a mistake. I couldn't lie about Moretti's allegiance to us. My papà would have figured it out soon enough, and as much as I would rather that he heard it from me, I would have preferred he not hear it at all.

“You are marrying...*down*?”

“I am marrying,” I corrected, taking a drag from my cigarette. “That is what you asked of me.”

“I would have expected you to know better than to marry down, Matteo.”

“You did not specify my wife needed to be established in any sense of the word.”

Papà shook his head. “Always pushing, Matteo. That will not serve you will if you are in my place.”

If.

Not when. *If.*

Che stronzo.

“So, when is the engagement party? Do I get an invite to this one?”

I sighed. Announcing our engagement to our associates was one thing, but this would be different. The news could get out to the wrong people...like Dominov.

“Saturday. Will your newest wife be joining us?”

He ignored me and blotted his cigarette out on the table next to my hand. “Don’t let this woman be a distraction. Could get you killed, *figlio*.”

CHAPTER

Ten

MARCELLA

I HADN'T SEEN Matteo in days. Nearly an entire week had gone by without us even crossing paths. When I would sneak out of my room to get a drink or look around the home, he was nowhere to be found.

On Saturday, I could hear his booming voice through the black double doors next to the dining room. Those doors were always closed. And guarded.

His associates watched me carefully as I moved through the foyer to the kitchen, standing so still they resembled statues with eyes that followed you. It made me uncomfortable, but then again, almost everything about this entire situation made me uncomfortable.

Silvia stood in the kitchen, stirring her delicious marinara that I could smell from the hallway upstairs. I stopped, staring at the woman who was supposed to be at *my* house, not Matteo's.

"*Cara!*" Silvia called, crossing the space to pull me into a hug. "I have missed you."

"What are you doing here?"

She held me at arm's length and checked over every visible part of my body. For bruises, I suspected.

"This is where I work now. I will miss your sisters...but I still have my Marcella."

As happy as I was to see her, I was equally as pissed.

"That's great," I said slowly, testing my words on my tongue.

My tone still made Silvia frown, but she brushed it off and returned to her sauce, mumbling in Italian about not wanting to ruin it.

I thought about telling her I would be back, but decided against it and spun away, toward those goddamn guarded doors.

“*Move,*” I commanded as I neared, glaring up at the two morons who had stepped in front of either door.

I expected more kickback from them, but they shared a glance and got out of my way, opening the doors. Not fast enough.

I shoved them open, trying not to grin when they slammed against the walls on either side. I was pissed. I needed *him* to see that I was pissed.

“Let me call you back,” Matteo said slowly, each word more menacing than the last. He was glaring at me, and I glared right back. “Yes, *amorina?*”

“Why the hell is Silvia in your stupid kitchen right now?” I pointed in the direction of the kitchen, my entire arm shaking with what I hoped was anger, but I knew was fear.

Matteo rose from his seat and rounded his desk. The motion was calculated, tedious, and only set me even further on edge.

“She is your family, *si?*” He stopped in front of me, far closer than he needed to be, and placed two fingers on my shoulder. “How else am I going to get you to eat, *amorina?*”

Slowly, his fingers glazed across my skin, to my elbow, and then wrist, where he gently pushed down until my hand was back at my side. His grip shifted, a more commanding hold against my back that drew me flush to him.

“You must eat, and I am too busy to cook for you.”

Matteo held me so tight against him I could barely breathe. His glare had softened, and he was now inspecting my face, as if trying to memorize the details.

“She is supposed to be at home.”

His right brow ticked up. “This is your home, *amorina.*”

Ugh.

“*Her* home.” *My* home. “With my family.”

He reached for my other hand and lifted it, pressing my finger against his chest beyond his button-down that was splayed open at the top. “*I am your family.*”

Matteo hooked my finger below the second button, pushing until it popped open. I stared at the inked skin below, entirely mesmerized, unable to stop him as he unhooked the next button.

A voice behind us made a low growl leave the man in front of me. “Cortese.”

“What?” Matteo barked, refusing to look away from me.

“We have an update.”

Closing his eyes, Matteo exhaled slowly through his nose. When he gazed at me again, his expression had shifted entirely. “Upstairs.”

“What?”

“*Now*, Marcella.”

His hands were off me in an instant, and it felt like I had been burned. He turned away, and peered at me over his shoulder, annoyed that I was still standing right where he had left me a few seconds ago.

I was guided out of Matteo’s office and back to my room, and I wasn’t surprised when I heard the door lock behind me.

I wasn’t sure how much time had passed when the door opened and Silvia stepped in wearing a frown. She carried a tray toward the bed and took a seat, resting the tray on her lap.

“*Cara...*” She sighed. “Are you okay?”

I didn’t look up from the plate of penne à la vodka that was next to a tall glass filled with cremosa. “I’m okay, Silvia.”

“I did not want this for you.”

I peered up at her. “It doesn’t work like that.”

Her frown deepened. “I wanted more for you, *cara.*”

This *was* more. Right? Matteo could give me more, or at least I hoped he could.



Silvia had refused to leave my room until I ate every single piece of penne off my plate. She had fixed me with a wink and left, and I was once again alone.

Being *alone* wasn't entirely familiar to me. With two younger sisters who were always in my business, wanting to be exactly where I was, I was rarely alone.

When Mamma first became ill, Annabella hadn't left my side. She had even followed me into the bathroom, afraid that I was going to collapse like Mamma had in the foyer that winter day.

I should have enjoyed being alone. Having time for myself. Being able to do whatever the hell I wanted.

But in reality...I hated it.

My heart ached for my family, for someone to follow me around and whip a million questions my way at top speed. I wanted to be pestered by Annabella, to argue with Gisella, and to talk with Mamma. I still didn't want to be around Papà, but I would have preferred his company than solely my own.

I was the worst company to keep. Matteo would learn soon enough that I couldn't stand to be around myself, so he wouldn't enjoy it either. There was nothing to me. I was what my papà had told me to be. Whatever personality I had was merely fabricated, shaped to be what was needed to be a wife.

I could cook and clean and raise children. I never spoke out of turn, and I was knowledgeable in just enough to hold a conversation with my soon-to-be husband about a variety of topics.

That was my role as the eldest daughter. I had taken over when Mamma could no longer, and I had been a child myself when I had the responsibility of two more.

My own thoughts made me groan. I was too busy internalizing everything that I was certain I had washed my hair twice. I moved on to conditioner, letting it sit in my hair as I lathered lemon body wash against my skin, rinsing it and then the conditioner.

I stepped out of the shower and wrapped myself in a towel. I wasn't finished with my hair yet, having fully embraced my high-maintenance waves. I spent the next fifteen minutes practically upside-down as I added curl cream and mousse and diffused until my hair was semi-dry.

When I straightened, I wobbled slightly and gripped the counter. I leaned forward to unplug my hairdryer, and as I glanced in the mirror, I was met with a cold, hardened gaze that wasn't my own.

I screamed and spun, whipping my hairdryer at the man behind me. At *Matteo*.

He caught it like it was the easiest thing to catch. "Going to need to work on your self-defense skills, *amorina*."

"What the hell are you doing here?" I adjusted my towel, hoping I hadn't completely flashed him at any point.

His glare dipped across the light pink towel around me, and I knew his thoughts were entirely impure just by his expression when he finally peered back at me.

"We haven't finished our conversation from earlier." He moved toward me slowly, and I backed up until I felt the bite of the counter against my spine.

"It seemed pretty *finished* to me. You told me to leave."

"I told you to go upstairs."

"Same thing."

His jaw tensed. He looked like he wanted to say something, but chose not to. "I bought you a dress."

My heart thundered in my chest. Matteo would not be the type to buy me a dress without already having a reason for me to wear it.

“What for?”

He ignored my question and reached out to tug on a wave clump that was hooked with another, separating them. “Keep your hair like this. I’ll be back around five to get you.”

“Wait,” I called once he had turned away. “Please tell me what to expect, Matteo. At least give me that much.”

He tucked his right hand in his pocket and faced me again, stopping when he was pressed fully against me. Matteo reached for my left hand and slipped something on my ring finger.

“Our engagement party, *amorina*.”

I lifted my hand to stare at the solitaire oval diamond on a gold band. It was gorgeous, but not what I had expected from him. The diamond was huge, most likely over two carats, and it was so perfect that I could almost see my own reflection glistening back at me.

“Will you accept this until your ring is ready, *amorina*?”

My brows furrowed and I gazed up at him. “What do you mean?”

“I’m making you a custom ring. Call this one...” He raised my hand higher to inspect it. “A stand-in.”

“But this one is fine.”

Matteo glared at me. “You deserve more than *fine*, *amorina*. And I intend to give you that.” He dropped my hand and took a step back. “Five o’clock, Marcella. Be ready.”

I stayed pressed against the counter as he left the bathroom, not even exhaling until I heard the bedroom door close behind him. Creeping out, I checked if he was still in the room and then peered at the ruby dress.

Clearly Matteo liked me in red.

CHAPTER

Eleven

MATTEO

I ENTERED my fiancée's room to find her bent at the waist with her incredible ass facing me, wrapped in red.

She straightened and fluffed her untamed waves, frowning at her own reflection, and then at me through the mirror of her vanity table. "I look ridiculous."

It was my duty to tell her that she was wrong, that she was the most beautiful person I had seen up close, but I couldn't seem to get the words past my throat. I just made a noise and shook my head.

"You don't."

Marcella rolled her eyes. "Even you don't sound convinced with your own words."

She grabbed a white bottle of perfume and sprayed her hair, then right between her tits. The scent of sweet lemons carried across the room as she moved toward me, and I wanted to bury my face between those tits and stay forever.

"Are you ready?"

She frowned. "Yes."

Marcella crossed the space toward me, and as she neared, I drew her against my side with a hand on her hip. I felt her stiffen beneath my grasp, and as much as I tried to ignore it, it pissed me off. She was going to be my wife soon. She would have to get used to being at my side. It was where she belonged, whether she liked it or not.

My own coldness only pissed me off further. How could I expect her to simply melt against me when she didn't even know me? I had been actively avoiding her, trying to let her get settled in this space at her own pace, yet that only seemed to hinder any progress I had expected.

I had no idea what I was doing. No woman had lived in this home. Sure, some had stayed, but were gone as quickly as the sun had crested over the coast. I was only good for sex and money. I wasn't good for affection.

I dug my fingers into Marcella's hip, stopping her from descending down the stairs. All eyes were already on us, since a good portion of the second floor of my home was open to the first.

"What's wrong?" she whispered, as if we could be heard over the chatter from downstairs.

"We will only do this if you want to do this."

When she tilted her head to look up at me, I was surprised to find her smiling.

"I want this."

I was reading into that statement, I had to. To keep myself sane.

I threaded my fingers in the hair at the nape of her neck and drew her forward, pressing a firm kiss to her forehead. I closed my eyes and hoped hers were closed too, and then pulled back, readjusted my grip on her, and guided us down the stairs.

Marcella had barely placed the toe of her shoe on the stone floor before she was yanked out of my grasp and passed around the capo wives. They offered to help her plan our wedding just to be involved. They didn't care about her. They cared about being *seen*.

Their husbands watched, most with a look of disdain on their faces. Why was having a loveless relationship the norm in our world?

"*Figlio.*"

I suppressed a groan and turned to see my father wrapped around a woman who was *not* wife number seven. She was young, which was exactly my father's type, but blonde... which wasn't.

"Meet Melinda."

“Hi,” she sang and stepped forward with her hand extended, waiting for me to kiss it like she was some kind of princess.

“Hello,” I replied through gritted teeth.

This woman was younger than me, which wasn't uncommon for my father. What *was* uncommon was the way he was flaunting her in front of everyone like this. I guess he had assumed that the attention would be on me, so he could get away with it.

But the attention wasn't on me. It was on Marcella, who deserved every bit of it.

No matter where I stood, I could always see her. I refused to let her out of my sight for a single moment. But what made it all even better was the way she kept peeking over at me, like she enjoyed knowing I was watching her.

Her posture relaxed as she spoke with women that she was familiar with, but in a different capacity. She had been aware of these capo wives, knew their husbands through her papà. But now...they worshipped her.

I wasn't the only one watching Marcella. My papà had his eye on her, trying to find a weakness that he could use against her. Against *me*.

I was her strength, and she was my weakness, according to him.

Marcella was stronger than he believed. Stronger than I had assumed, which was wrong of me. My intention had never been to break her, but simply bend her will. I needed her to believe that this was what was best, even though I wasn't sure of it myself.

I leaned against the bar that was set in the foyer and unbuttoned my suit jacket, watching my future wife as she tilted her head toward the ceiling and laughed at something said by one of the women around her. I admired her throat, which I knew would look good in my hand and probably tasted as sweet as she smelled.

I wasn't a strong man when it came to keeping my mind off what I wanted to do to her when no one was watching. Hell, even if this entire room watched.

The only word that repeated in my head was *mine, mine, mine*.

Appetizers were served to our guests that filled my home, interspersed with guards who blended in. There wasn't a single person here who wasn't invited.

"Mr. Cortese." The voice that called my name sounded weak.

I turned my glare on Moretti. Of fucking *course* he was growing a heart at the same time I was.

"Look at your daughter," I said with a nod in Marcella's direction.

Her papà slowly shifted his gaze from me to her, and his miserable frown only deepened.

"Whatever you will say next will have a direct impact on the rest of her life, so I would choose wisely."

"It's not that," he began, and I slowly peeled my glance from Marcella to look at him. "I, uh, received this... It was in my backyard. Anna...Annabella found it."

With shaky hands, Moretti passed me a white envelope stained red on the bottom right corner.

Rage poured through me as I peered into the envelope and found a smoky gray eye staring back at me.

"When did Annabella find this?" I demanded, stuffing the fucking eyeball in an envelope into my suit jacket pocket. "Is she alright?" I asked the question I knew Marcella would need to know when I told her this.

If I told her this.

She would be gone if she knew her sister had found a fucking body part in their backyard.

"This morning." Moretti sucked in a breath. "It wasn't in the envelope. It was...fresh. Still warm."

“Is she *alright*?”

What was wrong with this man? He had sold his eldest daughter to cover the rising cost of his wife’s medical care that had spiraled out of control, and he was brushing off the fact that his youngest had found a fucking warm eyeball? What about the middle girl? Had he simply forgotten she existed?

Moretti nodded. “She’ll be fine. I told her it was fake.”

That wasn’t an answer I was willing to accept, and I knew it sure as hell wasn’t going to be enough for Marcella.

I would have considered letting her go home until we were married if not for this. I wasn’t sure how I was going to convince her that she was safer here without raising more concern for her family.

Because now *I* was concerned about her family. Shit was about to change in that home.

“I need to speak with Marcella.”

“*No*,” I growled, and Moretti’s eyes widened. “You will not upset her. You’ve done enough. Find my father. *I* will speak to Marcella.”

He nodded, and thankfully he didn’t challenge me. He drained his glass of amber liquid, and I watched him leave before I crossed the space toward Marcella.

But she wasn’t there.

She wasn’t with the capo wives. She wasn’t in the foyer. Or the den. Or the kitchen, dining room...*anywhere*.

“*Cazzo*,” I hissed.

I needed to stay calm. There was no way Dominov’s men could infiltrate this party. She couldn’t have gotten far. There were always eyes on her.

I slipped down the hall past the den and checked the door to the guest bedroom. It was still locked. So was the door to the bathroom, which was not normally. I knocked on the door and leaned in, waiting to hear the voice I was certain was behind the black wood.

“Just a minute!” Marcella called.

I knocked again. I heard her sigh, but that wasn't good enough. I kept knocking, and when she didn't open the door fast enough, I finally spoke.

“*Amorina*.” The nickname I had given her when I first saw her was a menacing word on my tongue. A warning.

A warning she heeded by opening the door.

I shouldered into the space and slammed the door behind me, flicking the lock. Marcella took quick steps back until her back pressed to the countertop. I stalked toward her, shoving the vase of flowers aside and lifting her onto the edge of the vanity with one arm against her lower back.

Snarling, I got in her face. “I don't give a fuck if you think I'm being an overbearing fucking asshole, but you tell me where you're goddamn going. Do you fucking understand, Marcella?”

The fact that I didn't use her nickname would hopefully add the necessary urgency to my words.

“Why do you always yell at me in bathrooms?” she whispered, and the ridiculous question made me breathe a laugh.

“Don't make this a thing.”

I stepped back, but Marcella reached for me, gripping the bottom of my suit jacket, her fingers far too close to the loose fucking eyeball I was carrying.

“I'm sorry.”

I sighed. “You don't need to apologize. Maybe I should. I don't know. I didn't mean to yell. I just...”

I just *what*? I had no explanation to give her that she would like to hear. I couldn't tell her about the fucking eye. Not yet, not until I knew more. And I sure as hell wasn't going to tell her who had found it. Eventually, I would. But not now.

“Were you worried?” Her question was delivered with one hell of a cheeky grin. She pointed at the toilet behind me.

“What if I had fallen in?”

“I’m not fucking playing around.”

All humor left the room when Marcella sucked in a gasp. My hand was at her waist, digging in, and although I didn’t want to leave a mark on her, I didn’t want to let go.

I stared at her—probably glared, but I didn’t have anything else to say. Nothing that lingered on the tip of my tongue would do either of us any good.

I was either going to kiss her whether she wanted it or not or call her an idiot. So I stayed fucking silent and with one final squeeze on her waist, I stepped back and turned away.

“I’ll tell you when I leave, Matteo,” Marcella called from behind me.

I paused and turned my head but didn’t look at her. Just so she knew I heard her.

I then exited the bathroom, nodded at the men that had followed me, and searched the main floor of my home for my goddamn papà.

We needed to fucking talk.

CHAPTER

Twelve

MARCELLA

FINDING the courage to open the bathroom door after being yelled at by the man I was going to marry had taken me longer than I had thought it would.

I wasn't sure I could face him after that, and I knew that I would somehow manage to disappoint him again over the course of this goddamn evening.

As I neared the door, it opened for me.

And a man stepped in.

"Marcella Moretti," he stated, not needing to ask me who I was because he already knew. "I had hoped we would meet on different...terms."

The man motioned to the tiled space around us. The door was pulled closed, and the man who knew me moved closer, grinning wickedly when I countered.

"Well-behaved," he remarked, tilting his chin up. "A woman who does not speak unless addressed. Your papà has taught you well."

When the silence stretched between us, his eyes narrowed.

"This is your invitation to speak, so I suggest you use it."

"What would you like me to say?"

That response pleased him, if his slimy grin was any indication. "I want you to tell me why you think you are good enough for my son."

Cazzo. This man was Matteo's papà!?

I didn't need to explain myself to him, because I already knew that no matter what my response was, he would have a differing opinion.

So...I gave him what he wanted.

“I’m not.”

“You’re not,” he agreed and reached for my hand, inspecting the ring that didn’t belong there. “I’m glad we both can agree on something.”

He dropped my hand like I wasn’t good enough to touch. But then, with a swiftness that made me freeze, he grabbed my chin and angled my face for his inspection.

“As beautiful as you may be, it’s not enough. It will never be enough. This wedding will not happen, are we clear?”

I chose not to challenge him. “Yes.”

“Yes...”

“Yes, we are clear, Mr. Cortese.”

“Good,” he said and leaned in to press his mouth against mine.

My stomach churned, but I stayed completely still, thankful the kiss was over as quickly as it had begun.

Mr. Cortese lifted a finger to his lips and grinned wickedly through his command for me to keep silent about our interaction.



Matteo held onto his anger. This was something I had learned from experience.

It seemed so simple that I had excused myself from the capo wives who had gathered around me and gushed like I was royalty. I had to pee; the wine that Matteo kept ordering for me went right to my bladder.

I had yet to see him that mad. I hoped I would never see it again, the poorly restrained rage that bubbled just below the surface, and it was all aimed at me.

The day after our engagement party was the first day that I was allowed to leave the house without Matteo. His second in command had collected me from my bedroom just after ten in

the morning to tell me that he was bringing me to meet with the Cortese company wedding planner.

I didn't know they had one. Then again, it was clear that I didn't know much about the organization. The way the wives had talked around me had almost been overwhelming. The names and relationships were enough to try to memorize, but their ranks and who they reported to were something I hadn't realized I would need to know.

My heart had pounded in my chest, and my full bladder had been an excuse to get the hell away from the conversation, even if only for a moment. Sure, I had stayed far longer than I needed to in the bathroom, but the majority of my time there was spent giving myself a pep talk to get back out there and smile.

My interaction with Matteo had made me want to curl into a ball and disappear.

So did my interaction with his papà.

I had stayed in Matteo's line of sight for the remainder of the evening, going to his side when summoned, smiling and laughing and pretending I was fine.

Then, at the end of the evening, I found two of Matteo's men who were remotely familiar and told them I would like to be accompanied to my room.

I wasn't sure what Mr. Cortese was going to do to put an end to this wedding, or if I was going to survive long enough to find out.



“Jewel tones are *so* in right now.”

“Oh, my God, *yes!* Jewel tones!”

“I wanted to do jewel tones for my wedding, but Vinnie's mamma put up a fight, so we went with a *gorgeous* blush pink.”

The capo wives spoke around me, essentially planning my entire wedding for me. The only thing I could think about was how badly I had wanted to plan my wedding with Mamma.

All of this would overwhelm her.

“What do you think?”

The question was actually directed at me, and I yanked my attention away from my sick mamma and faced Alessia with a smile. She was married to...Lorenzo?

“Jewel tones sound perfect.”

Alessia grinned and nodded at Maria, who sorted through the book of fabric samples in front of her until she found the jewel tones that she thought would be best for my wedding.

Mamma would like jewel tones. She would look amazing in a deep sapphire dress. Gisella would demand to be in green, and Annabella wouldn't care what color she wore as long as she was included.

Gisella would be my maid of honor. She should have been here, helping me figure all of this out. Annabella would be the flower girl, and Lucia had already offered for her five-year-old son, Gianni, to be the ring bearer.

The three capo wives across from me assumed that they were going to be my bridesmaids. It was assumed since they had offered to help me plan the wedding that they would have a much bigger role in all of this.

I felt like I didn't have much say in my own wedding at this point, so I agreed, and we moved on to discussing florals. I had spent the morning with the wedding planner discussing approved locations for the wedding, and the capo wives had arrived around noon to “help,” as they had called it.

I wasn't sure what I would call it. Take control, maybe?

“I have seven sisters.” Lucia nudged my elbow with hers and leaned in as Maria and Alessia argued over dahlias. “I've planned seven weddings, including my own. I know it's a lot to think about, but we want you to be happy.”

I forced a smile. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Is everything alright so far? You can tell us if you hate the jewel tones.”

I shook my head. “No, no. The jewel tones are perfect. I...”

How much detail was I willing to give this woman? Did she really need to know why all of this was kind of upsetting?

“I had wanted to plan my wedding with my mamma, but she’s sick.”

“Oh, no,” Lucia gasped and placed her hand over her mouth, which drew Maria and Alessia’s attention our way. “I’m so sorry.”

“What is it?” Maria asked carefully.

“Her mamma is sick.”

Alessia and Maria also gasped and covered their mouths, staring at me with the damn sympathy I hadn’t wanted to see. I didn’t need their sympathy. I didn’t know their stories, but now they knew mine. Would that be looked at as a weakness?

“She’s okay. She has her good days and her bad days. We...don’t really know what’s going on, but the past six months have been difficult. She couldn’t walk for a few months. She had to re-learn how to walk again through physical therapy. Her heart rate spikes so much that she has chest pain, she feels faint, and she’s passed out a few times, hurting herself in the process.”

“I’m so sorry,” Lucia repeated and carefully placed her hand on my shoulder, testing if I was willing to be comforted. “You must be really worried about her.”

I sucked in a slow breath. “Yeah.”

I wanted the conversation to end. I didn’t want to get into all of it with them when I didn’t fully understand it myself.

Lucia smiled weakly and pushed the fabric samples closer to me. “How about we pick your wedding colors?”

CHAPTER

Thirteen

MATTEO

AN EYE FOR AN EYE.

Dominov's weak associate howled beneath my grasp, and I commanded my men to hold him still. His eye popped from the socket and flopped against his cheek. I severed the optic nerve and passed the eyeball to Papà.

He inspected it before placing it in an envelope. "Put him back where he was found."

Our men dragged the Russian with one eye out of our warehouse, and I turned to face Papà.

He passed me the envelope. "Do you know what you're doing with it?"

I sighed. "Yes."

Why must he question everything?

Papà lit a cigarette and watched me, something unsaid written across his face. "Met your..."

"Marcella." I said her name through gritted teeth. He knew her name.

"Your *Marcella*." The disdain in his tone only pissed me off further. "Her beauty was unexpected."

What the fuck was that supposed to mean? Just because her papà worked for us, that meant she was not supposed to be as incredibly fucking gorgeous as she was?

I sighed. "Where are you going with this?"

I was tired. We had been questioning the damn Russian all night. I didn't even know what time it was. Marcella had no idea I wasn't home. That wasn't fair to her.

Papà smiled slowly, an action that was far more menacing than it should have been. "I should have known you would pick someone so...*weak*. Easy to bend. Control."

“Tread carefully.”

“Tread carefully?” He barked a single laugh. “Is that supposed to be a threat? Should I be afraid, *figlio?*”

Before I could reply and tell him that he should, Papà continued.

“You will do best to learn not to threaten me, Matteo. Bring that fucking eyeball to the location we discussed.”

With a wave of his hand, Papà dismissed me, and I knew better than to challenge him in that moment.



A strange sound from deep within my home set me on edge as I entered from the garage. I grabbed my gun from its holster and flicked the safety off, quietly kicking out of my shoes. I didn't need whoever was in my home to hear my footsteps.

Two of my men rose to action at the sight of me with my gun out and flanked me on either side. They had been assigned to Marcella. What the hell were they doing downstairs?

Checking the kitchen and passing through the dining room, we entered the den with guns raised and pointed at a sleeping Marcella on the couch.

“Lower your fucking weapons,” I hissed and turned to glare at them, uncocking my gun.

I slipped it back in my holster and glanced at the television that sat above the fireplace. I rarely used it, but I was glad to see Marcella out of her room.

She had been watching an action movie before she had fallen asleep. The explosions of the fight scene had been what I'd heard when I entered my home.

Marcella was curled against the edge of the couch using the armrest as a pillow. What was I supposed to do? Get a blanket for her? Carry her upstairs to her room?

I couldn't trust myself to do the second one. I'd bring her straight to my room...

I carefully sat next to her, far closer than I should have. A strange thundering of my heart made my chest ache, desperate to reach out and touch her.

Marcella stirred, but she didn't open her eyes. "Your house is cold."

Her words were spoken so softly that I leaned in, resting my hand on the back of the couch. "Hmm?"

She stretched, slipping her right leg across my lap. "It's cold."

"Would you like me to get you a blanket?"

Marcella nodded. "I'm watching a movie."

I chuckled. "Oh, are you?"

I glanced over my shoulder and mouthed for Lombardo to get me a blanket, pointing at the guest hallway. I wasn't getting up, especially not when she adjusted further until her ass pressed against my leg.

"What's the movie about?" I prodded and gently tugged the pillow from behind her back, placing it at the other end of the couch.

"The mafia."

I breathed a laugh. "The mafia? Why would you want to watch a movie about the mafia?"

She barely lifted her right shoulder in a shrug. "Research."

Covering the both of us with the blanket, I slipped behind her, surprised when she didn't immediately stiffen. "You could come with me if you want to research the mafia, *amorina*."

"Okay," she whispered as I slipped my hand around her waist and pulled her closer. "You smell like pennies."

I smelled like blood. I was covered in the dried blood of the Russian I had tortured. I didn't want her to see me like this.

I wasn't sure how she would react, but I knew it wouldn't be good.

“You smell better than me.”

Marcella breathed a laugh, and a ghost of a smile appeared across her sleepy face. “I know.”

Why did I want to hold her for the night? I couldn't do that. I wasn't going to let her spend the night on the couch, but I also wasn't going to wake her and make her walk upstairs.

I was going to carry her up. Because I wanted to.

Why? That was still a mystery.

Waiting until her breathing evened out, I guided the blanket off us and pulled Marcella into my arms.

She roused, but barely. “What are you doing?”

I didn't reply, because I didn't really have an answer.

This woman was going to be my wife. I needed to get used to caring for her, comforting her, and everything that came with having a wife. It was far more daunting than simply having a girlfriend, or someone that I fucked.

As much as I needed to keep her safe, I also wanted her to be happy.

Nudging back the comforter on her bed with my knee, I placed Marcella in her bed and covered her. I stared down at her for a moment, fighting an internal battle to walk away...or kiss her goodnight.

When I turned away, she reached for my hand. I stopped and peered back at her.

Marcella blinked up at me. “I'm sorry I left. You were worried about me, and you couldn't find me. I'm sorry, Matteo.”

I sighed. “I shouldn't have yelled at you. I should have... explained myself better. I'm...not great at that.”

She pulled weakly on my hand and shuffled toward the middle of the bed. I climbed in next to her, beneath the

blankets, and I didn't have to reach for her. Marcella slipped into my grasp because she belonged there.

“We'll learn how to make this work, right?”

“We will, *amorina*.”

We didn't have a choice.

CHAPTER

Fourteen

MARCELLA

“*TI SCOPERÒ FORTE, AMORINA.*”

I'll fuck you hard, sweetheart.

Dream Matteo was far more appealing than real Matteo. He wasn't hot and cold, and he wouldn't yell at me.

Dream Matteo did things to me that I would never want real Matteo to do. I'd never let him get close enough to spread my legs apart and settle himself between them like he belonged there.

He'd *never* belong there.

But for some unknown reason, he was in my bed.

Shirtless.

Shirtless in my bed.

“Good morning, *amorina.*”

“*Cazzo,*” I hissed and shuffled back.

My ass hung off the edge, and when I tilted to peer back at it, I nearly fell off the bed.

Matteo darted forward and gripped me by the waist, drawing me back to him. *All the way back.*

“You need to be more careful,” he chided, practically glaring down at me.

There was no space between us. *Zero.* His body was pressed down on mine, knee parting my legs.

Like he had in my dream...only better.

“You're blushing, *amorina.*”

“Why are you in my bed?”

“Because I want to be.”

“*God*,” I groaned and pushed at his chest, but he didn’t move. “What do you want, Matteo?”

“Other than you?” He grinned when I groaned again. “I want to buy you a new dress.”

“For?”

Matteo frowned. “Do I need a reason?”

“You have a reason.”

“You’re meeting my mamma. She couldn’t come to our engagement party, but she has been asking me to bring you over.”

“I am not.”

I pushed at him again, but he countered by pressing down on me, squishing my arms between us.

“When?” I sighed, the last bit of air leaving my lungs with the word.

“Eight. Tonight.”

Wiggling my arms loose, I held onto him.

Fuck it.

Nothing was going to happen, not even as I pushed hair out of his face, tugging just enough to make him groan softly.

“Is this how you plan to wake me, Matteo?”

“No...” He reached for my right knee below him and spread my legs wider and settled himself between them. Like he belonged there. “I have a different method in mind.”

I could feel the length of him exactly where it had been in my dream. Heat pooled where he was pressed against me, attraction taking control.

My lips parted, but I made no sound.

“Finally...a way to shut you up.”

I was frustrated, sexually and literally. Matteo was a stranger. A damn stranger I had to marry. I wasn’t going to sleep with him until I had to. Until I knew him.

But I knew how to play along.

I shifted my hips, rubbing against his cock. His smile slipped away, replaced by something I wasn't prepared to deal with yet. Unrestrained *lust*.

"If you were to fuck me right now..." I threaded my fingers in his hair and tugged hard. "I wouldn't be quiet, Matteo."

"*Cazzo...*"

I used his moment of weakness to push him to the side, but instead of releasing me like I had hoped, his grip on me only tightened. I wasn't graceful enough to land in a way that could've been sexy. My chest crashed onto his and I clambered up to straddle him.

Matteo dug his fingers into my hips, and I really wished I had picked different pajamas to wear to bed. My sleep shorts were basically replacing the underwear that I was *not* wearing. If I wiggled against him the right way, I could use his hardness to come.

"What are you going to do, *amorina*?"

The question left me speechless, but only for a moment.

I leaned in and planted my hands on either side of his face, watching the grin spread wide across his mouth. "I'm going to go shopping and spend your money, Matteo."

I pushed away from him and the bed, yanking my foot from below his hips. Standing, I tried to jump off the bed. *Tried*. Because Matteo grabbed my ankles.

"I don't think so," he growled and slammed me back down onto his body, rolling us over until he was on top of me again. "Think this is funny, *amorina*?"

"Very," I chuckled.

He wrapped his long fingers around my wrists, pinned me down to the bed, and nudged my legs apart again. Matteo leaned in, absolutely seething.

“You won’t be laughing when I fuck you so hard you’re sore for a week, Marcella.”

His chest was heaving, rage rolling off him in hot waves. Rage that was accurately aimed at me.

“Now...” he began and tightened his grip on my wrists. “I’ve gone far too fucking long without kissing you, so I’m going to kiss you and you will kiss me back. Am I clear, *amorina?*”

Why was his anger intoxicating? Why the hell did I want him to do far more than just kiss me?

“Yes,” I breathed.

Matteo smirked. “*Brava ragazza.*”

Oh, *fuck*. He called me a good girl in Italian.

Matteo’s mouth on mine was rough just like I had hoped it would be. His controlling nature carried over into his kiss, and as he released my wrists and his hands wandered, so did mine.

I didn’t want to like kissing Matteo...but I did. *Cazzo*, I did.

I had wanted his kiss to be terrible, all tongue and too much saliva, but it wasn’t terrible. It was great, and it was messing with my mind. I couldn’t enjoy kissing him, and I couldn’t enjoy everything that might come *after* a kiss with Matteo.

No. I couldn’t think about that. I couldn’t think about an *after* with Matteo when there wasn’t going to *be* an after with Matteo. I could only kiss him. Nothing further.

Matteo reached for my leg and *thrust* against me. A startled moan rattled from my throat that Matteo replied to with a groan.

Oddio, I wanted more. So much more.

His skin was smooth beneath my touch, all along his arms and across his chest. But when my fingers grazed over puckered skin on his stomach, I pulled my mouth away and tilted my head to see what it was.

A scar, hidden by a winding snake tattoo, sliced across his lower stomach. I traced the scar that was thin, but long, like someone had tried to stab him but he'd turned before they could.

Matteo nibbled at my neck, ignoring my concern.

"Upper shoulder," he mumbled into my skin.

I slid my hands up his sides and across his back as he brought his mouth down to mine again. I felt the circular scar on his left shoulder, and I didn't need to ask what had caused it. Our kiss slowed and when Matteo pulled back, he pressed his forehead against mine.

"I told you I could take a bullet, *amorina*."

"I don't want you to get shot."

He breathed a laugh. "I'll take a bullet for you."



Matteo sat across from the change rooms, suit unbuttoned, posture lax, and his gaze locked fully on me. Every dress I tried on, he loved and bought for me.

But the one that set it all apart was the crimson square-neck dress with a slit that nearly went to my right hip.

"*Cazzo*," he hissed and leaned forward.

"You hate it," I teased and turned away.

I gazed at myself in the mirror, admiring the fit of the dress that made my body look smoother than it actually was.

Matteo appeared behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist, pushing me into the dressing room further. He pulled the curtain closed behind us, and the large man possessed the small space.

"You're getting it. In every fucking color, *amorina*."

His hands were back on me, slipping over the polyester. His touch was gentle, yet prodding, teasing just enough to

make my pussy tingle.

Matteo pushed hair away from my neck and brought his mouth down to my skin. A soft kiss quickly turned to a sharp nibble that made me yelp.

He watched me in the mirror and unzipped the dress. “I want you to wear this one tonight, *amorina*.”

With a wicked grin, Matteo’s hands were off me and he left the change room, closing the curtain behind him.

CHAPTER

Fifteen

MATTEO

KISSING her wouldn't be enough. Fucking her wouldn't be enough. No matter what, I'd always want *more* of her.

I had said I wanted to go dress shopping with her to spend time with her, but we both knew I needed to go to keep her safe. Dominov's men were becoming more aggressive, and it was a bad time to plan a wedding.

I was certain the planted eyeball had been found, and the repercussions of that would arise soon enough. We were a few steps ahead, or at least I hoped we were.

In all this chaos, I knew one thing for certain: Marcella looked fucking incredible in red.

She quizzed me on my mamma as we were driven to the massive and insanely reinforced home, desperate to know more about the woman who would soon be her mother-in-law.

I'd chosen not to drive so I could drink tonight, but mostly so I could be in the back of the car with Marcella. Keeping my hands off her was already proving to be a challenge, especially in that goddamn dress.

"I feel like I know nothing about you," Marcella said with a pout.

She was right. I knew everything I possibly could about the woman I was going to marry, but I hadn't afforded her the same luxury.

"What would you like to know, *amorina*?"

"I want to know you, Matteo."

I leaned forward and nudged Genovesi's shoulder. "Take the scenic route."

"Yes, boss," he replied with a nod, and I turned my full attention toward Marcella.

“I am yours to question.”

“What was it like growing up like...”

“Like the only child of a Don? I could say lonely, but I was rarely alone. There were nannies and educators, guards who pretended they weren’t watching my every movement, and at least seven guns hidden in my childhood bedroom that I knew how to use by the time I was ten.”

“Papà taught me how to use a gun.”

“Then your papà is a smart man.”

Just not smart with his money.

“I wasn’t allowed to leave the house, so you’ll excuse me if I believe you’re safer when you are at home.”

“I guess I can forgive you,” she said with a shrug, her lips turned upward in a soft smile. “When did your papà start...”

“Grooming me for the infamous Cortese throne? As soon as I could talk.”

“So...you didn’t have a childhood?”

I huffed. “If you consider arms training and ruthless negotiations tactics a childhood, then sure. But I don’t think you’ll believe a child should know how to dismember a body.”

Marcella grimaced. “Please don’t...”

I cut her off. “We’re two having girls. And then when they’re mostly grown, we’ll try again and have a boy, an heir, and he will be a child before he will be an underboss.”

That cheeky smile was back. “Tell that to my uterus.”

“I will,” I said, and bent to bury my face in her lap.

She laughed, the first big laugh I had the pleasure of hearing, and feebly pulled at my head. I mumbled my request to her pussy and then relented, allowing her to lift my face to hers.

“You’re insane, Matteo Cortese.”

“You’re right, Marcella Cortese. *Hmm*, I like the sound of that.”

“Marcella *Moretti*,” she corrected and tapped my nose. “I’m not a Cortese yet.”

“Yet.” I clung to the word and reached for her left hand and pressed a kiss to her palm up to her ring finger.

Flipping her hand over, I peered at the ring that I had been holding onto since I’d paid off Moretti’s debt. He told me her ring size, and I picked one up that I liked. But once I saw her, I realized it paled in comparison to the woman I would marry.

The fact that I didn’t present this to her the night I announced our engagement to the capos of our syndicate kind of pissed me off. She deserved better than this. She deserved a better ring, a better proposal, and a better fiancé.

“Do you like it?” I questioned after far too much silence.

Marcella smiled sweetly, and I wondered if she was about to lie or let me down easy. “I love it, Matteo. It’s beautiful.”

I wasn’t quite sure if I believed her. I ran my thumb over the two-carat solitaire oval diamond and pressed a kiss to the top of her hand.

I wondered if I should kiss her. This felt like a moment when I should kiss her, but we just kind of *stared* at each other.

She was scared. Of me. Of *this*.

Genovesi cleared his throat. “We’re here, boss.”

I stepped out of the car first and helped Marcella out, sweeping her under my arm. I held her hip and guided her toward the slick black doors of my mamma’s most recent mansion.

Genovesi knocked, nodding at the made men that opened the door and guided us into the sunken den where my papà was smoking and sipping whiskey.

Why the fuck was he here? This supper was supposed to be with Mamma only. Did that mean papà’s wife or whoever the hell he’d brought to the engagement party would be here as well?

“Matteo,” he drawled, his gaze locked on the quivering woman at my side. “You’re late.” He placed his tumbler down and blotted out his cigarette, standing. “Bring her to me.”

Che cazzo, why did he have to act like this? His legs fucking worked perfectly fine.

Marcella slipped from my grasp and crossed the space toward my papà. His brow hiked and he reached for her, drawing her in to kiss her cheeks. When he placed his hand on her lower back, just grazing the swell of her ass, rage blazed through me, but I stayed completely still.

He was testing me. I hoped.

My papà held Marcella at arm’s length and quizzed her. In Italian. About me. His thumb was rubbing back and forth on her left forearm, an action he wanted me to see. He could have her if he wanted her, he was making that known.

“Go get your mamma.”

The command was aimed at me, but delivered to Marcella. He wouldn’t look away from her. He wanted me to *trust* him with my fiancée alone? Fat fucking chance.

But I’d do as he said. Marcella wouldn’t fall for his honey trap.

With a nod, I left the room, trying not to react as the made men were dismissed as well. I couldn’t react. I couldn’t let my papà know that I might actually grow to care about Marcella, an affection greater than lust.

It would be my weakness, and my papà would use that against me in any way that he could.

Mamma was in her bedroom sitting at a white and gold vanity table. She noticed me in the mirror and smiled softly, turning in her seat.

“Matteo,” she called gently, drawing me to her.

“Mamma.” I kissed both of her cheeks and helped her stand. “How have you been?”

Mamma swatted away my hands. “I’m fine, Matteo. You have more to worry about than your mamma. You have a wife.”

“But she hasn’t recently had surgery,” I reminded her.

Mamma grimaced. “You worry more than your papà.”

Because I actually cared about her. She may have been a stranger during my childhood, but she’d only ever shown me kindness. I owed her the same in return.

I chose not to reply, not to agree with the obvious, and changed the subject. “This could have waited.”

“I want to meet her.”

“She’s not going anywhere. You need to rest.”

Mamma had been on bed rest for four weeks after her hysterectomy. Her wound wasn’t healed, and I would have preferred that she stayed in bed until it was.

“I’ll rest later. Where is she?”

I didn’t reply, and Mamma sighed. I held my elbow out to her, and although she hesitated, she surprisingly accepted the assistance. Slowly, I guided her downstairs and into the den where my papà was sitting tightly next to Marcella on the uncomfortable couch.

He didn’t bother to peer up when we entered the space, but Marcella did. She stood and smoothed out her crimson dress and flicked soft curls over her exposed shoulder. Pressing her blood-red lips together, Marcella waited for me to address her before she moved.

“Mamma, this is Marcella Moretti.”

“Moretti?” Mamma said quickly and peered up at me. “Mirella Moretti?”

Marcella nodded. Well, I guessed that was why all of the Moretti girls’ names ended in *ella*.

“Yes, my mamma is Mirella.”

Mamma let go of me and crossed the room. Without hesitation, she yanked Marcella into a tight hug.

“Oh, *cara*. I’m so sorry. How is she?” Mamma kissed Marcella’s cheeks and then stared at her.

What was she talking about? I knew Moretti had insisted that I hire nurses for his family, but I hadn’t questioned him on it. It was none of my business. But now, it was. Marcella was my business.

“She is doing okay.”

Mamma nodded and squeezed Marcella’s arms. “What do you drink, *cara*?”

Marcella peered past Mamma at me, so I responded for her.

“Red wine.”

“She has a glass,” my papà interjected, motioning vaguely to the glass of red wine next to his whiskey.

“I’ll check on supper.”

“I will help,” Marcella said quickly, and I wanted to flash a menacing smile at my papà.

She didn’t want to be around him. Whatever the hell he’d said to her, it hadn’t worked.

Staring at me and then her wine glass, Marcella followed Mamma to the kitchen to check on the chefs.

“She knows more than I thought she would...being raised by a made man.” Papà muttered and took a sip of his whiskey.

I snatched Marcella’s glass and downed the contents. “What is this? It’s disgusting. Why would you serve that to her?”

He ignored my question. “How did you find her?”

“Why?”

“What made you pursue her?”

To get you off my fucking back.

“You spoke with her. Why don’t you tell me?” I turned his bold question back on him, needing the heat to be off me for once in my goddamn life.

“Seems...odd that we had a discussion about how you are still single at thirty-seven only a few months ago...and now you have a bride.”

“You wanted me to get married; now I’m getting married.”

“You could’ve picked better.”

My jaw was clenched so hard I thought I would break my own teeth. “Do not insult her. Ever.”

My papà looked past me, and I turned to see Marcella standing with her hands clasped tightly together.

“Supper is ready.”

Why she was sent to tell us this instead of one of the staff, I wasn’t sure, but one thing I knew for certain was that she’d heard the cruel words that left my papà’s mouth.

I crossed the room to her and pulled her against me. I wanted to kiss her, but the way she stared up at me, wide-eyed and afraid, I decided against it. I thought about kissing her forehead or her cheek, but even that seemed like it would be too much for her in this situation.

I spent the entirety of supper watching Marcella. What she ate, how much she ate, if she drank, what she drank, and especially her body language. Her body was very...expressive. She had cringed when she took a sip of that disgusting wine my papà had opened for her and covered her outward disgust by straightening her spine.

It was nearly ten by the time we finished eating, and I was more than ready to leave. My papà was still talking when I pushed my chair away from the table and stood. I reached for Marcella, breathing a sigh of relief when she stood and took my hand.

“It was nice meeting you,” she said politely, her niceties aimed only at Mamma, and ducked her head to follow me to the foyer.

“Wait!” Mamma called after us.

I turned, watching with a frown as she stood slowly. Marcella gently pulled herself away from me to help her, and instead of swatting her away like she had me, Mamma held onto Marcella tightly.

“I can help you plan the wedding...if you’d like.”

Marcella smiled sweetly at her. “I’d like that. There is so much to do.”

Mamma beamed back. “I have four sisters, so I may know a few things about planning weddings. Although my taste might be a bit dated.”

My fiancée chuckled, and Mamma pulled her into a hug.

“Matteo will give me your number, and we can set up a time to plan. What do you say?”

“Oh...” Marcella began and peeked at me. “I don’t know where my phone is.”

“I’ll buy you another.” My response was clipped, but it wasn’t over the thought of getting a phone for Marcella. It was because my papà was watching our entire interaction with a wicked grin.

“Alright, *cara*. We’ll talk soon.” Mamma let Marcella go and winked at me before slowly moving toward the stairs.

Marcella was in my arms again and we were out of the house before my papà could say something stupid. When I opened the car door for her, she crawled across the backseat and turned to face me when I sat.

“Come here,” I ordered, patting my thigh.

Marcella slid across the leather and slowly placed one leg over mine. Her movements were careful, cautious, and I was sick of waiting. I grabbed her waist and pulled her onto my lap, shoving at her dress, ignoring her gasp when it started to rip.

“*Cazzo*...I’m sorry, *amorina*.” I mumbled my apology against her throat.

“It’s alright. You can buy me a new one.”

“Fuck the dress. I mean about my papà.”

Threading my fingers in her hair at the nape of her neck, I guided her mouth down to mine, having gone far too long without kissing her.

The sound of her moan in our kiss nearly turned me feral. I was clawing and nipping and sucking at her exposed skin, tugging at the straps of her dress until they ripped too.

Genovesi said something about us arriving home, and the house was cleared, but I wasn’t listening to him. I was only listening to the sounds Marcella was making.

I opened the door, but I knew I couldn’t climb out while connected with Marcella, as much as I wanted to, so I slowed our kiss, grinning wickedly at the way she was panting.

She climbed off my lap carefully, running her inner thigh along my cock just to be a tease. I got out of the car and reached for her, admiring her flushed cheeks and tattered dress.

When her feet hit the stone driveway, I picked her up and carried her into the home and up the stairs in a much different, yet equally as eager way as I had the first night she was here.

But I wasn’t bringing her to her room.

I was bringing her to *my* room.

CHAPTER

Sixteen

MARCELLA

I LIKED the way Matteo kissed me. I didn't want him to stop kissing me, but I did want us both to make it upstairs without falling, and there was no way we could do that if we were kissing.

My bones felt like they were vibrating in my body, a deep quivering that could have been explained away simply as lust, but I knew was fear hung heavy in my core.

Whatever Matteo wanted to do to me, I wanted it just as badly. I just didn't want to disappoint.

He was older than me, experienced in a way I wasn't allowed to be, and even the way he kissed me let me know that he fucked, and he fucked *well*.

Matteo walked straight past my bedroom. I gazed at him, confused, but he just grinned at me and nudged open the double doors at the end of the hallway.

It was his bedroom.

The walls and ceiling were a smoky gray color, and I was surprised that the room wasn't all black and white. Warm wooden flooring spread across the space and into a bathroom with a deep soaker tub that could be seen from the bed.

The *bed*. Matteo's bed.

The bed that he tossed me down onto, with deep forest green blankets and ashy gray pillows that Matteo pushed aside.

"There's color," I whispered as Matteo kneeled on the edge of the bed.

He bit a grin away. "Yeah, *amorina*. And I intend to paint you all over this room."

The flash of silver drew my attention away from his handsome face to his left hand, where he held a folding knife. My smile slipped away, and I wondered what I had done to deserve this pain.

Matteo grabbed my ankle and pulled me toward him, nudging my legs apart with his knee. “Trust me, *amorina*?”

“Not entirely.”

He leaned in and chuckled down at me. “Then don’t move.”

The tip of the knife came into view before it darted down quickly. Matteo gripped the bust of my dress, holding it away from me, and he sliced at the dress between my tits. He worked slowly, lifting the dress away from my skin before continuing to cut it off me.

“I always have this on me.” He grazed the tip of the knife up my torso from my belly button to the center of my bra. “You never know...” He tucked the knife below my bra and yanked it up, splitting the garment down the middle. “When you might need it.”

“If you keep ruining my clothes, I won’t have anything to wear.”

“That’s the point, *amorina*.”

The blade tickled my skin again, trailing down to my panties that I knew he was about to cut off me. The action still made me gasp. A quick slice of fabric at one hipbone and again at the other.

Flicking the knife closed, Matteo leaned back and tucked it in the inner pocket of his suit jacket. I felt all too exposed while he was fully dressed, something that he already knew.

He undressed gradually, first his suit jacket and the holster he had been wearing beneath it. He undid each button of his shirt tediously slow, grinning wickedly when he noticed I was squirming.

I wanted this. I wanted *him*.

Resting his hand on his belt buckle, Matteo gazed at me and tilted his head to the side. “Hmm...you first.”

“What?”

He slipped his hand below my back and pulled me away from the scraps of my dress and bra, yanking them from beneath me, then sat up fully and guiding me onto his thighs. He was breathing heavy, gaze locked on the sliced panties that barely covered my pussy, but he didn't take them off me, just stared, and his grip on me was tight.

I reached down and let the fabric fall. I lifted myself off his thighs, grabbed the scrap of lace, and tossed it aside. I was completely naked when I sank back down on his lap. Completely naked and completely inexperienced.

With a low growl, Matteo tossed me onto the bed and brought his hungry mouth down to mine. I didn't think his kiss could get any rougher, any more urgent. But it did.

His mouth roamed over my skin, down my collarbone and across my tits, licking and sucking and nibbling until it hurt. I arched my back to him, needing more.

As his kiss reached my mound and he nudged my legs over his shoulder, Matteo peered up at me, his hazel eyes a shade darker with lust. “I will worship you, Marcella. With my mouth, with my hands, and with my cock. *Si?*”

He was asking...*permission?* To take what was rightfully his? Claim me the way he deserved?

“Yes,” I breathed.

The word was barely past my lips when Matteo sealed his mouth over my clit. Guttural sounds left me as Matteo touched me in a way I had never been touched, slipping a finger inside me, then another, and another, prodding and stretching.

I had explored myself before, but not like this. *This...* was entirely different. This was fucking *incredible*.

“Ah...God...”

“God?” Matteo murmured against my sensitive clit. “No, *amorina*. I am your god now.”

I groaned and threading my fingers in his hair, hanging on, drawing him just a little closer. He chuckled against my clit, and I gasped, jolting from the intensity of that change. My legs were quivering; a deep ache settled in my core, not willing to budge.

So damn close.

“Let me see what my pretty pussy can do, *amorina*. Come on, be a good girl for me.”

The command was something I was more than willing to comply with. A desperate warmth took away the ache, took away everything, until I felt it *all*.

I squealed and squeezed my eyes shut as the orgasm ripped through me and I clamped my knees together, probably suffocating Matteo with my pussy. I didn't care. All I knew was pleasure, and all I wanted was *more*.

Matteo must have freed himself from between my thighs, because he was kissing me. Slow, gentle draws of his tired tongue that tasted like me.

I gasped as I felt him press his cock into me and opened my eyes. I stared down at the thick cock that I wasn't sure I could take fully. I'd taken the head of it, and already that hurt.

“Shh,” Matteo soothed and nudged my head back. “Need you relaxed, *amorina*. Can you relax for me?”

“It won't fit.”

He chuckled. “It will. You're taking me so well already.”

Pressing my thighs apart further, Matteo eased more of himself in, pulled back until it was just the tip, and then I took more of him again.

I dug my nails into his arms and sucked in a gasp as it felt like his cock ripped through my pussy. I tensed, and Matteo stilled inside me, peering down with a soft grin.

“I'll wear your blood on my cock. I wasn't sure if I'd be the one to do that.”

“This hurts. I want to go back to your mouth on me.”

He chuckled. “The pain gives way to pleasure. You’ll get used to me.”

“I doubt that,” I mumbled and peered down.

Not even *half* of him was inside me.

“Relax,” he coaxed and swept down to kiss me.

I focused on the kiss to take my mind off the throbbing ache between my legs.

“Look at how you take all of me.”

I had. Matteo was buried fully in me, deep enough that I felt him at my belly button.

“I’m going to fuck you now, and I’ll apologize for the pain later. I can’t go another fucking second without fucking you, *amorina*.”

He drew back and thrust quickly, his hipbones slamming against my inner thighs. Okay, *that* hurt. He did it again and again, and through the pain, I felt the tiniest twinge of pleasure.

That pleasure began to grow, overshadowing the pain, even though I didn’t think it was possible. Holy *fuck*, it was good. Matteo noticed the shift in my body, the way the pain was ebbing, and he fucked me harder.

This pain was *good*. The pain of being fucked by him, the pain from his hips on my thighs, the pain of his fingers in my hair, yanking my head back until my face was tilted toward his.

“Matteo...” I moaned his name and received a groan in return from him.

“*Cazzo*, Marcella...I love being inside you.”

“We should do this again sometime,” I said, grinning when Matteo glared down at me.

“You’re going to have to beg me to stop fucking you so much.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Is that so? Don’t start something you can’t handle, *amorina*.”

I tilted my head. “I thought I was handling you well, Matteo?”

“*Fuck...*” he hissed and slammed his lips against mine.

He reached for my hips, drawing me even closer as his thrusts became more urgent.

I was totally satisfied. I’d come, and now it was his turn. It felt so good, I didn’t want it to end. I never wanted this to end.

A deeper, more urgent pleasure ripped through me. Somehow, I came again. I felt my body spasm as I gasped for air between moans.

“Look at me when I fill my fucking pussy, *amorina*,” Matteo commanded gruffly.

My body went lax, and I popped my eyes open to look into those crazed hazel eyes.

The sound of our skin slapping mixed with Matteo’s urgent grunts as he came. Groaning, he kissed me hard, lifting my legs around his hips. He guided my hands around his neck, and he pushed us up and off the bed.

Slowing our kiss, Matteo walked us to the bathroom and turned the tap on the bathtub. As it filled, he placed me on the edge of the vanity and opened a drawer to my left. I watched as he ran a black washcloth under warm water and brought it to where we were still joined. I liked feeling him throbbing inside me, but as the pleasure faded, the pain had resurfaced.

Matteo pulled his cock out of me and covered my pussy with the washcloth. He glanced down at his cock, slick with blood, and then back at me with a sly grin.

“I’m your first and only, *amorina*.”

“Well, except for that fling I’ll have with one of your men when I’m thirty and bored.” I teased.

Matteo’s jaw tensed. “No one touches what’s mine.”

“Except you?”

He carefully cleaned blood and cum from my pussy and inner thighs and then wiped his cock. “Except me.” Matteo tossed the washcloth aside and placed both hands on the counter by my hips. “I hope you’re joking, *amorina*.”

I grabbed his chin and drew his face forward. “Jealous, Matteo?”

He nodded once. “My men aren’t allowed to look at you, let alone lay a fucking finger on you. I’ll kill any man that isn’t me who touches you.”

“So that’s why everyone pretended I didn’t exist when we first met.”

Another stiff nod. “Yes. I’m possessive over what’s mine, and that includes you.”

Done with the conversation, Matteo scooped me up from the counter and stepped into the bathtub, depositing me in the hot water. He turned the tap off and settled himself on the opposite end of the tub, drawing me between his legs.

I pressed my back against his chest and peered up at him. He was still tense. I reached up and ran my fingers along his cheek. He relaxed, and I was thankful he reacted to my touch.

Matteo bent to kiss me, and I realized that this could work.

Us.

I didn’t quite hate him anymore, and he seemed to tolerate me. It was a start, at least.

“You’re going to be sore,” Matteo began, and dipped a hand in the water.

His fingers drifted over my thigh and to my pussy. Using his pointer and middle fingers, he parted my folds and soothed the tender area gently.

“And if I fuck you the way I want to fuck you, then you’ll be sore every time.”

I gasped at the feel of something cold on my chest. Matteo poured body wash onto me that smelled like fresh mint. He

lathered the soap on my chest, taking extra care to make sure my tits were clean.

I breathed a laugh and turned, pressing my soapy tits against Matteo's chest. I kissed him, because I was certain I'd never get tired of kissing him.

"You're staying with me tonight," Matteo said against my lips. "And I'll have you know...pajamas are not allowed."

CHAPTER

Seventeen

MATTEO

AS MUCH AS I wanted to wake Marcella with my cock, she needed to recover so I could fuck her even harder than I had.

It also didn't help that I was startled awake by a phone call at four a.m. from my papà.

“What?” I hissed, slipping my arm from beneath Marcella.

“Warehouse.” My papà's tone was clipped.

It was a demand I wasn't going to refuse, but it was one I was going to question.

I sighed and peered over at Marcella. “What is it this time?”

My girl was rubbing her eyes and sat up enough for the blanket to fall and expose those perfect fucking tits with nipples I had sucked until they were cherry-red.

“Someone would like to congratulate you...on your engagement.”

“*What?*”

“Is that the only word you know? Get the fuck down here, *figlio.*”

He ended the call, and I could hear the blood rushing through my ears. I stiffened when Marcella reached for my arm and turned to see her frowning. Fuck.

“Are you alright?”

I nodded and leaned down to kiss her. “I'm fine. I just need to do some work. Sleep, *amorina.*”

“I don't want to sleep in here without you,” she said as I slid out of bed.

I was far too tense to respond to her in a way that wouldn't sound cold, so I stayed quiet and dressed.

Marcella didn't have any clothes in here. I would need to change that. I grabbed a button-down and put it on her, hating the way she was still frowning.

“I'll bring you to your room.”

She nodded and slipped out of bed, taking my outstretched hand. The shirt barely covered the swell of her ass, so I stood behind her as we exited the room to prevent my men from getting a look at her.

They followed us and stood on either side of Marcella's doors as we entered the room. I should have stayed in the hallway, dismissed her to bed, but I was already being cruel enough by remaining silent.

Marcella sat on the edge of the bed and stared at me, begging me with her honey-brown eyes to tell her what was going on. I got to my knees in front of her and unbuttoned my shirt, pushing it off her shoulders until she was bare again before me.

I kissed from her collarbone to each of her perfect tits, giving them enough attention before I moved up to kiss her lips.

“I'll be back before you wake,” I promised, hoping I wasn't lying to her further.

I was already lying by omission.



I didn't recognize the Russian man who was grinning menacingly at me as much as he could with a fucked-up face.

My papà passed me the brass knuckles that were already bloodied and spoke to me in Italian. “Take a guess who his boss is?”

“Where was he found?”

That question made my papà pause and inhale slowly. “In my driveway.”

“We’ll pass your bride around. We’ll all get the chance to fuck her before we tear her apart and deliver the pieces to you,” the man said.

My papà gave me a look that said *don’t fucking react*.

So, I ignored him. “When was he found?”

“An hour before I called you. He’s not looking to hurt me, only you. *You* are the one with the weakness.”

“He won’t hurt me by threatening her life.”

“Are you sure about that?” My papà stepped away and blotted his cigarette out on the man’s forehead. “Why don’t you ask him what he told me?”

My black leather shoes clicked against the concrete as I strode toward the bound Russian. I shrugged out of my suit jacket, tossed it aside, and began rolling up my sleeves.

“What brings you here, *brutto pezzo di merda*?”

He laughed in response and attempted to spit bloody saliva on me, but I sidestepped it, which only made him snarl and curse at me in Russian.

“I’m going to slice her pretty tits off.”

“Who are you talking about?”

“You will not fool me. The Moretti girl will die, and you will wear her blood.”

I didn’t react. I wasn’t a fucking moron, and a bit of pussy wasn’t going to change that. Perfect pussy, no less, but I wasn’t falling for her, so she wasn’t my weakness.

“You kill her, I’ll just find another,” I offered with a shrug.

The Russian tilted his head. “You lie.”

“I have no reason to lie.”

“You will watch as we drain her of her blood.”

I shook my head. “Not interested. How did you get onto the property?”

He cursed at me in Russian, and I rewarded him with a brass knuckle-spiked right hook that split more of his already-sliced cheek. Then another, and another.

I repeated my question, and this time all I received in response was silence. He was limp in the chair, head hung low, but I knew he was still conscious. He wasn't that weak. Dominov wouldn't have hired someone who couldn't handle being beaten until they were an inch from death.

Grabbing his black hair at his forehead, I forced him to look at me. “How did you get onto the property?”

“I walked,” the Russian replied smartly and sneered at me. “Your fortress is weak, and your kingdom will crumble. We will have what we want. We will take everything from you... starting with *her*.”

That was *enough*.

I wasn't going to let him know that his words had an effect on me, but I was sick of hearing his fucking voice. My grip on his hair tightened to keep my target steady, and my brass knuckles connected with his face over and over, blood splattering across every single surface, but mostly me.

“*Figlio! Smettila!*” Papà yelled.

I felt his hand on my elbow, but I shook him off. I wasn't finished.

I wasn't stopping until the fucker *begged* me to stop.

CHAPTER

Eighteen

MARCELLA

THE BED SHIFTED BEHIND ME, and I was drawn back against a firm body. Matteo buried his face in the crook of my neck and inhaled.

“You didn’t lie,” I whispered and rolled onto my back.

“I’ll never lie to you.” Matteo’s lips pressed against mine, and when I opened my mouth to his, I finally opened my eyes.

A coppery taste glided across my tongue, and I gently pushed him back.

“*Oddio!*”

Matteo was covered in blood. It was splattered across his face and shirt, dried across his arms and hands.

“Are you hurt?”

He breathed a laugh. “No, *amorina*. It’s not mine.”

I unbuttoned his bloody shirt and pushed it down his tense arms, guiding his red-stained hands out of it. Matteo inhaled slowly, just watching me as I undressed him. His eyes fluttered closed when I wrapped my fingers around his cock.

“*Amorina...*” he warned, thrusting fully into my palm.

“I want it. I want to know how to calm you down when you return to me wearing another man’s blood.”

“You want it?” Each word was delivered with such force, I almost started to regret my request.

But I nodded, and that small movement roused a growl from somewhere deep within him.

Matteo’s lips crashed against mine, and he slipped his cock out of my hand. As he kissed me, he positioned me exactly how he wanted me, pressing my knees up to my shoulders roughly.

After rubbing the tip of his cock in my wetness, barely a breath later, he slammed into me straight to the hilt, and I cried out. Matteo swallowed my cries with a groan of his own, and he made it known he wasn't taking it easy on me this time.

Matteo shifted his grip to my waist, digging his fingers in. He pulled his mouth from mine and stared down at me with a feral look in his eyes.

“*Cazzo*, Marcella...” he moaned, and his hips stilled.

I wondered what I'd done wrong, if I was *that* inexperienced, but all thoughts left my head when Matteo swooped down and kissed me. He still tasted like blood, but there was a sweetness on his tongue that I wanted more of, and he was willing to give me that.

So I gave him me. All of me. In any way he liked.

It should have been painful, I almost wanted for it to be painful, to make sense of things, but it wasn't.

Matteo rested his hands on the backs of my knees, pressing his weight down and spreading my legs further as he started fucking me again. Deeper, harder, with more intent, and something *more*.

Nothing made sense at the same time that *everything* made sense. As long as it was him.

A lifetime of this would be worth it.

“Going to need you to come, *amorina*. Do it for me.” His demand was followed by his unrelenting touch against my clit.

Whatever orgasm was buried deep down rose quickly to the surface and spilled over into everything. My hips bucked in a desperate attempt to stop his fingers from working against my overly sensitive bud, but he kept going, and so did the orgasm, stretching out and snapping together all at the same time.

Wetness pooled on the bed below me. Wetness that turned Matteo feral.

“*Fuck* yes, Marcella,” he groaned, hips ruthlessly pounding against mine.

I wasn't sure who screamed louder when Matteo came: him or me. His entire body shook, cock throbbing inside me as he filled me in a way that I would never get tired of.

The weight of him on me and in me was quickly becoming one of my favorite sensations. And when he kissed me roughly and passionately, cradling my body against his, that simply rounded out the perfection of being fucked by Matteo Cortese.

The gentleness he had shown me last night after we slept together returned as he sat back and drew me onto his lap. He held me against him, tucking my head into the crook of his neck as we came down from our high together, breathing in sync, hearts beating as one.

Matteo's kisses against my shoulder shifted to soft nibbles, and when I groaned, his grip on me became rougher. Holding me tight, Matteo got to his knees and stepped off the bed, carrying me once again to a bathroom to clean me up.

But he was the one that needed to be cleaned. Blood had dried across his face in splatters, up his arms, and darkened his fingertips until everything was red.

He settled me on the counter, and I reached up to push dark wispy waves out of his face.

“Will you tell me whose blood this is?”

Matteo's jaw tensed. “That wouldn't be a good idea.”

“Am I going to spend my life being kept in the dark about what you do?”

I had to ask. I wanted to know if Matteo would ever trust me.

“Keeping you in the dark is what keeps you safe, *amorina*.”

“That sounds like a shitty excuse.”

“Marcella—” Matteo began, but I cut him off.

“You're going to tell me that's how this world works, right? Like I don't know that already? My papà might be the

lowest of the low in your eyes, but he did what he had to so we could have a good life.”

“*Amorina...*”

“Please don’t tell me I don’t know what I’m talking about. Don’t tell me I can’t handle it, or that I wouldn’t like it, because let’s face the facts here, Mr. Cortese. We don’t know each other.” I held my hand up and flashed the ring he had given me. “We’re supposed to get married, and we’ve fucked. That’s it. Now, would you please get out of me and go clean off that blood?”

It wasn’t about organized crime. It wasn’t about him coming home covered in blood on a daily basis. It wasn’t about Matteo killing people.

It was about *trust*, something Mamma had said was more important than almost everything in a relationship. She trusted Papà with her entire soul, so she believed so fiercely that *this*—my current situation—was what was the best for us. As a family.

What was best for me.

“*No*,” Matteo menaced and fixed me with a glare.

“No?” My voice jumped an octave with sheer surprise.

Planting his hands on either side of my hips, he leaned in. “I said *no*, *amorina*. I’m not just going to pull my dick out of you and walk away like you mean nothing to me. That’s not how *we* work. You deserve more, probably more than I can ever give you, but I’ll give you what I have.”

He hung his head and slowly inhaled.

“The blood...belongs to a man that was found on my papà’s property early this morning. We...were trying to get information out of him.”

I reached for his face and forced his gaze to meet mine. “Was that so hard?”

He grimaced, but removed all emotion from his face quickly until he resembled a marble sculpture.

“I’ll clean you up if you clean us...” I trailed my hand down the center of his chest to just below his belly button.

Matteo nodded, his lips pressed firmly together. He found a washcloth and cleaned the sex from both of us. He then ran a warm bath, pouring bubble bath that smelled like fresh limes into the tub that wasn’t as nice as the one in his room.

The bath was hotter than the one we had last night. Matteo still lifted me into the bubbly water, but he didn’t draw me toward his chest. He relaxed against the edge of the tub, and I settled between his legs, facing him.

Pushing up onto my knees, I reached past him for my citrus body wash and a sea sponge. Matteo watched every movement I made with an intensity that made my insides ache.

I wet the sponge and dripped warm water across his chest and arms. He closed his eyes and rested his head back, slipping deeper into the water and closer to me.

I was shaky. This man was going to be my husband, but he was a stranger in front of me, someone so guarded that I wondered if I would ever truly know him.

I lathered the body wash in my hands and then on him starting with his shoulders. I moved up his neck, winding both hands around his throat just because I could, and down his chest.

I cleaned his arms and worked the soap against his hands and fingers until the soft white bubbles turned pale red. I soaked the sponge and pressed it against his neck, letting the water roll across his hardened chest and stomach. I repeated it over and over until the only blood that remained was on his face.

Matteo sat forward to reach for my hips and drew me toward him, adjusting until I was on his lap with my feet behind him. My stomach flopped around as he tucked his somehow already hard again cock between us and it slapped against my belly button.

Reaching up, I ran my wet fingers across his cheeks, wiping away the blood. He closed his eyes again, breathing

slowly as I traced from his forehead down his sharp nose.

I saved his lips for last. When I pressed my fingers to them, Matteo's eyes snapped open, hooded with a lust I felt deep in my core. I slipped my hand away from his mouth and dove below the water to wrap around his cock.

“Marcella...”

“Shh...”

Let me do this.

Let me figure this out, whatever it is between us.

Let me in.

His head fell back and he groaned. I smiled softly. I liked having this...*control* over him.

The bubbles in front of me dissipated, and I peered down to watch how I worked my hand up and down his length. It was such a simple action that had such an effect on the man in front of me.

His stamina was something to be marveled at, but my hand was getting tired. I wasn't sure what to do with his...

“No,” he growled and yanked my hand away from his cock. “The only place my cum belongs is inside *you*.”

Matteo grabbed me and forced me to stand. Turning us, he nudged my knee onto the edge of the tub, pressed at the center of my back until I bent forward, and quickly teased my entrance before pressing into me.

This was the third time in less than twenty-four hours that he had been inside me. I was a fan, but I was sore. A good kind of soreness that I felt when he was gone, like my pussy ached for him.

I felt him deeper this way, like the tip of his cock was pressing against my damn lungs. If he wasn't careful, he might puncture one.

A sharp slap across my ass made me buck forward with a squeal. Matteo tightened his grip on my hips, keeping me still.

I felt him press against me, his mouth on my back near my shoulder.

He bit down as he came, our groans echoing off the tiled walls and back to us.

Wrapping his arms around my waist, Matteo eased me back into the bath. “You make me never want to leave this house. The only thing I want to do is you, *amorina*.”

I turned my head toward him. “You bit me.”

He breathed a laugh. “I did.”

“It hurt.”

“It was supposed to.”

“Am I bleeding?”

Matteo kissed my shoulder where he had bit me. “No. I will never draw blood from you.”

“You already did,” I reminded him. “Last night.”

Another chuckle. “That was not my intent. It was an unfortunate side effect of being fucked for the first time, *amorina*.”

I leaned forward to slide off him, but he pulled me back and spread my legs.

“Ground rules, *amorina*. If I get to come, so do you.”

“I don’t think I have it in me...”

Matteo drew languid circles against my clit. “There are a few more ground rules we need to go over. This room is no longer where you stay, is that clear?”

I pressed my lips firmly together to try and quell the moan that hung on the tip of my tongue, but it slipped out when I replied. “Yes.”

“Good.” I could hear the triumphant grin in his tone. “You will sleep in bed with me however you like. I do prefer you like this, though.”

The tantalizing rhythm on my already aroused bud was making me delirious. Each swirl brought me closer and closer,

but not fast enough.

“Need to know if you understand, Marcella,” he whispered against my ear.

“Uh-huh.”

Matteo chuckled. “Good girl.”

I groaned. Those goddamn words.

“Last rule...for now, anyway.” He kissed my cheek and his hand moved faster.

I gripped the edge of the tub, desperate little sounds slipping from between my lips.

“My hands, tongue, and cock are the *only* things you can use to come, understood?”

The movement stopped. I groaned and tossed my head back against his shoulder. I knew he was smiling without having to look.

“Yes,” I breathed, allowing him more. More control, more of me.

But...I didn't mind. I kind of...liked it. Far more than I should have.

“That's my girl.” His tone was as rough as his touch that left me squirming and panting in his arms.

I had lost count of the number of times this man had made me orgasm in a twenty-four-hour period.

We were just exploring...right? Figuring each other out. There was no possible way we could continue at this rate, as much as I would like it...

CHAPTER

Nineteen

MATTEO

MARCELLA TRACED a finger along the serpent tattoo that wound along my left side. I closed my eyes and focused on her touch, tried to focus on anything that wasn't Dominov.

Tried to focus on *her*.

She deserved that much from me. Hell, she deserved more. She deserved more than I could ever possibly give.

“What do you think about jewel tones?” Her question was a soft whisper that I almost missed.

Opening my eyes, I glanced down at her. She had stopped tracing my tattoo and rested her chin against my chest.

“Jewel tones?”

Slowly, she nodded. “For...our wedding. Like an emerald green or sapphire for dresses and ties and stuff.”

“If you want jewel tones, then we'll have jewel tones, *amorina*.”

My response made her sigh. “I want your input.”

“And I want you to have the wedding of your dreams, *amorina*. My input is not meant to sway you from having everything you've always wanted.”

She sat up further and fixed me with a glare. It took a hell of a lot of willpower not to break her gaze and stare at her incredible tits.

“Everything I've always wanted?”

“Yes.”

“So, if I want...a bouncy castle at our wedding...”

“Then we'll have one, *amorina*. Would you like a bouncy castle at our wedding?”

“No,” she sighed. “I want...my mamma at our wedding.”

Marcella lay back against the bed and stared up at the ceiling.

I shifted onto my side and practically wrapped myself around her. “Tell me about her.”

A soft smile worked its way across her face. “She’s incredible. Strong, caring, and always smiling. She’s sick right now, and we don’t know what’s wrong with her.”

“I’m sorry,” I said honestly, but that made her frown.

“All of the tests, hospital visits, doctors’ visits, *everything* came back normal. But she can barely stand anymore. She can barely get out of bed. About two months ago, she seemed like she was doing better, but when she was walking around, she passed out and hit her head. Gave herself a concussion.”

I didn’t want to tell her I was sorry again. My sympathy wouldn’t help the matter at hand. I listened, and tried to think of how I could help. *If* I could help.

I hadn’t met her mamma. I had stood outside the bedroom door of her mamma’s room when Marcella had told me to clean her sister’s face and then ran.

Annabella had frowned and said she did something wrong. I had asked what she had meant, and she admitted that she’d told Marcella that their mamma had been breathing funny and had to be taken to the hospital.

I had cleaned her face as fast as I could and told her to go play, but before I could go upstairs to be with my bride-to-be, I had to deal with the shit-for-brains staff who wasn’t doing his fucking job. Broke his hand, threatened his life, met Marcella’s middle sister, and then stood outside the bedroom door, listening like a fucking creep.

Marcella had been pissed when she ran into me, and I hadn’t heard enough to know why being there had been such a big deal. So...I had responded like an ass and let my fucking arousal rule my brain.

“I thought I would plan my wedding with her.”

“I know, *amorina*.”

Whatever was going on with her mamma, I needed to make sure that she was at our wedding. For Marcella.



I stared at Lino Tocci through the hazy mixture of cigar and cigarette smoke that filled the games room.

This was technically my bachelor party. A quiet night of playing poker in my home, because I respected Marcella enough not to go to some strip club where my men would try to entice me to sleep with someone other than my bride-to-be. *To get it out of my system.*

I didn't want to sleep with anyone else. Sleeping with Marcella was the only thing on my mind lately, clouding every rational thought.

I wanted to devour her day and night, spend every waking moment discovering her body over and over because I truly *was* insatiable.

Tocci glanced down at his cards one final time before sighing. He tossed his cards toward the center of the table.

“Fold,” he grumbled around his cigar.

I drew the chips toward me, finding the game wasn't as entertaining when everyone in this room was betting with my money. Winning wasn't actually *winning* when I was the owner of the cash.

“Any word from Dominov?” Ulisse Mazzi asked, shuffling the deck.

He was a recently promoted capo, having been a made man for nearly twenty years under my father's reign. He had an insatiable thirst for blood, and he wasn't afraid of getting his hands dirty. He was purposefully single, not wanting any sort of weakness, which made him a near-perfect killer.

I shrugged and opened my mouth to respond, but my papà, who I hadn't invited, responded for me.

“The envelope was found almost immediately, but their retaliation is slow. Calculated. We need everyone to keep their goddamn guards up. With this...” He paused, and I knew he was glaring at me. “Wedding only a few weeks away, we can assume that he’s going to strike before...or on the lovely day.”

“*Cazzo*,” Genovesi grumbled. “Bad timing.”

I fixed him with a glare. “Dominov is the one with bad timing, not us.”

Genovesi nodded. “That’s what I meant, boss.”

Yeah fucking right.

I refused to look at Papà, well aware that he was probably grinning wickedly at the thought of all of the bullshit with Dominov being my fault.

By getting engaged, Papà believed I had essentially broadcast a weakness to our enemies. A way to hurt us through her.

And I was starting to believe he might be right.

That wasn’t my intention. I had traded money for a wife at my papà’s snide request, for him to no longer have something to hold over my head.

But he would always have something to hold over my head: our company.

I could feel him tightening the restraints since my engagement. His refusal to relinquish control was becoming apparent as the wedding date crept closer.

All of this shit with Dominov wasn’t helping. I had been reduced to a lackey overnight, dropping eyeballs that I had scooped out of skulls off at random locations. A trail, leading Dominov toward a trap that *I* had created, but Papà would take credit for.

If this all worked out, that was. If it was a complete failure, he would have no issue telling our men that it was my dumb idea that had been unsuccessful.

“What about your soon-to-be *wife* made you choose her, *figlio*?” Papà stepped forward and nudged Tocci out of his seat.

Now my papà was across from me, that wicked gleam in his eye warning me that nothing good would come from this conversation.

“Have you met her?” I chose my response carefully and looked away from my papà down toward the cards in front of me.

I had a shit hand, and I wasn’t in the mood to bluff my way through this round, especially not with Papà now playing.

“I have,” Papà began and blotted out his cigarette. He lifted his cards and peered at me over the top of them. “There is a lot to like.”

My men around us laughed, but I just stared at Papà, not giving him a reaction.

I opened my mouth to respond, but he continued.

“She is very beautiful, Matteo. Too beautiful for you, no?”

More laughter. I gripped my glass of whiskey so tightly it nearly shattered in my palm. Taking a sip, I emptied the contents and carefully placed the glass back down on the felt table.

“I might just have to steal her from you, *figlio*.”

I tried not to react. *Tried*. I failed miserably, and it only made Papà grin more. I shoved my chair away from the table and tossed my cards to the center.

“Fold. I’ll be back in a bit. Try not to lose all your money, *Papà*. You’re not good at poker.”

The only thing I could hear was the sound of my blood pumping, a loud *thump, thump, thump* as I climbed the stairs. I was going to take my anger out on Marcella in the only way I should ever take my anger out on her.

“Take a fucking break,” I grumbled to the two morons stationed outside my bedroom.

I pushed the doors open as they walked away, and my rage only increased when I didn't see Marcella where I had left her.

"Matteo?" she called from the bathroom, a quiver of fear in her voice.

Some weird, mushy feeling squeezed in my chest as I moved to her, drawn by some kind of force that neither of us understood yet.

Cazzo.

My bride was in the bath, perky nipples above the milky water, corners of her pouty lips tugged down. She exhaled slowly when she saw me, and I was glad to know I was giving her a sense of security. She was relieved.

"What are you doing up here?" That fear was still present in her tone, but I ignored it and slowly rolled up my sleeves.

"Come here." My words were delivered in a husky whisper.

"What?"

Her innocence was something to be marveled at. I was going to fuck that innocence out of her.

I reached for her, hands diving below the warm water until they were around her waist, and I guided her to stand. I couldn't be held responsible for the sounds that left my throat when I lifted her soaking wet body from the tub and wrapped her smooth legs around my hips.

Marcella's cheeks warmed, a simple action that made my cock ache. She knew what I needed, and she was more than willing to give me exactly that.

I tossed her onto the bed, grinning down at her as she giggled. I took a moment to admire her body, her face... fucking *everything*.

She was *mine*.

"You're all wet," Marcella whispered as I placed a knee on the bed.

I peered down at my shirt, looking back at her to see her sitting with a cheeky grin.

“I want to...do something, okay?”

Slowly, Marcella untucked my shirt from my black slacks. Wrapping the white fabric around her wrists, she yanked her hands out, popping the buttons until my shirt was open.

Another glorious giggle worked up from her throat. “Oops.”

Her hands moved to my belt, then zipper, and she pushed my slacks down. She guided my cock out of my boxers and admired how it looked in her palm.

A moan rattled from me as Marcella sat forward and wrapped her lips around my cock. A moan that she echoed, the sound vibrating along the tip. I bucked forward at the sensation and gripped the back of her head, trying not to choke her the first time my cock was in her mouth.

When her gaze met mine, I was a fucking goner.

“*Cazzo, amorina.*” My grip in her hair tightened. “You look good with my cock in your mouth.”

She giggled, and that felt fucking incredible, and started moving her lips up and down my length. Her tongue lapped across the tip, tasting the bead of precum that had formed the moment I fucking saw her.

I needed to know what was going through her mind to make her want to do this. I didn't want her to feel like she needed to do this to please me. I needed her to know that she was perfect exactly how she was, and that this was not necessary.

I wasn't going to control her. She was the one who would control me.

“You're too good at this,” I told her honestly, pulling her mouth away from my cock.

A string of spit still connected the tip of my cock and her damp pink lips.

She pouted. “You’re lying.”

“Do you want me to come down the back of your throat or in my pussy where it belongs? Because if you kept that up, your mouth would be full, and your pussy would be aching.”

“Get on your back,” she commanded, pointing at the bed.

Now I was the one to be confused. “What?”

“Get. On. Your. *Back.*” She enunciated each word, and I was more than willing to comply.

I stripped down fully, cock painfully hard, and I did as my girl said. I got on my damn back behind her on the bed.

Marcella spun toward me, grinning triumphantly, and I’d be damned if she didn’t wear that grin every fucking day for the rest of her life. I’d do whatever it took to make it so.

She moved so fast I didn’t have time to register her actions before she sank that sweet fucking pussy down onto my cock with a moan that mixed with a hiss.

As she wiggled to adjust once she had taken me fully, every movement she made was heightened. A tense arousal coiled in me, nearly driving me mad.

“I feel you *everywhere,*” she whimpered and placed her hands on my chest.

Digging her nails in, she used the leverage to rock back and forth. I gripped her hips, desperate to take back the control I had given her and fuck her senseless. I wanted to set the speed, to hold her steady and thrust up, but I was curious to see what she could do if I let her.

Marcella leaned forward; that wicked little gleam in her eye only increased as she bounced on my dick.

“*Cazzo...*” I groaned, driven to the brink of insanity by the roll of her hips.

“You like that,” she breathed.

It was a statement, not a question, but I gave her an answer regardless.

“I love that, *amorina*.”

I sat up and snatched her, needing to taste her sweet mouth, annoyed with myself that I hadn't yet kissed her. She didn't stop riding me as we kissed, her sounds against my lips becoming more desperate.

“Fuck me,” Marcella chanted, over and over until I reached for the back of her knees and flipped us.

I did as my girl asked. I'd always give in to her requests, especially when she wanted me to fuck her. I fucked her into the mattress, pulling my mouth away from hers to hear her squeal as she came.

As she relaxed into the plush blankets beneath her, coming down from her high, Marcella smiled up at me sweetly. A smile that would be my entire undoing. I'd give in to her every whim just to see that smile.

With a strained groan, I came hard. I flopped down onto my forearms, slipping my hands beneath Marcella's shoulder blades. She cradled my face in her warm hands and kissed me in a way that made me want to stay in this room for the rest of my goddamn life.

For the rest of our life together. Which was fucking forever.

I could get used to forever with her.

I carried Marcella to the bathroom and cleaned her up like I always would, ran her a new bath, and placed her back where I found her. I got to my knees in front of the tub and threaded my fingers in her wild hair at the nape of her neck.

Drawing her forward, I paused before our lips met. “I will *worship* you, *amorina*. In every way you will let me worship you.”

“Oh, my God.” Her words were a breathy chuckle.

Her eyes fluttered closed as I kissed her one final time before I left.

I dressed slowly, dreading to discover what had happened since I had been gone.

Passing my men in the hall, I watched them return to their station outside my bedroom door, then continued downstairs. Laughter flowed from the game room, and I entered the smoky space, thankful that the laughter continued and I was able to slip in almost unnoticed.

“Is that a different shirt?” Neri asked.

“Yep.”

CHAPTER

Twenty

MARCELLA

I WAS FALLING into a routine with Matteo that I adored.

Each morning, he'd wake me with a kiss against the tip of my nose and a soft chuckle when I'd groan. He'd pull me against him and kiss me until I opened my eyes, only taking it further if I initiated.

And I often did.

We'd dress together slowly and make our way to the kitchen, where we'd either cook breakfast together or eat the meal Silvia had prepared for us based on Matteo's request the night before.

I had a phone again, and I got regular updates from Gisella about Mamma. I had to pull the information out of her, offering to buy her things with Matteo's money, but I knew she would tell me if something happened.

And she did. On a Tuesday.

"*Amorina?*" Matteo's kiss along my throat stilled, his voice filled with worry as he watched me read the message Gisella had sent me at five in the morning.

G: Mamma is in the hospital. Let me know if you're visiting. Annabella is tired and cranky, and I need to take her home, but I don't want to leave Mamma alone.

"Mamma is in the hospital." My throat was tight, and I tried to blink the tears away.

"*Cazzo,*" he hissed and tossed the blankets off us. "Come."

The one-word command should have riled me to a stand, but I stayed on the bed, hugging my knees against my chest.

It must have been bad if the night nurse had felt Mamma needed to go to the hospital.

“*Amorina...*”

Matteo’s gentle whisper drew my attention away from the worries slamming around in my head. His warm hands pulled my arms from my legs, and he guided me up until I was sitting.

Matteo put one of his hoodies on me, something I hadn’t expected to be a part of his wardrobe. He was on his knees in front of me, his handsome face twisted with concern, a pair of black shorts in his grip that he slid up my legs.

He helped me stand, ignoring me when I told him I was fine, and walked me to the bathroom. I pulled my hair into a bun, brushed my teeth, and slipped against Matteo’s side as we left the bedroom.

I was glad Matteo wasn’t trying to tell me that Mamma was going to be okay. He wasn’t going to lie to me, because neither of us knew what was going on. Gisella hadn’t answered my texts or calls, which was only setting me further on edge.

So...I called Papà.

“*Cara,*” Papà sighed when he picked up. “How are you?”

I ignored his dumb question. “What room is Mamma in?”

Another sigh. “413.”

“Thanks for letting me know something happened. Always great to be kept in the loop.” I hung up and crossed my arms, flinching when Matteo slipped his hand between my knees to squeeze my leg.

“I’ll only say what you want to hear, *amorina.*”

I peered over at him, and he glanced away from the weaving traffic in front of us for a moment to smile softly at me. It was a genuine smile. A concerned smile.

“Tell me that she won’t die. Promise me that. Even if you break that promise...”

“I’ll never break a promise to you, *amorina.* She won’t die. Not yet. Not for a long time. We’ll need her around to look

after all of our kids. We're having four, remember?"

I snorted a laugh. "What happened to three?"

A grin spread wide across his face. "Three *girls*, and then our boy, remember?"

"You said two girls and then a boy."

He tilted his head and pretended to think. "Hmm...no, I'm pretty sure I said three girls, *amorina*. Are you feeling okay? Your memory isn't great."

Matteo pressed the back of his hand against my forehead, and I swatted it away with a laugh.

"I love that sound..." He slipped his hand between my knees again, kneading my thigh. "I'll never get tired of making you laugh."

"You're a *total* softie."

"For you, *amorina*."



The sight of Mamma in a hospital bed, listening to Gisella's lame teen gossip, made me freeze.

Matteo slammed into my back and his hand slipped around my waist, holding me against him.

"You okay?" His question was delivered to the top of my head with a kiss.

"*Tesoro*..." Mamma began, but her gaze rose higher, and I knew she was looking at the wall of man behind me. "*Oddio*."

"He's *hot*, Mamma," Gisella fake whispered.

Matteo chuckled, the sound rumbling through me, and he pushed us further into the room. "Hello, Gisella. Hello, Mrs. Moretti."

Mamma frowned. "I didn't want to meet you like...*this*."

She lifted her hand, untangling the cord for the pulse sensor on her pointer finger and the IV tubing.

Matteo gently nudged me to the side and stepped around me. "I think we're all aware that my timing is not perfect."

Mamma laughed softly and slowly sat up, squeezing her eyes tightly throughout the action. Matteo pushed forward and helped her. Hooking the leg of the chair behind him with his foot, he dragged it toward him without looking. He sat and kissed Mamma's hand, speaking softly to her, but I couldn't hear him.

Gisella stared at me, wide-eyed and completely dazed, while my heart thrummed in my chest at the subtle actions of the man I would marry.

My attraction to him was addicting, the hum in my veins something I could get used to, and all it took was a single glance over his shoulder toward me. The wink...that was a welcomed bonus.

My sister placed her hand on my elbow, dragging my attention from Matteo. "Papà took Annabella to get a snack. Let me tell you what happened."

I followed her into the hall, and my heart absolutely broke when Gisella started crying.

"She said her heart was hurting and she couldn't breathe right."

I pulled Gisella into a hug and let her cry. She was no longer oblivious to Mamma's health because I wasn't there to hide her from it, to tell her that Mamma was okay. I had sheltered my sisters from the reality that there were no answers about what was going on with Mamma.

For the past five months, I had lied to my sisters. When Mamma couldn't walk, I had told them her legs were tired, not that they didn't work. I told them she was too tired to spend time with them, that she wasn't sleeping well, instead of the horrible truth of her unknown condition causing her pain and weakness and distress.

I had been the one to hold Mamma's hand while she cried and listed off the things she had wanted to do with us before she died, but believed she wouldn't get the chance to now. I

had sat in on the meetings with our lawyer, listening as Mamma made me the executor to her will, and I was stone-faced as she discussed her funeral arrangements.

While I was preparing to bury our Mamma, Gisella was arguing with Papà about stupid teenager shit, and Annabella was playing with her dolls. I had protected them... from *this*.

From the pain of not knowing if Mamma would be alive when we woke in the morning.

“Is she going to be okay?” Gisella sobbed, pulling back to peer up at me with a sliver of hope in her reddened eyes.

Should I continue to lie? I wasn't there to protect her from seeing this, and I knew Papà hadn't been the one to find Mamma. It had probably been Gisella.

“I don't know,” I sighed. “I hope so. I really do. And that's all we can do. Smile and don't let her know you're scared, okay? It's okay to be scared. I'm scared.”

“I can't lose her.”

“I know. What has been done since she's been admitted?”

Gisella's brows furrowed, and it took her a moment to realize what I meant. “Oh...um, she's had bloodwork, some kind of heart rate thing with stickers...”

“EKG.”

“Yeah, that. And a chest x-ray. To look for blood clots in her lungs.”

“And?” I prompted.

Gisella shrugged. “EKG thingy was normal, chest x-ray normal, and bloodwork normal.”

“Of course it was normal,” I sighed. “How has she been doing, though?”

Another shrug from my sister. “Pretending she's fine, I guess.”

“Marcella!”

The sleepy call from my youngest sister had me reaching out to wipe the tears away from Gisella's face and mouth *smile* to her.

"Anna," I said with a grin and turned to see her reaching for me from Papà's arms. I took her gently from Papà and pressed a kiss to her warm cheek. "You smell like honey."

"Papà bought me a honey donut." She rested her head on my shoulder. "I'm tired."

"Gisella is going to bring you home now," I said and nodded at Gisella.

My middle sister rolled her eyes and waited until I placed Annabella on her feet.

"Come on, Anna," Gisella prompted and held her hand out.

"Bye," Annabella said softly, peering over her shoulder to wave at me.

The girls were barely out of sight before Papà spoke. "May I speak with you?"

I sighed. "About?"

Papà frowned. "Please, Marcella."

I glanced in the hospital room at Mamma, and she was grinning at Matteo, listening intently to whatever he was saying. She was awake, she was coherent, and she was safe—especially with Matteo.

I nodded and followed Papà down the hall. He turned a corner and stopped, facing me with a frown.

"I love you, Marcella. You know that, right?"

I crossed my arms. "You have an interesting way of showing it."

Papà nodded once. "I only want what's best for you. What's best for our family."

"So...selling me is what's best for our family?"

All expression dropped away from his face. “You think me the enemy...for what I’ve done.”

I shrugged. “What else am I supposed to think?”

“Marcella...all I ask is that you *listen* to me right now. If not for me...then for your mamma. And the girls. Please.”

I hated that he knew the way to my heart. It made me weak. It made me easy to bend. Staying silent, I leaned against the wall and waited for him to speak and get it over with. There was nothing he could say that would make up for his decision to sell me.

Being used as currency wasn’t entirely foreign in our way of life. It was, however, completely degrading. I was essentially equivalent to a few thousand dollars. My life was valued so low in Papà’s eyes.

“My girls are my entire life. You are my soul, the only thing on my mind, and my girls are my entire heart. When... when your mamma got sick...” He paused and cleared his throat. “I did everything I could to help. All the tests and specialized doctor visits and therapies and...*everything, cara.*”

Papà shook his head. “Nothing was working. So, we tried more. And it got...expensive. I’m not proud to say that I’ve never been good with money, *cara*. Anything my girls want, they get. So I poured...everything into your mamma’s medical bills. *Everything.*”

“And you started working more.”

“But it wasn’t enough. Nothing I was doing was enough. I bought a casket for my wife...” His voice cracked and he brought his fist to his mouth, clearing his throat again. “I planned her funeral. I had to come to terms with the love of my life...dying. I had to break my own heart, and I was going to break yours, and Gisella’s, and Annabella’s too when I would have to tell you that your mamma was gone. That I couldn’t save her, couldn’t...*fix* her. And that I never knew what she was dealing with. Never had a name for what had been causing her so much pain.”

“Papà...” I began, but he raised his hand, silently asking me to let him finish.

“I used every last cent I had on your mamma. And it wasn’t enough. Her medical bills started piling up. I was getting calls almost daily about overdue payments. I panicked. I did something I now regret because I hurt you, *cara*, while trying to fix everything.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“Tell me that you ran out of money. Tell me that you were going to *sell me* to pay off your goddamn debts.”

“*Cara...*” he reached for me, but I took a step back.

“It’s *very* easy, Papà, to be fucking honest with me. And when it really fucking mattered, you couldn’t even do that. I thought I was being *punished*. I thought you were profiting off selling me to your goddamn boss. But things were so much fucking worse.”

“Marcella.” Papà’s tone was a warning, a suggestion that I turn this conversation around, but that wasn’t my plan.

“I hope losing me in the process was worth it. Now that’s *your* debt, Papà.” I started to turn away, but I stopped. “How was I brought up...as payment?”

Papà shook his head. “I didn’t.”

“You didn’t what?”

“I didn’t bring you up. Matteo did.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-One

MATTEO

MY PHONE WOULDN'T STOP VIBRATING

in the inner pocket of my suit jacket as I spoke with Marcella's mamma.

I kept declining the call, wanting to give Mrs. Moretti my full attention, but barely a second later, it would begin vibrating again.

When Marcella re-entered the hospital room, I excused myself and slid past my fiancée, grazing my fingers across her lower back. She stiffened, and I wasn't sure if it was from my touch or because her mamma hissed and reached for her ribs.

Pushing out into the hall, I pulled my phone from my pocket and stared down at the word *Private* written across the top of the screen.

Who the fuck was calling me from a blocked number?

"Hello?" I said cautiously.

"*Privet, Cortese.*"

A thick Russian accent greeted me on the other end of the line.

I didn't respond. My blood flared and I peered around the hall carefully while backing against the wall to Mrs. Moretto's hospital room.

"You speak, yes?"

"Only when I know who I'm speaking with."

A dark laugh. "Oh, you know me. And I know you."

"Dominov."

"See? Now, that wasn't so hard. Why are you making everything else difficult?"

“I’ve asked what you wanted, and your response has been to murder my men. This isn’t a game I want to play.”

“But I want to play, Cortese. I like playing. She likes playing, too.”

The slightest movement at the end of the hall drew my attention, and I watched a woman wearing bright blue scrubs use a key card to open the door for a room filled with medical supplies.

“Then play with her,” I offered, and slipped closer to the supply room.

The woman grabbed sterile surgical supplies and loaded them onto a silver tray, kicking up the door stopper as she exited the room.

“That is not the answer I was...expecting.”

I stopped the door to the supply room from closing with my foot and entered. “It’s the answer you’re getting.”

“You will regret your unwillingness to play, Cortese.”

“I doubt that.”

“You will.”

The call ended, and I immediately dialed Papà’s number, pocketing a few syringes and a scalpel. These could come in handy when persuading Dominov’s men to talk.

“What?” Papà growled into the phone.

“Dominov just called me.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” he demanded in Italian.

Clearly, I had pissed the man off simply by calling him.

“He. *Called*. Me.”

“How the fuck did he get your number? What the fuck did he say?”

“I don’t know, and I *don’t* know. He talked about playing, so I guess he’s going to do something stupid soon.”

“You need to take this seriously, *figlio*. *Think*. What did Dominov say?”

I exhaled slowly through my nose. “He said he wanted to play. That *she* wanted to play. Who the fuck is *she*?”

“That was it? Nothing else?”

“Should there have been?”

Papà sighed. “Be careful, *figlio*. Your...decision-making skills have been questionable lately. Don’t get yourself killed before your wedding.”

He hung up, and I took a slow breath before creeping out into the empty hallway.

Marcella was standing outside the hospital room, entirely alone, and that only pissed me off further. Where the hell were the men stationed to look after the Morettis? There should have been at least two here watching Marcella’s mamma.

“What are you doing out here?” I asked, a bit harsher than I intended.

Marcella slowly turned her head toward me and gazed at me. Gazed *through* me.

“I’m ready to leave.”

“Okay,” I said and stepped toward her, but she countered the movement.

Marcella looked *pissed*, and I needed to know what had happened since we had been apart.

“Is everything...alright?”

She scoffed, but didn’t reply. She turned away and started walking down the hall. I followed, mentally retracing my steps since we got to the hospital, and came up absolutely empty.

Whatever was eating away at Marcella was *my* fault.

In the parking garage, I held the passenger door open for her, peering around the dim space for anyone out of place. When she was seated, I closed the door carefully and rounded the car, glaring into the darkness.

I paid for the parking, pulled onto the freeway, and shifted my gaze between the road in front of us and any cars behind mine.

Taking her here without security had been stupid, but leaving her mamma there without any was a complete disaster.

I called Genovesi and arranged for a shift of no less than four men keeping watch over Marcella's mamma, and even that didn't seem to affect her mood like I hoped it would.

Slipping through traffic and finally getting a break away, I downshifted and brushed my knuckles intentionally along Marcella's outer thigh, frowning when she tilted away.

"I'd like to talk about what's on your mind, *amorina*."

"How long have you known about me?"

"Hmm?" I glanced over at her and was met with a lethal glare.

She repeated her question slowly, but it still didn't make sense. Why was *this* what was on her mind?

I had been aware of Marcella Moretti since her papà had joined the organization. He vowed his allegiance to my papà before Marcella was born, and before he had even met her mamma.

I had known of Marcella her entire life. I knew of her existence at the very least, but...was she asking about my *interest* in her?

"It's not that hard of a question, Matteo." My name was like acid on her tongue.

"I've known about you your entire life, *amorina*. Your papà has worked for us for thirty years. He talked about you and your sisters often. His one true weakness was his girls."

"So you used that against him?"

I eased my foot off the gas and looked over at her. "What..."

"Don't play stupid, Matteo. Papà told me why he came to you needing help," Marcella hissed.

Moretti's one true weakness was his girls.

“Then you’re aware that your papà had been spending beyond his means and asked to meet with me specifically to discuss how he could work off that debt?”

“He was paying for mamma’s medical bills. Her funeral, even.”

I grimaced. Moretti hadn’t thought to mention that when he came running to me looking for help. That wouldn’t have changed my stance on everything. He had something I needed, and I could make his debt disappear and give him enough to live comfortably. Now he was getting *too* comfortable.

Marcella deserved to hear this from me, and I had been a coward not to tell her the details of the exchange to her face.

“What do you want to know?” I asked slowly.

“Did you...” She paused and shook her head, seeming to rethink her question. “How was I brought up? *Why* was I dragged into this?”

I stiffened. I had to choose my words carefully. This could either add insight into the exchange or ruin it entirely.

“To take over for my papà, his one request was that I marry.”

She sucked in a shallow gasp. I peered back over at her, frowning when I saw the hurt across her gorgeous face that quickly morphed to pure *hatred*.

Everything we had created crumbled in an instant.

“You didn’t want me. You needed a *wife*.”

“No, *amorina*...”

“Don’t *call* me that!” she hollered and levelled me with a glare filled with malice. “This entire time, I thought Papà willingly gave me up as some form of payment. I made him the enemy when all along, it was *you*.”

The gate to our—my—home swung open, and Marcella yanked off her seatbelt. She hopped out of the car and

slammed the door, but instead of running out into the tree-lined road behind me, she stomped up the stone driveway.

I drove slowly behind her, knowing there was nothing I could do to soften the blow, because she was right. I was the enemy. I'd used Moretti's weakness against him, and it had worked out in my favor.

And now the woman I had fallen for had fully slipped out of my grasp.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Two

MARCELLA

I WORE A PLASTIC SMILE, posing for photos with my bridesmaids, my sisters, and even Matteo's mamma at my bachelorette party.

I had wanted my sisters to be involved, and Annabella had wanted a tea party. So, we had a tea party in Matteo's backyard.

This time, Matteo had been avoiding me. I had tried to erase the image of him looking utterly crushed when I opened the door to my room instead of his. He had climbed the stairs and watched me enter the room, his shoulders had fallen, and he'd faced the ground as I pressed the door closed.

But I hadn't closed it entirely. I had left the door open a crack, hoping he'd push his way in and tell me that he had wanted me, that now that he had me, he wasn't going to let go so easily. But he didn't. The only person who entered my room had been Silvia wearing a frown.

I wanted Matteo to fight *for* me, not with me. I had hoped his answer was going to be different than the one Papà had provided, but his silence and absence only added validity to Papà's words.

"Just the Morettis and Mrs. Cortese," the photographer, who must have been subject to a rigorous background check and interrogation by Matteo's men, announced with a soft smile.

"Oh, no, it's okay..." Matteo's mamma said slowly and waved a hand in our direction. "I...don't belong there."

"Yes you do, Mamma Cortese," Annabella announced proudly, holding her no doubt sticky hand out to Mrs. Cortese.

Matteo's mamma stared down at Annabella for a moment before nodding once and accepting the eight-year-old's hand.

Gisella grabbed the glass of wine from my hand and drank the final sip, making a face. “*Gross.*”

“Wine is not for *little girls*,” I teased and pulled her against my side.

She rolled her eyes dramatically, but her posture relaxed, and I felt her pose. Annabella grabbed my hand and drew me closer to her and Mrs. Cortese, and I knew my youngest sister was wearing an ear-to-ear toothy grin.

“Are you sure?” Mrs. Cortese whispered at my side.

I turned to her with a smile. “I’m sure, Mamma Cortese.”

I was still going to marry Matteo. I didn’t have a choice. I could hate him for the rest of my life, but his mamma didn’t deserve any of that hatred. She had shown that she was pure and honest, and she had helped me plan my wedding, something I needed a mamma to do.

She had stepped in where my mamma couldn’t. And not once did I ever feel like she was trying to replace my own mamma.



“You look like a fucking *princess!*” Lucia gushed, sipping champagne from a crystal glass.

“I’m *so* jealous,” Maria said with a nod.

“Are you sure?” I picked up the satin and sparkle tulle skirt, turning to peer at myself in the mirror.

Alessia fluffed the base of the skirt until it looked perfect, because it *was* perfect.

The wedding gown was covered in a layer of glitter tulle over satin, but it was soft and flowy. The off-the-shoulder bodice had a deep V down the center that was accented with beaded lace, and it was all pulled together with pearl buttons along the spine.

“Do you like it?”

I turned to look at the phone in Gisella's hand. The one pointed at me. The one that was being used to video call Mamma. Gisella smiled softly at me and nodded once, her subtle approval of the dress that I was going to wear to marry Matteo, even though I wasn't sure how I felt about him.

Three weeks ago, I had thought I could grow to love him eventually.

But now? I wasn't even sure if I wanted to share the same home as him if we were going to continue to exist as strangers.

At least I didn't have to worry about being pregnant by said stranger...yet, anyway.

My hormones that were currently making me feel like I was bleeding out between my legs were also making me tear up at the thought of wearing a damn wedding dress.

"I do, Mamma."

"Then get it, *tesoro*. You look incredible, and I can't wait to watch you marry Matteo in a few weeks."

My smile slipped away, but I hid it from Mamma, turning to look at myself in the mirror again. She'd be watching me from Gisella's phone again, looking at my back the entire wedding.

I sniffled, and Alessia placed her hand on my arm.

"If you cry in the wedding dress, it means it's meant to be. You look gorgeous, Marcella. Matteo is one lucky *coglione*."

"Good," I replied and wiped at my tears. "Because its custom-made. If I hated it now, I would be screwed."

I had fallen in love with the custom luxury dress when I found it while searching for wedding dresses a year ago. When trying on dresses with the capo wives, every single one paled in comparison to the glittering design I had my heart set on.

While they tried on bridesmaid dresses, I had sneaked off to discuss ordering the custom dress with the owner of the bridal boutique who was no doubt on Matteo's payroll. They had jumped at the opportunity to please the future Mrs. Cortese, taken my measurements right away, and submitted

the order for the gorgeous gown I'd never thought I'd get the chance to wear.

I was a complete hopeless romantic, having planned a fake wedding of my own when I was ten, but those plans didn't work for my marriage to Matteo. No, those plans had been for the Marcella who got to marry the love of her life. The man that *chose* her and only her, and the man that had asked her papà for permission.

That wedding would have been full of love and light and happiness, and there wouldn't have been armed guards posing as guests scattered in the crowd of strangers who were just there to watch their boss marry anyone.

There would never be a place for me in Matteo's heart, only at his side. That was my role now. To keep up appearances, pretend to be happy and so in love until we were alone and would go our separate ways.

We'd sleep together a few times a month when I was ovulating to get me pregnant, and it would be for the sole purpose of procreation, not pleasure. We'd kiss in front of others and share scowls in secret.

But I knew, even if it felt irrational, that Matteo would take care of me. Not in the way I wanted, but in the way I needed. He would protect me because that was his vow.

Mine was probably to serve or something, but I didn't want to think about it.

"Just because I want to play devil's advocate..." Maria began and sat forward, tilting her champagne flute left and right while she chewed her bottom lip. "Try on the lace one you liked last time. If you're still in love with this one..." She pointed the champagne flute at the skirt of my dress. "Then you'll know for sure."

"She doesn't have to do that," Lucia argued.

Maria turned to glare at her. "I *hated* my dress on my wedding day. Loved it when I tried it on, but it was all... *wrong*."

“I don’t mind,” I offered with a shrug, and took Alessia’s outstretched hand.

She helped me off the pedestal and fluffed the dress in front of me so I could walk.

Mamma Cortese stood and helped me into the change room, pulling the door closed behind us. She unbuttoned the back of the dress, smiling at me in the mirror, and a tear slipped down her cheek. She quickly wiped it away and forced a smile.

I held onto the bodice of the dress and turned to her, frowning. “Mamma...”

“Oh.” She gasped and covered her mouth. “It’s clichéd, isn’t it? To say I’ve always wanted a daughter...” Mamma Cortese shook her head. “I wanted more children, but Vittore wanted an heir...and that’s what I gave him.” She huffed a laugh. “No. I gave him everything. And it was never enough.”

Reaching up to push hair behind my ear, Mamma Cortese smiled at me. “But I know my Matteo is different. As much as he’s like his papà, he’s different all the same. I’m proud of the man he’s become, and I know the way you both...met isn’t quite like it is in the movies, *cara*. But I’ve never seen Matteo look at anyone the way he looks at you.”

The way he *looked* at me. I wanted to correct her, just to maybe hear her tell me I was wrong, but I couldn’t handle the harsh truth that I had ruined what could have been by reacting the way I had.

I just...wanted him to want me. *Me*. Not what I could be to him. Fucking *me*.

Mamma Cortese chuckled. “I told him to come out, but he said he didn’t want to ruin your bachelorette party.”

“What do you mean?”

She tilted her head. “My Matteo stood in the den and watched you for the entire bachelorette party, *cara*.”

I didn’t know how to react to that. He was just keeping an eye on a garden full of women, right? Making sure we were all

safe. He wasn't looking at *me* the entire time.

The dress Maria wanted me to try on was tossed over the top of the door. Mamma Cortese gently pulled it out of the garment bag and off the hanger, holding onto it while I stepped carefully out of my perfect dress. Mamma Cortese ducked to help me into the lacy dress and picked up my custom dress as I adjusted the lace one.

It was nice...but it was just that. *Nice*. Off-the-shoulder lace over satin with beading on the bodice that flowed into the skirt. It also had the pearl buttons that Mamma Cortese fastened while I smoothed out the skirt.

"I like the other one better," she whispered and winked at me in the mirror.

"Me too."

"Pick the one you love, *cara*. The one that makes you feel like the goddess you are. It's your special day, not theirs."

It was supposed to be my special day, but it didn't quite feel like it was for a number of reasons. The capo wives had planned the wedding for me, with Mamma Cortese's input.

My life was officially tipping into *this sucks* territory.

Mamma Cortese opened the dressing room door and walked out backward, grinning at me. She was yanked to the side, and my smile slipped away as one of Matteo's men stepped into view.

"*Privet*, Marcella Moretti." His Italian accent was swapped for something that sounded...Russian?

I backed up against the mirror, which the man took as an invitation to enter the small dressing room. He was tall and wide, wearing a black suit which must have been the uniform required by Matteo, and he had black hair that was pulled back into a low bun at the nape of his neck.

"Aren't you going to say hello to me?"

"Hello," I said cautiously. "I don't believe we've been introduced properly."

The man snatched my left hand, glaring down at the engagement ring. He twisted the ring around until the diamond bit into my palm and only the band was visible.

“Viktor Dominov,” he stated formally, and kissed the back of my hand. “You look lovely, *malishka*. Is this the dress you plan to wear to our wedding?”

I wanted to laugh, but I knew that would be a bad idea.

“Do you like it?” I asked instead, swallowing a gasp as he stepped closer.

He unclenched my fist and used my own hand to choke me.

“It’s a shame to know I’m the only one who will see you in white...by the time Cortese gets the chance to see you, this dress...” He flicked at the skirt with his free hand. “Will be red.”

“With his blood?”

He chuckled. “No. With yours.”

Dominov boomed a command in Russian, and a man I didn’t recognize came into view with a bandage over his right eye. He tossed a phone that Dominov caught with ease. He unlocked it and turned it toward me.

It was my phone. My old phone.

“Call him. If you say one *fucking* thing wrong...” Dominov’s grip over my hand tightened, and the diamond pressed into the side of my throat, wetting my palm with my own blood. “You won’t make it out of this dress shop.”

“What would you like me to say?”

My willingness to be obedient made him grin. “That you are here and want him to see your pretty dress.”

“Let them go first.”

“Who?” He tilted his head. “The *suchki* out there?”

“Yes. Matteo doesn’t know where I am right now. If I don’t tell him to come here, he won’t. Let them go.”

Dominov glared down at me for what felt like an eternity. I stared back, hoping that I appeared stronger than I felt. He snarled and leaned back, barking a command in Russian.

Yanking me forward by the throat, Dominov walked me out of the dressing room and into the main area of the bridal boutique. Unfamiliar men held guns to the temples of the capo wives, Mamma Cortese...and Gisella.

My skin prickled uncomfortably, a flame of fear licking across my body, knowing I was the only thing keeping them alive right now. If I didn't play along, do exactly what this man said, I would be the reason for their deaths.

"Please," I whispered and brought my other hand up to press his further against my throat. "I'll be enough to get him here."

Dominov shifted us until he was behind me, holding me tight to him.

"Are you certain of that?" The question was a whisper against my ear.

I nodded again, and he laughed.

"You'd best be right, *malishka*. For your own sake." He turned his attention to the room before us. "Get them out of here."

Dominov wasn't letting them go. He was just removing them from the building. I watched as they were shoved into two SUVs and driven away.

Dominov removed my hand from his and tucked my phone in my palm. I heard the click before the cold barrel was pressed to the side of my head.

"Call him."

I stiffened so I could hide the tremors that vibrated through my body. Unlocking my phone, I paused and stared at my background image. A photo of my sisters and I with our tongues out made my chest tighten.

I couldn't let anything happen to them. I'd die to protect them. Their lives were worth more than mine.

When I pulled up my contacts, my thumb hovered over Matteo's name, and with one final breath, I called him. Before I could bring the phone to my ear, Dominov pressed the speaker button with his pinky finger.

"*Amorina.*" Matteo's warm voice nearly broke the strength I was clinging to. "I'm sorry. Please..."

"No, I'm sorry," I said quickly, feeling Dominov's grip tighten against my throat. "I just wanted you to want me."

"I *do* want you. Only you. Let me show you."

"Okay," I agreed.

"Do as I say," Dominov whispered, his lips against the shell of my ear.

"Come see me in my dress."

Matteo chuckled. "Isn't that bad luck?"

"For him, it will be," Dominov muttered.

"No," I squeaked.

My weak tone was rewarded with more pressure against my throat.

"Come," I managed to say against the strain of Dominov's hand and mine.

"I will. Where are you, *amorina*?"

"Tell him you will share your location."

I did as Dominov said.

"I'll share my location."

"See you soon, *amorina.*"

Pulling the gun from my head, Dominov ended the call and opened my messages. They were up to date with my new phone. He'd had access to *everything* for as long as he'd had my old phone. Dominov shared our location with Matteo and then tossed the phone across the room.

"He'll never find you, *malishka.* At least...not until we *want* him to find you."

Dominov shoved me forward with his knee at my back. My feet tangled in the skirt of the dress, and I toppled headfirst, but the strain of his hand at my throat kept me from falling. He yanked me upright, and I felt the rip of skin against my ring.

“*Poydem,*” he hissed in my ear.

I was pushed into the back of an SUV, but before I could sit, Dominov yanked me onto his lap with his other arm banded across my hips and rolled down the window.

“You will watch as we murder the man you love, *malishka.*”

The SUV pulled away from the dress shop and headed west. My heart thrummed in my chest as time crept onward at a glacial pace.

Dominov chuckled beneath me, and he pointed. “There.”

Matteo’s red sports car was coming toward us. I felt the SUV slow down, and the sounds of guns cocking made me scream.

“*NO!*”

Dominov shouted in Russian, and as Matteo’s car came up along the left side of the SUV, the driver and passengers opened fire on Matteo.

Bullets peppered the driver’s door and window until it shattered, and when the car stopped moving, the SUV took off.

Dominov pushed hair back from the side of my face and brought his mouth along my jaw. “Looks like you’re no longer engaged, *malishka.*”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Three

MATTEO

“THE DRIVER IS DEAD,” Genovesi announced.

“And Marcella?” I asked desperately, not giving a shit about the decoy Matteo. He was just some associate who looked enough like me that he could die in my place.

Genovesi’s expression was like stone. It was driving me fucking mad, and he wasn’t talking fast enough. I paced back and forth in front of him, like some caged fucking animal ready to unleash pure fucking chaos to get my Marcella back.

I had too much to say to her. I had too much to show her, too much to give and do and *be* for her.

“*Where the fuck is she!?*” The unrestrained howl that left me bounced off the walls back at me, an achy echo filled with emotions I didn’t believe I was capable of.

Didn’t believe I deserved.

Until her.

She was willing to love me when I had shown her that I wasn’t worthy of her love. She was willing to *try* with me. I had gained her trust and affection, and I had done so with only dishonesty.

I needed to give her my honesty. I wanted to. She deserved that. She deserved *more*.

“Alive,” Genovesi finally fucking said, and I was able to breathe again. “Black SUV, westbound. Mazzi and Moretti have been tailing separately.”

“Moretti?”

Genovesi stared at me. “Yes. He’s been given orders not to go inside once Dominov’s location has been discovered.”

He’d blow the entire fucking thing if he ran in there looking for his daughter. He would get himself killed.

Moretti would get Marcella killed.

“Where is Mamma? Gisella?”

Genovesi exhaled slowly. “We’ve tracked Gisella’s phone, but we’re waiting until Dominov stops. They might be in the same location.”

“Dominov is a fucking moron for messing with me. I can’t wait to play in his fucking blood.”

“Sir...” Genovesi began and stood, pocketing his phone. “I worry...that you don’t want to see what Dominov has done. We should clear the location first, secure it, get the women to a safe location, and then you can go in.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? My *wife!*” I yelled, closing my eyes to attempt to reel myself in. “Marcella is making it to our wedding. So is my mamma, Gisella, and the fucking wives. I’m *not* losing her. I’m not fucking losing her, Genovesi.”

“I understand...but...”

“Where the *fuck* is Noemi?!” Papà’s demand was delivered to anyone who was listening. He stormed into the room, fixing everyone with a pure fucking death glare. “*Figlio.*”

“We have Mamma’s location. We are waiting.”

“For *what?!?*”

“For Marcella.”

Papà scoffed and cursed under his breath in Italian. “She is the reason for *all of this!* Weakness! That’s all she is!”

“She’s *not fucking weakness!*” I got in his face, snarling back at him. “Dominov has *your* fucking weakness too, old man. And Moretti’s, Neri’s, Calbresi’s, *and* Palazzo’s!”

“Your mamma is *not* my weakness.”

“Bullshit,” I scoffed. “You just barged in here demanding to know where she is. Not wife number seven, or that fucking bitch you brought to my engagement party. You *fucked up* with Mamma. I’m *not* doing the same with Marcella.”

Papà sneered at me. “She won’t marry you.”

“*Vaffanculo.*”

“Her lips are so sweet...” He ran his finger along his lower lip, and he was distracted enough by his taunting that I landed a punch to his fucking nose with ease.

Blood spurted from his nostrils and he cursed at me in Italian, stumbling back.

“No wonder she can’t stand to be around you. Try to kiss her again and see what happens, old man.”

“You’re threatening me?” Papà’s words were muffled behind his palm.

“*Smettila!*” Genovesi hollered, stepping between us. “Dominov has stopped. They’re all in the one location. We need to move *now.*”



Dominov’s guards were scattered across the property, far enough apart that it made them all easy targets. We cleared the grounds, and it didn’t take long before we had the building surrounded.

Mazzi and Moretti had followed Dominov to the abandoned warehouse in Brooklyn that was far too close to ours, but not as hidden. Anyone could walk into this building, and maybe that had been the goal.

With a nod, Mazzi slipped through the door first, the obvious sacrifice. He didn’t have anyone to lose. I did, Papà did, and so did Moretti.

No matter what we said, he’d refused to stay behind. He was determined to get in and get Gisella, and he was on strict orders to leave as soon as he had his middle daughter.

At the sound of gunfire, we swarmed the main door, guns raised, and followed Mazzi’s trail of carnage to the main area of the first floor. The only thing that kept me pushing forward was the screaming.

Marcella's screaming.

Her screaming shifted to begging, and I blindly shoved my way through gunfire and Russians to get to her.

Marcella was on her knees, staring up at Dominov, who held a gun to her forehead and was yelling at her in Russian. The white wedding dress she wore was torn and covered in blood and dirt.

I didn't think. I raised my gun and aimed for his head. As I pulled the trigger, one of his men yelled his name. He turned, and the bullet blew through his earlobe instead of his fucking skull.

But that wasn't what surprised me more.

It was the fact that it wasn't Dominov. It was Lombardo. A man who had been an associate for a year. A man who had been in my home more times than I could count. A man who had been stationed outside Marcella's room.

A man I trusted. A man who'd lied to me.

A man who was now grinning as the realization set in.

"Stronzo."

"Privet, Cortese."

How the *fuck* had this happened? Each associate went through one hell of a background check and vowed their fucking allegiance in blood.

"Ma che cazzo!" Papà skidded to a stop next to me, glaring at Dominov. "Lombardo?"

"Sì..." Dominov began, his grin only widening. "Pretending to be Lombardo has been my favorite. It was easy to gain your trust...almost *too* easy." He shook his gun in our direction. "But you Italians are tough. It took a while to find a weakness."

Dominov's gun was once again at Marcella's temple, making my girl whimper. I stiffened to a painful degree, and Papà grabbed my forearm, stopping me from raising my gun.

“Then she walked in the door and you...” The gun was aimed at me. “Turned to fucking putty, Cortese.”

I could handle being shot. Even if I wasn't wearing a bulletproof vest, I'd take a thousand bullets to make sure Marcella took none.

I nodded once. “She's worth it.”

“Is she?” Swinging his arm around to aim his pistol back at Marcella, Dominov peered down at her, analyzing her bloodied face.

That better not be her blood...

“*Focus!*” I yelled, and Dominov's head snapped toward me. “You've used her to get us here. Now you have us. You said you wanted to play, so let's fucking play.”

A dark laugh left his twisted mouth. “I said *she* wants to play, Cortese.” He called for someone, and his grin widened. “Now that you're here, the game can begin. We've been waiting.”

“*Cazzo*,” Papà hissed at the same time as a laugh—no, a *cackle*—echoed in the warehouse.

On the second level balcony just above Dominov and Marcella stood a woman with blonde hair who looked far too familiar.

Papà's new fucking girlfriend.

“You stupid fucking idiot,” I snarled, glaring over at papà.

It was the first time I had ever seen him look *scared*.

I knew he wasn't scared for Marcella. I knew he wasn't scared for me. He was scared for himself because he was a selfish fuck. Who knew what he had told this bitch, the fucking secrets he'd spewed while he fucked her? Secrets she brought straight to Dominov.

“Melinda,” Papà sighed.

“Vito,” Melinda sang, her heels clicking against the steel stairs as she descended. “Fool me once, shame on me.” She

stopped next to Dominov and rested her forearm on his shoulder, popping her hip out. “What’s the rest, *milaya*?”

“Fool Vittore Cortese twice...shame on him.” Dominov turned his head, and Melinda leaned in to kiss him.

As they kissed, I carefully glanced at Marcella, but she wasn’t looking at me. She was looking behind me.

“Behind,” I barely whispered, and Papà stiffened next to me.

He released my forearm, and within the same breath, I turned and shot the two Russians who had been advancing on us straight in the head.

The sound of gunshots stopped, and Melinda chuckled.

“Time to play.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Four

MARCELLA

DOMINOV AND MELINDA turned to me with wicked grins. Dominov stepped back, and Melinda launched forward to grab a clump of my hair at my crown. She pulled me to my feet, laughing when I cried out.

“I’m going to have fun tearing you apart.”

Dominov yelled at her in Russian, and she frowned, turning to glare at him and argue back.

I didn’t care what they were arguing about. I needed her to let me go. I needed to get to Matteo.

I kept shifting my bound wrists back and forth behind my back, needing my hands free to try to get Melinda off me.

Gunshots rang out in the metallic space—some aimed at Dominov, some aimed at Matteo, but most aimed at his papà. As cruel as the man had been to me, I didn’t want him to die.

Matteo spun and flicked a glance at me, and before I had a chance to react, he fired his gun in my direction. I squeezed my eyes shut, but I wasn’t the one to scream.

Melinda was.

She released me, and I tumbled to the dirty concrete floor, landing on my side. My shoulder screamed from the impact, but I shoved myself up by my elbow until I was sitting.

Another scream, and Melinda launched herself at me, forearm gushing blood, eyes filled with hatred.

“Viktor says I can’t have you,” she hissed, gripping at my dress, ripping it as she climbed her way up, bloody hands clawing until she wrapped them around my throat. “I’ll have you. I always get what I want.”

Melinda pushed me onto my back, pinning my hands beneath me as she sat on my chest, using all her leverage to

choke me, hands slipping around in her own blood. I tried to buck her off, tried to flip onto my side, but my feeble attempts only made her laugh.

“Weak! This is too easy!”

Melinda’s head bobbed to the side, right ear to her shoulder. She slowly lifted it back up and looked to the left. Blood poured from the gunshot wound just above her ear, dripping onto my face.

Two more shots connected with her forehead, and she slumped back, hopefully dead.

“*NO!*” Dominov yelled, pulling Melinda’s body off me.

He kept shooting, but he wasn’t looking where he was shooting. He was looking at Melinda.

I scurried back, trying to get to my feet in all the chaos, but I kept stumbling like a complete fool, fear clouding my every movement.

Dominov shoved Melinda’s body to the side and reached out to snatch my ankle, dragging me back toward him. My dress gathered around my hips, an action that only made Dominov laugh.

“You want me to take you in front of everyone, huh? Don’t be so fucking desperate, *malishka*.”

He slipped his fingers below the bust of my dress, gripping the fabric to drag me to sit. Dominov held a knife in front of my face, and without even bothering to look, he hacked at the ropes that bound me and my hands.

I swung my fist around to hit him, but he snatched my wrist and drew me in front of him as a human fucking shield.

“Stand up. Stand the *fuck up*.”

I stood and slowly brought my gaze up to where Matteo stood, gun aimed directly at me. If he wanted to shoot Dominov, the bullet would have to go straight through me.

Dominov brought his blade to my throat, pressing until he drew blood. “Go to him.”

“What?”

“Fucking *go to him, malishka.*”

Gunfire stilled as Dominov urged me toward Matteo. His papà came into view, pistol trained on me, and I was stopped right before I could reach out and touch Matteo.

“Matteo,” I cried, tears mixing with the blood on my cheeks.

“*Amorina,*” he sighed, entirely defeated.

We were going to lose. Not only the war around us...but our lives, too.

“I’m not going to kill you, Cortese. *She* is.”

I felt the cold handle of Dominov’s gun as he pressed it into my palm and raised my hand, his covering mine. He forced my finger on the trigger and angled the gun higher.

Matteo took a step forward and let the barrel of the gun rest against his forehead. A garbled sob ripped from my throat; Dominov’s grip kept me from shaking.

“I have a clear shot!” someone yelled across the room.

“*Do not shoot!*” Matteo commanded, refusing to break his gaze from mine. “It is too dangerous. Marcella could get shot. She...she can’t get hurt...” His words trailed off, and his jaw set.

“Please...” I begged.

I had spent hours begging for my life, but now I was begging for Matteo’s.

Dominov laughed behind me. “No, *malishka.* He will die, and so will his papà. I’ll save you for last.”

“*Amorina...*”

“While you’re still alive...was it you, Cortese, that killed my brother, or will your papà cover for you?”

“I’d love to take credit for taking your brother’s life, but I wasn’t the one who killed him.”

Dominov exhaled slowly. “I would kill your papà first, but really...I should thank him. He brought all of us together.”

Matteo watched Dominov, trying to determine his next move, but as the Russian behind me chuckled, a grim expression crossed my fiancé’s face.

“This has all been so fun, I don’t want it to end. But do you want to know my favorite part?” Dominov leaned closer, not giving Matteo the chance to respond. “Watching that little girl... *Annabella*...find an eyeball in her own backyard.”

I sucked in a jagged gasp that was overshadowed by Dominov’s laughter.

“You didn’t tell her? I’m not surprised. You’re all so *weak*.” Dominov forced my shaky grip to press the gun harder against Matteo’s temple.

Annabella had found...an eyeball? In our backyard? When? Why had no one told me? Not even Papà? Was she alright?

Matteo’s face twisted with guilt. “I’m sorry...”

“Too little, too late, Cortese.”

I stared at Matteo through my tears, gazing at the man who was now going to die because of me. The man who wanted me. I was stupid to believe otherwise, because he had spent every second of our time together showing me just that.

Matteo Cortese wanted me. He *had* wanted me...

“I love you, *amorina*.”

“Oh, *God*,” I sobbed and hung my head, not wanting to look at him as Dominov pulled the trigger.

I couldn’t kill the man who loved me.

I couldn’t kill the man I loved.

Matteo’s shoes slipped out of view, and in a split second, a gun was fired, but not the one in my hand. I was dragged down by Dominov, my knees smashing against the concrete before he yanked me back against his chest.

A jagged exhale left Dominov, and his grip on me laxed, knife flicked across the room as his hand flopped to the side.

“*Amorina!*” Matteo called.

I scurried off Dominov, crawling toward Matteo. He crouched as I neared, reaching for me, but I pushed at his pant leg and pulled the knife Matteo always had on him from the leather holster at his ankle.

Turning back to Dominov, my chest heaving, I darted forward and stabbed Matteo’s blade into Dominov’s heart. I pulled it out and stabbed again, over and over, sinking the reddened knife into his chest and throat and face.

Warm hands against my arms pulled me back, drawing me fully away from Dominov. Matteo appeared in front of me and scooped me up, tucking my face into the crook of his neck while I hyperventilated. He was walking, but I couldn’t focus on where he was going because I was focusing on his words.

“Listen to me, Marcella. Just listen to what I’m saying. Come back to me...please... I’ve got you, *amorina*. I’ve always got you. I promise. *Cazzo*, I’m so sorry...this should have never happened. You will never be in danger again.”

Matteo sat and placed me on his lap, pushing at the hair in my face that was crusted with blood. He slipped his palms along my jaw, cradling my face in his warm hands, inspecting me all over for injuries.

“Say...it...again...” I gasped each word.

Matteo breathed in deep through his nose and exhaled from his mouth. He did this again, and the third time around, I mirrored his breathing.

He slowly smiled once my breathing evened out. “I love you, Marcella. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

I nodded, and his grin spread wider. Matteo pulled me closer, but I pressed at his chest.

“Wait,” I blurted, and this made him frown. “I love you, Matteo. I think I loved you first.”

He shook his head. “Impossible, *amorina*. Now, let me kiss you. I’ve got far too long without your lips on mine, and I refuse to wait any longer.”

I breathed a laugh and got to see that handsome grin on Matteo’s face before his lips were on mine. I knew I tasted of blood, but Matteo kissed me like we had spent no time apart these past few weeks.

He kissed me until my wounds no longer hurt.

He kissed me like he loved me...because he did.

Matteo Cortese loved me. *Me*.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Five

MATTEO

GETTING the woman I loved away from that fucking warehouse had been my only fucking priority after I killed Dominov.

When Marcella had ducked her head, distraught with the guilt of believing she would have to kill me, I'd seen my opportunity. Dominov had been glaring down at her, his head visible from the nose up. I'd stepped back so I wouldn't blow Marcella's eardrums with the firing of my gun, aimed for the center of Dominov's forehead, and taken my shot.

It had been a risk. If Marcella had looked back at me, raised her head a few inches, I would have killed her. My heart had thundered in my chest, time slowed as the bullet zipped through the air and split through the skin above Dominov's brow.

He went down easier than Melinda had. I shot her four fucking times before she finally hit the ground and stayed. She had taken a fucking headshot and still managed to turn and look at me before I delivered two more bullets to her brain.

Dominov had tumbled down, and when his grip had loosened on Marcella, she'd darted toward me, but not for the reason I'd thought.

No. My smart girl had remembered that I always kept a blade on me, and she'd found my knife and used it to make sure that Dominov wouldn't get back up.

Marcella had stabbed him seventeen times before I'd pulled her away from his obviously dead body. I'd give her the credit for taking his life. She deserved it.

She'd then sobbed so hard she stopped breathing, only able to suck in jagged gasps that made her entire body quiver. I'd scooped her up, yelled over my shoulder what I was doing, and commanded the made men in the building to take care

of the mess and make sure no fucking Russian survived the chaos.

Papà had said something to me, but I had ignored him. I didn't give a fuck what he had to say. This was all his fucking fault. He had been the one who hired Lombardo. He had dated Melinda. He had let them both into our tangled web of secrets and given them access to everything.

As I soothed Marcella, sitting in the tangled dead grass, watching ferries drift in the harbor, a sound to my right drew my attention. Moretti was hugging a frightened and tired Gisella, comforting her the best he could, but he was looking straight at me. At his eldest daughter that I was consoling, that I would be consoling for the rest of our lives.

Moretti had heard how I felt about Marcella. So had my papà, and every single person in that warehouse. My confession had echoed off the steel around us, reverberating back to me in a way that hurt more than I thought it would have when I finally got the chance to tell Marcella how I felt. How I had felt for a while, an unfamiliar emotion taking residency in my heart that I had decided to ignore instead of investigating.

Moretti nodded once, a simple show of approval that I hadn't needed but realized I wanted. I wanted him to approve of our relationship, to no longer look at it like the transaction it had started as, but to see it as what it truly was now.

It was more. More than I thought it would ever be. More than I deserved, but exactly what I needed.

Marcella. She was all I needed, and everything I wanted.



“I hope this isn't the dress you planned to wear to our wedding.”

Marcella laughed softly and peered down at her bloodied dress. “You seem to like me in red...”

I unbuttoned the back and carefully guided the dress off her tired body, helping her step out of the ruined heap of satin and lace that landed on the bathroom floor.

Removing her panties and the now-ruined light pink bra, I scooped up my bride and placed her in the bath, undressing once she was settled.

I sank into the hot milky water behind her and carefully removed dried blood and dirt from her body. I could see that the majority of the blood she had worn didn't belong to her, but her throat was punctured multiple times, each wound an odd curved shape.

"He turned my ring around," Marcella began, lifting her left hand out of the water. Her engagement ring had blood crusted between the diamond and the band. "And he used my own hand to choke me...so my ring cut me a few times."

"*Amorina...*" I sighed and covered the back of her hand with mine.

I was glad I was replacing that ring with the custom engagement ring that was made for her. Now that the temporary ring had been used as a weapon against her, I wanted it off her finger. I wasn't going to make her stare down at it and be reminded of what had happened.

"Why didn't you tell me about Annabella?"

I exhaled slowly. I wasn't going to lie to her, but I was going to give her the selfish truth first.

"I knew that if I told you, you would want to leave me. You would want to be with your family, and I didn't want that. I know it was selfish of me, but that wasn't my only reason to not want you there. I...believed my home was the safest when, in reality, Dominov was just outside your door the entire time. I almost told your papà to move your entire family into my home, but I'm glad I didn't. That might have put them in more danger."

Marcella brought our hands up to her mouth and pressed a kiss to mine. "I would have run out of the home before you even had a chance to explain anything to me. I would have put

my family in more danger by reacting the way I'm prone to reacting, if my past reactions are any indication of my emotions."

She laughed softly and rested her head back against my chest.

"I will tell you every vivid, gory detail of my work, *amorina*. I won't leave you in the dark anymore. I'm sorry, and I promise to keep not only you, but your entire family out of danger. That is all I've been trying to do this entire time."

"I know," she whispered. "How did you know I was in danger today?"

I turned her so I could look down at her gorgeous face. The only shade of red remaining was her peachy, pouty mouth.

"Other than seeing a call coming in from your old phone number?" I chuckled, and she rolled her eyes. "I've spent the past few months I've had with you learning everything about you, *amorina*. What you like, what you dislike, your body language, tone...*everything*. I could hear the fear in your voice. And when you blurted that you were sorry, I knew that you were being forced to speak. That someone was threatening you in some way. I just didn't think it would have been Dominov...Lombardo...whoever the fuck he is."

"Was," Marcella corrected and brought her finger up to tap against the tip of my nose. "You killed him."

"*You* killed him."

She grinned. "*Cavolo*, I'm a badass."



It was perfect.

I tilted the 3-carat oval diamond ring back and forth, inspecting it, wondering if it was good enough for Marcella. The slim gold band was smooth beneath my touch, and at the right angle, you could see the hidden halo of rubies beneath the glistening diamond.

Marcella was right. I did like her in red, but that wasn't my reasoning for choosing rubies. They were her birthstone, my July queen, which only made the decision to add the red gemstone to her ring even more perfect.

I could hear her asking Genovesi what he was doing, why he was leading her into our backyard when she had to finalize our wedding. My heart thundered in my chest, and I had never felt this nervous in my entire life.

The strategically placed candles provided a warm glow that would guide Marcella beyond the pool and into the manicured garden I had never paid much attention to until her. There were a lot of aspects of my life that I hadn't given much thought to until Marcella.

"Matteo?" she called and appeared below the wooden archway adorned with greenery and flowers by the landscape artists I had hired to make this area perfect.

Perfect for this.

Perfect for *her*.

Marcella gasped and covered her mouth, stepping carefully around the cheesy rose petals that were scattered along the stone walkway, creating a trail that led right to me.

I was on one knee, ready to give Marcella the proposal she deserved, or come as close to it as I could.

"Matteo..."

"Marcella Luisa Moretti," I began, beaming up at her as she stopped in front of me. "You've shown me that love isn't weakness. It's strength, it's light in the darkness, and it's something you've made me realize that I deserve. I know we'll exchange real vows next week, but this is my vow to you right now. I vow to always protect you, comfort you, and love you with every ounce of my being. I vow to give you everything you desire and more, and if you will accept my proposal..." I opened the ruby ring box. "I am yours to command, because you are mine to worship."

"*Certo che sì!*" she yelled.

Hell yes.

I stood and plucked the ring from the velvet box, tucking the empty box into my pocket. Marcella raised her shaky left hand, and I guided the temporary ring off her finger, slipping her custom, permanent ring where it belonged.

Marcella grabbed my face and kissed me, her tears wetting our lips, but they were the only tears I ever wanted to have my girl cry. My heart swelled as I held her tightly, knowing I would never let her go.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Six

MARCELLA

GISELLA TORE off a piece of my veil and held it up with a smile. “For good luck.”

“I love you, Gisella.”

My sister grinned. “I love you too.” She pressed her ring finger below her eye and looked up. “I seriously don’t want to cry and fuck up my makeup.”

I breathed a laugh. “You’re totally going to cry.”

Gisella inhaled quickly. “*Zitto!* So will you!”

There was a gentle knock at the dressing room door. Mamma Cortese crept in carrying a small white gift bag, stopping with a gasp once she looked at me in my wedding dress.

“*Cara...*” she whispered, tears welling in her eyes. “You look stunning. An absolute goddess.”

She crossed the room and gently pulled me into a hug.

I squeezed her tightly. “Thank you.”

When she leaned back, her warm brown eyes glistened with unshed tears that she blinked back. Mamma Cortese held up the white gift bag, peering down at it.

“Present from my Matteo.”

Two blue boxes sat at the bottom of the bag, along with an envelope that I pulled out.

“Read that last,” Mamma Cortese said and pulled the smaller blue box from the bag. “This...is your something borrowed, *cara*. They are the earrings I wore when I married Vittore. I guess they can be your something old too.” She chuckled and opened the box.

Inside was a glistening pair of delicate diamond stud earrings. They were *perfect*.

“They’ve been cleaned, and they’re not gold. I know that’s bad luck.” Mamma Cortese pulled the back off one earring and held it up. “Would you like to wear them?”

“Of course,” I gushed, pushing my hair back to let her put the earrings on me.

She once again looked as if she was going to cry and pulled the longer box from the bag. “This one next.”

A gorgeous diamond pendant necklace that matched perfectly with the earrings laid against soft blue velvet inside the second box. I gasped at the sight of it, and Mamma Cortese grinned, carefully lifting the necklace, letting it sparkle in the warm lighting.

Gisella lifted my hair and veil to make it easier for Mamma Cortese to clasp the necklace, the pendant falling perfectly just below my collarbone.

“Thank you,” I whispered, feeling the sting of tears myself.

Mamma Cortese shook her head. “The earrings are from me, but the necklace is from Matteo.”

She reached into the bag and passed me the soft ivory envelope with my nickname written across the front in scratchy handwriting.

Amorina

Pulling open the envelope, I smiled down at the letter from Matteo, hoping his words wouldn’t make me cry. Just like Gisella, I also didn’t want to ruin my makeup.

Amorina,

I can’t wait to marry you.

In just a few hours, you will be Mrs. Marcella Cortese, and I will be the happiest motherfucker on this goddamn planet.

All because of you.

When I first saw you enter my home with your papà, my heart stopped beating. But when you looked up at me, the

power of your curious gaze slammed against my chest, restarting my heart so it only beat for you.

I knew that even if you didn't agree with how our relationship started, I would do everything I could to show you just how I was willing to try for you. I'm not perfect, but you make me feel like I am.

Every wrong I've ever made feels right because they brought me you.

I will worship you until my last breath. You have all of me, amorina. I am yours.

I hope Mamma has given you your something old and borrowed, and your something new. Now all that's left is your something blue.

You will find it with your papà, where he will be waiting to walk you down the aisle and give you to me. I hope this is what you need to make your wedding day perfect.

For me...all I need is you.

I love you, and I can't wait to see you in your dress.

Don't laugh if I cry.

Yours,

Matteo

I tilted my head back, trying to will myself not to cry when I finished his letter.

“*Che cazzo,*” I muttered, chuckling as a tear rolled down my cheek. “Damn him.”

Gisella reached for the letter, scanning through it. “I hope he cries. That will be so funny.”

“I wanna see!” Annabella yelled, reaching for Gisella's arm.

Gisella crouched and read the note to our youngest sister, skipping over the curse words.

Mamma Cortese grabbed both of my hands and squeezed them tightly, her eyes sparkling with new tears.

“I’m so happy to have you joining our family, *cara*. I can’t wait to call you my *figlia*.” She leaned forward and pressed a kiss to each of my cheeks.

“Thank you, Mamma Cortese.”

I watched her leave the room, then turned to look at myself in the mirror. The dress was perfect, the jewelry perfect, my makeup perfect, and it felt like there was no possible way this wedding could be any less than perfect.

“Are you ready?” Alessia asked, appearing behind me.

I smiled at her in the mirror. “Yes.”

The capo wives left the room first. Annabella reached for my left hand, and Gisella my right. The three of us pushed into the hallway and started descending the stairs to the Capitale’s grand hall.

“Try calling Mamma again,” I said to Gisella, peeking over at her.

Mamma hadn’t answered when Gisella had tried to video call her to show off my wedding dress and veil together.

Gisella pulled her phone from the pocket of her dress and tried, but the call wouldn’t go through.

“It won’t even ring. *Ugh*, does the reception suck in here? What the hell is going on?” She tried again as we reached a landing, and I drew us to a stop.

“I need her to be a part of this. I can’t do this without her.”

“I know, I know,” Gisella sighed, and tried calling Mamma for the fourth time. “I’m trying.”

“Hi, Papà!” Annabella called, waving at where papà stood near the tall double doors to the grand hall.

I glanced up at him from Gisella’s phone, and he was grinning at me with his hand over his heart.

This was papà’s first look. His first time seeing me in a wedding dress. Well...a wedding dress that wasn’t soaked with blood...

This was his first daughter's wedding.

The capo wives were picking at their husbands' suits, making sure everything was perfect. Lucia was crouched, eye-level with her son, Gianni, trying to get him to hold the silly little pillow that the wedding bands were supposed to rest on, but he kept tilting it down.

"Vin, you hold the rings," Maria sighed, passing her husband the wedding bands.

"Do I get the pillow too?"

Lucia straightened and whipped the pillow at Vinnie's chest, fixing him with a glare before she turned to us with a smile. "Annabella, are you okay with sharing the flower girl duties with Gianni?"

Annabella nodded.

"Okay! But you can't throw all the flower petals all at once, Gianni. Okay?"

Gianni just stared at her, and I squeezed Annabella's hand.

"Go show him how to do it right, okay? Gisella and I are just trying to call Mamma."

"Okay!" Annabella bounced down the final steps as Papà neared, still grinning up at me.

"Tu sei la più bella nel mio mondo."

You're the most beautiful in my world.

"Grazie, papà."

"I have a gift for you, *cara*." Papà reached his hand out, and I glanced at Gisella.

She was still trying to call Mamma, and it seemed like I was going to have to do this without her. An ache settled in my chest that I tried to push aside as I took Papà's hand and descended the rest of stairs to him.

"What is the gift?"

Papà smiled and leaned forward to kiss both of my cheeks twice. "First...a gift from me. I'm sorry, *mi cara*. I should

have told you about the medical bills. I should have told you much more than just that. I should have told you about Matteo, and the deal that we made at your expense. You deserved to know that you were being married off, and you should have known that by offering you to Matteo, he was paying your mamma's medical expenses and more. He still pays for everything for us, *cara*."

"He...he does?"

Papà nodded. "Yes, *cara*. Will you accept my apology?"

"Of course, Papà." I kissed both of his cheeks, lingering a little longer simply because I needed it.

"Your gift," Papà said and stepped aside.

Mamma stood behind him, beaming at me with tears in her eyes.

She was my something blue, wearing a gorgeous sapphire dress.

"Mamma?"

"*Tesoro*," Mamma replied and opened her arms to me.

I rushed forward, carefully hugging my mamma, not wanting to break her when she was already so fragile. Gisella and Annabella yelled for Mamma and wrapped themselves around us.

Mamma chuckled softly.

"*Le mie ragazze*," she said and kissed the top of our heads from oldest to youngest.

"How?" I asked and pulled back to peer at her.

Mamma gently dabbed at my tears and smiled softly. "Matteo."

She didn't need to explain further. Matteo had made sure that my mamma would be at my wedding, and I didn't care how he'd done it. He'd done it.

I didn't think it was possible to fall even more in love with my fiancé, but that simple act had me falling all over again.

The capo wives lined up behind Annabella and Gianni. Gisella and Matteo's cousin, Stefano, were behind them, and I stood between Mamma and Papà, ready to walk down the aisle toward the man I loved more than I thought possible to love one soul.

I laughed softly as Annabella kept Gianni on track while tossing flowers perfectly. The capos and their wives went next, followed by Gisella and Stefano.

The music changed, and with one final kiss from my parents, papà pulled my veil over my face.

"Pronta?" Papà asked.

"Certo che sì."

Papà grinned, Mamma passed me my bouquet, and we stepped through the doors, making our way toward the altar. All eyes were on me, but I only saw Matteo. He wore a burgundy suit with a black shirt and bowtie beneath, looking deliciously lethal.

Matteo looked incredible in red.

As we got closer, a smile cracked wide across my face while Matteo's twisted with emotion. He was crying softly.

My man was a total softie, but only for me.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Seven

MATTEO

I STARED at Mrs. Matteo Cortese, unable to take my eyes off her. She was laughing, swinging Annabella around the dance floor while the tired eight-year-old was just hanging onto her oldest sister like her life depended on it.

I spun my black diamond wedding band around on my ring finger, admiring it once more. My girl had picked out the ring made from tantalum, a rare metal, with a row of black diamonds set in the center.

As the song came to an end, Marcella passed Annabella to her papà, kissed him on the cheek, then her mamma, and finally her middle sister. She waved goodbye to her family and turned to me with a heart-stopping grin.

I could tell that she liked my something blue gift.

I had vowed to her mamma the day we saw her in the hospital that I wasn't stopping until I found answers for her. For Marcella.

I went with Mrs. Moretti to every appointment to put a bit of *pressure* on the medical professionals she saw. And we now knew what had been causing her so much weakness and pain. Mrs. Moretti had polymyositis, which could be treated with medication and physical therapy.

So, I paid for the medication and physical therapy.

I was certain Mrs. Moretti was in a world of pain, but she had pushed through for her daughter's wedding.

"Matteo..." My papà's tone was weak, and when I peered over at where he stood, he looked afraid. "May I..."

"Yes," I sighed.

Papà pulled out the chair to my left and took a seat, seeming to mull over his words before he spoke again. "Thank

you for allowing me to attend your wedding. It was beautiful. Marcella did a great job.”

“She did,” I agreed. “There was nothing you could do that would ever stop me from marrying her. Your opinion of her means nothing to me.”

“I didn’t mean what I said. For years, *figlio*, I believed you would not marry. So...I held the company over your head by creating a stipulation that I believed you would never fulfill. But you did. And you are happy. Which makes me happy.”

I looked away from him and found my wife dancing with the capo wives, grinning and singing along. “You’ve never been a good liar, Papà.”

“I’m not lying, *figlio*. I swear.” Papà sighed. “I have ruined almost everything for myself, and I nearly ruined it all for you, too. I’m sorry, Matteo. I never meant for her to get hurt.”

“But she did,” I finally turned my glare back to him. “We moved the wedding back so her throat could heal from where Dominov choked her with her own hand and her engagement ring sliced her skin repeatedly. Her scars will remind her of it all, and you are the one to blame, but you will never admit it.”

“I am to blame, Matteo. Fully. I hired Dominov, I was fooled by his lies, and...” Papà hung his head. “I believed Melinda’s attraction to me was genuine, when it was all a perfectly crafted trap that I fell into.”

When he met my gaze again, I barely recognized the man across from me. His eyes were hollow with torment.

“I’m done, *figlio*. The company is yours. When you are back from your honeymoon, I will no longer be the one with all the power. I don’t deserve it anymore.”

Papà was stepping down.

“Tell Marcella she looks beautiful. I don’t believe she would want to hear it from me.”

He stood, and the conversation was over. Papà had said what he needed to say.

Marcella flopped onto my lap and brought her mouth down to mine. “Hello, Mr. Cortese.”

I slid my hands across the lacy bodice of her wedding dress. “Hello, Mrs. Cortese.”

“What did your papà have to say?”

“He’s stepping down. The company is mine. When we get back from Italy...I will be the new Don, *amorina*.”

She smiled sweetly. “How do you feel about that?”

That was one of the many things I loved about Marcella. She cared about me, not the power that would come with the promotion from underboss to Don. She wanted to know if this would make me happy, or if it was something I would hate.

“I’ve waited a long time to hear him say those words...and I only have you to thank.”

“Me?” Marcella squeaked.

I grinned. “*You, amorina*. I didn’t just want you...I needed you. Only you.”

“We’re married,” she whispered, wearing the sweetest grin.

“We are.”

“Since, you know, I didn’t leave you at the altar. Thought of it...”

“Oh, yeah?” My grip on her tightened, and she giggled. “You’re mine, *amorina*. Officially. *Legally*...”

I tapped on the gold and diamond wedding band on her ring finger.

She raised her hand and admired the way the low lighting still made her rings sparkle. “Papà picked a good one, huh?”

I chuckled. “What?”

Marcella placed her arms around my neck and pulled herself closer. “Papà went to you for help. I’m glad he didn’t go to your papà instead...”

“Alright, we’re getting out of here. Say goodbye to everyone.”

I stood and banded an arm around her waist, lifting her up as she giggled. I placed her on her feet, and she threaded her fingers with mine, peering up at me.

“I go where you go, *amore mio*.”

“I get a nickname now?” I teased. “Took you long enough.”



Marcella laughed as I tossed her onto our bed, landing in a heap of glittery tulle and satin. She pushed at her hair and dress, watching me as I crawled onto the edge of the bed.

“This is the only dress I won’t rip or cut off you, *amorina*.”

“Good! It’s custom.”

I guided her to sit and carefully unbuttoned the back of her dress, slipping it off. Before I undressed her further, I reached for the bottle of wine on my nightstand.

“What’s that?” Marcella sat up on her elbows, watching as I opened the bottle and poured two glasses.

“Since you’re so inclined to get red liquids on wedding dresses...” I passed her a glass, and she glared at me. “It’s our wine, *amorina*. 2005 Contrada.”

She took a sip. “The eight-thousand-dollar bottle of wine? You have more?”

I chuckled. “Hopefully enough for each of our major life events.”

“*God*, I love you,” Marcella sighed and sat up further, resting her glass of wine on her nightstand.

I did the same with mine and shrugged out of my tux jacket.

My wife kissed me, and we undressed together. Marcella guided my cock into her, groaning against my mouth, and I fucked her slowly, never wanting this moment to end.

“Mine, mine, mine,” she chanted, digging her fingers into my back.

“Yours, yours, yours,” I vowed.

Epilogue

MARCELLA

MATTEO and I spent seven perfect weeks travelling Italy for our honeymoon. We started in Milan and worked our way down the country that held so much meaning for both of us.

We stopped in Verona and then Venice, met family in Florence, viewed the ruins of the coliseum in Rome, and boarded a ferry in Naples to end our honeymoon in Sicily.

I couldn't have dreamed of a better honeymoon. As incredible as Italy was, I was far more in love with the man who joined me on the journey.

My husband lifted my hand and pressed a kiss to my knuckles, grinning softly at me. "I have a surprise for you."

I chuckled. "Oh, you do?"

He nodded. "Trust me?"

"I do."

"Those are two of my favorite words that you have ever said, *amorina*." Matteo loosened his tie slowly. "Then you will let me cover your eyes and lead you to the surprise, *si?*"

"Yes," I agreed.

With a smile, Matteo stepped out of the rental car and rounded the hood, helping me out. He turned me away from him and placed his black tie over my eyes and secured it.

"I will keep you safe," he whispered and reached for both of my hands.

Matteo guided me forward, and I focused on the crunch of red dirt beneath our feet, the soft breeze in the cypress trees, and the gentle waves along the coast.

My husband slowed and pulled me to him, bringing his mouth to mine as he removed the tie. "Open your eyes, *amorina*."

Behind Matteo stood a large villa made of warm stone and terracotta. Large trees cast shadows across the brick pathway leading to a front courtyard.

“Is this where we’re staying now?” I asked and turned to grin at him.

“It is.” Matteo threaded his fingers with mine and stepped toward the rental property. “Thirteen bedrooms, thirteen bathrooms, and over 115 acres of land.”

“Wow...” I breathed. “That’s incredible.”

He opened the dark wooden door, and we stepped into the entryway with pale yellow stucco walls and curved archways. A gorgeous fireplace sat along the back wall surrounded by warm brown couches. There was a game room with a pool table, a huge kitchen, and a dining room that could have seated every guest from our wedding.

The villa was stunning. Matteo pushed through two dark doors to the rear terrace with a few sitting areas, a pool and hot tub, and a canopy to get shade from the hot Sicilian sun.

He paused and turned to me, nodding toward the double doors along the exterior brick wall. “Come.”

Pushing through the doors, I wasn’t sure what I had expected, but seeing rows and rows of crops had not been at all what I had imagined.

I was confused, but Matteo guided me further between the plants covered in netting. He reached for a branch and gently pulled it out of the shade, resting the bunch of dark berries on his palm.

“Grapes?”

“Nero d’Avola grapes.” He carefully tucked the grapes back below the netting and motioned toward the abundant rows beyond. “Seventy acres of vineyard, *amorina*.”

“Vineyard? Like...for making wine?”

“*Sì*,” he chuckled. “For making wine. But not just any wine. A wine...that is very special to me.”

I tilted my head. “That costs eight thousand dollars?”

Matteo grinned. “You are quick, *amorina*. Yes. This is the very vineyard that grew and produced the 2005 Contrada wine that won you over.”

“Oh, *that’s* what won me over?” I asked with a laugh.

My husband wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me toward him. “It took a lot more to win you over than a glass of wine, *amorina*. But you are worth it. You are worth fighting for every day, trying to impress for the rest of our lives, and surprises like this...”

Matteo leaned in, but he didn’t kiss me. He brought his mouth to my ear.

“I bought it.”

“You *bought* it?” I turned my face to his and caught his brilliant grin.

“I bought the vineyard, the villa, the 115 acres... All of it, *amorina*. All...for you.”

“You didn’t have to do that...”

He chuckled. “I know. But I wanted to. It’s the perfect opportunity, and I wasn’t going to pass it up, not when this place created a wine that is so special to me.”

My heart swelled as I watched the man I loved not because I had to, but because I wanted to. Because as much as I had sworn to myself that I would never fall for him, that I could never fall for him, I had. And I had fallen hard, tumbling into a world I didn’t want to believe was my reality, but I hadn’t landed on my feet.

Matteo had caught me, and he refused to let me go. Refused to give up on me when I really felt that he should have.

“Thank you, *amorina*.”

“For what?”

“For giving me more than I’ve ever wanted. For being there for me, for never giving up on me... For loving me, even

when I didn't deserve it."

I brought my hand up to his face, resting my palm on his warm cheek. "You've always deserved love, *amore mio*, and it's my job to show you that."

"You're damn good at your job."

I smiled. "I know."

"I fucking love you, *amorina*."

"I fucking love you back, Matteo."

The End



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About the Author

Merissa Bartlett is an East Coast Canadian author who dabbles in both contemporary and dark romance. She writes about sassy, damaged female leads and the broody alphas that fall in love with them. She's an introverted bookworm who is never far from wine, her Yorkie, Ella, and some form of caffeine.

VOLUME

Six

LOVE AT FULL THROTTLE BY P.T. MACIAS

Love At Full Throttle
Anarchy Kings MC NorCal Chapter



He Lives In Darkness, She's Lost,
Love Lights Their Soul!
A Bad Boy Biker Motorcycle Club Romance
P.T. Macias



I'm dedicating this book to my husband, Jose Arturo, my children Erica, Andres, Ricardo, and my grandchildren Anthony, Gabriel, Christian, Elizabeth, and my family. I'm thankful for your love, patience, and support.



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They're awesome!

[This story is an Epilogue to Michail's story.](#)

[Michail's and Leticia's story is available.](#)

☐ Check out the reviews!

☐ They are both broken, but can they heal each other hearts & souls? Hang on for another wild ride.

☐ Great book. A fantastic short story, worth your time to read, filled with thoroughly enjoyable characters and an interesting storyline. A gang, a motorcycle club, a brotherhood of bikers, an innocent young woman trying to make her way in the world, the biker who comes to love her, a murder, plenty of action and sexual chemistry, add in romance, and you have one fantastic read.

☐ I loved Michail and Leticia's story. It's an action-filled story that's sweet and has incredible chemistry between the characters. A really great read that left me wanting more. I can't wait for the next book.



Synopsis

Michail

I have a plan.

It's going to be amazing.

It's a surprise for my Baby girl.

My Baby will love it.

I know that it's hasty.

What can I say?

I can't stop this feeling.

I can't stop this wild need.

I can't stop my soul from claiming her.

I can't stop my heart from throbbing.

It's love at full throttle!



Welcome to Michail's and Leticia's story. Please note that this story is full of action, violence, dirty-talking bad boy bikers, slang, romance, steamy scenes, and HEA.

Love At Full Throttle, Anarchy Kings MC NorCal Chapter, He Lives In Darkness,
She's Lost, Love Lights Their Soul, A Bad Boy Biker Motorcycle Club Romance
By P.T. Macias

Smashwords Edition

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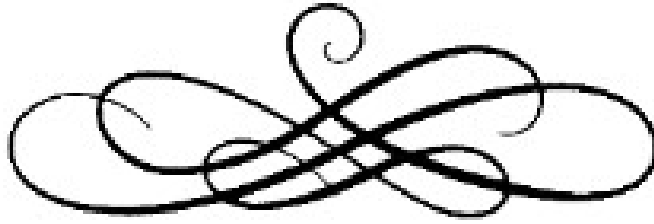
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fine of \$250,000.

CHAPTER 1

Michail



DAMN STRAIGHT!

I have Leticia right where I want her, in my arms. I'm over the moon; she fucking loves me, owns my soul, and she's having my baby.

Life is great!

It's time to plan the wedding; I'm going to ask my Baby to marry me; I'm working on surprising her.

Leticia has the sweetest soul, pure and innocent. My Baby girl has been through a lot; I'm going to protect her from all of the sons of bitches in the world. Nobody will ever hurt my Baby girl!

I have my brothers guarding Leticia; I'm not taking any chances. I'll be damned if I allow another motherfucker to take her from me again.

Once was fucking enough.

Those hours are the darkest hours of my life. I almost died thinking that she was taken by that low-life gang, the Royal Mambas.

Thank fuck that Nestor, my Baby's stepbrother, protected Leticia from that crazy motherfucker Ralph, the Royal Mambas leader. Nestor has another point in his favor since he told the Prez where Ralph stashed the drugs and money that he stole from the MC.

Stupidass made a huge mistake taking my Baby, taking the drugs and money.

Fucking hell!

But I made damn sure to snuff that little weasel.

I'm going to talk to the Prez about Nestor and Kiko wanting to prospect.

Motherfuckers!

They best not fuck me.

I walk into the clubhouse, looking around the room. The club whores are in their corner working with Slayer, the Sergeant At Arms. Smokey and Boom are playing pool, ignoring Twinkie leaning against the wall and calling them. That whore loves to eat Twinkies, so she earned her name.

I shake my head, walking over to the bar, nodding at the prospect Kade; he's working hard on getting his patch.

"Hey, Kade, get me a beer," I huff, looking at my brother Tex.

"What has your dick in a knot," Tex growls in his heavy southern drawl.

My bro stares at me with deadpan cold blue eyes. Motherfucker is from Texas; his road name is Tex. He's fucking cold and silent. He doesn't talk much, but I can count on him to have my back.

"Hey, Brother, I'm here to talk to the Prez. What's up," I ask, taking the beer from Kade.

I take a long pull of the beer, closing my eyes and enjoying the cold liquid.

Fuck yes! It hits the spot.

I look at my bro, shaking my head, leaning on the countertop, twisting the bottle in my hand.

"I'm going to get my Baby a ring," I say, chuckling.

"Oh yeah, sounds good. Where are you going to get it," Tex asks, peeling the label from the bottle.

I look at him, inhaling, exhaling, and raising my shoulders.

“I don’t have a fucking clue, but I’m sure that there are lots of stores out there,” I say, nodding.

“Yeah, maybe the jewelry store that we work with can help you get a nice one for your old lady,” Tex says, taking a pull of the beer.

“Oh yeah, bro, that’s a great idea. I’m heading over soon as I finish talking to the Prez about those dumbasses Nestor and Kiko,” I snort, shaking my head.

“Kiko and Nestor did help out when everything went down,” Tex points out, looking at me, furrowing his forehead.

Fuck, I owe Kiko my life because my Baby girl called him to help with my gunshot wounds since he was a doctor in the Marines.

Stupid fuck Nestor, he helped my Baby girl out with that bastard Ralph, the Royal Mambas gang leader. That motherfucker Ralph wanted to keep Leticia. He’s the bastard that raped her when she was in high school on a date, yeah, a date rape. Nestor is still on my shit list since he was part of the Royal Mambas and Ralph’s second, but he did everything to protect my Baby girl.

Motherfucker.

I promised my Baby girl that I’ll help both motherfuckers to prospect, but I better not regret it.

“Yeah, Tex, you’re right. I’m just a little wary that they won’t cut it,” I say, lifting my shoulders and finishing off my beer.

“Yeah, I hear you but remember that they did save your ass,” Tex says, lifting his chin to Kade and asking for another beer.

“I’m going to talk to the Prez; want to go with me to the store,” I ask, sliding off the stool.

“Yeah,” Tex says, grabbing the other beer from the prospect.

I walk into the secured area, down the hall, to see my Prez. I stop at the closed door, knocking.

“Enter,” Prez growls.

I open the door, looking into the room, nodding.

“Prez, do you have a minute,” I ask, walking into the room.

“Yeah, what’s up,” Prez asks, crossing his arms.

“Nestor and Kiko would like to prospect,” I say, crossing my arms.

“Oh yeah? Nestor did help us get our money and package back. He did help save your old lady,” the Prez says, rubbing his chin.

“Yeah, and Kiko helped me when I was shot,” I say, clenching my jaw.

“We need to have a vote in Church,” the Prez says, running his hand through his thinning hair.

“Yeah, that works,” I say, nodding.

“Right, you’re sponsoring them,” the Prez asks, lifting his eyebrow and looking at me.

“Yeah, they saved my old lady and me. I’m going to sponsor them,” I say, nodding.

“Right,” the Prez says, leaning forward to grab a cigarette.

“Thanks. Later,” I say, walking out of the room, down the hall to the main room. I walk over to my bro Tex.

“Hey, are you ready to go,” I ask, sliding onto the stool and lifting my chin to the prospect to get me a beer.

“Yeah, after I finish my beer,” Tex smirks, taking a pull.

“Right,” I say, nodding. I take the beer bottle from the prospect taking a long pull.

Fuck!



An hour later, I walked into Anderson's jewelry store with Tex. The older lady nods, her eyelids lower, and nervously looks at me. She tries hard not to panic by clutching her hands tight.

Fuck!

I look around the room for Bob Anderson, the owner; then I look at her.

Fuck!

We're giving her a fucking heart attack!

"Hello, is Bob here," I ask, stopping a couple of feet away, crossing my arms, and smiling.

"Yes, let me get him," the lady says, walking away.

A couple of minutes later, Bob walks out, and the lady walks behind him.

"Hello, Bear, Tex. How can I help you," Bob asks, smiling, resting his fingers on the shiny glass top.

"Hey Bob, I'm so glad that you're in the shop. I'm looking for an engagement ring and wedding bands," I say, smiling, unable to hide my excitement.

"Congratulations Bear; I'm happy that you came to me because I have some excellent rings that I got a couple of days ago," Bob says, leaning down behind the counter. He places a black velvet tray with some beautiful rings and bands.

I look at them, a little confused and overwhelmed.

Fuck!

Which one should I get? What if she doesn't like it?

Fuck!

"Tex, come here, help me out, bro," I say, turning to look at him and rubbing my hand at my neck.

“Motherfucker, you don’t need my help,” Tex growls, walking over and sliding his cell phone into his cut’s pocket.

“Yeah, well, I do,” I say, looking down at the rings.

“Bro, it does not matter. I’m sure you can bring her to pick out another ring if she doesn’t like it. Isn’t that right, Bob,” Tex says, looking at the jeweler?

“That’s correct; I’ll be happy to exchange it for another ring,” Bob says, grasping the countertop edge.

“Fuckingtastic! Let me look at the round stone,” I say, pointing to the diamond ring in the middle of the row.

That diamond calls me; I know that Leticia will love this ring. I can’t wait to show it to her.

“Excellent choice; this engagement ring is part of this wedding band set,” Bob says, pointing to the wedding bands on the side.

Bob hands me the engagement ring. I look at it, clenching my jaw. My heartbeat increases, and I feel so damn excited but scared.

Yeah, I want Leticia forever in my life, but marriage is something that I thought I would never do.

Fuck!

“I’ll take them, but if my Baby doesn’t like them, I’m bringing them back to exchange,” I huff, staring at Bob.

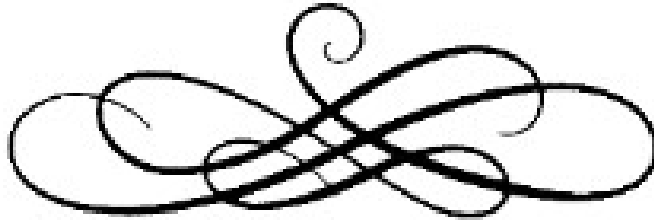
“No worries, I’ll be happy to exchange the rings for any other that she likes,” Bob says, smiling.

“Right,” I say, handing him the rings.

“Yeah, bro, all good,” Tex says, smirking.

CHAPTER 2

Michail



THE NEXT DAY.

Fuck!

I can't believe that I'm going to propose to my Baby girl at my home. I know that she loves it here, and I cooked up some steaks, salad, and baked potatoes that she loves.

I look at my cell phone to check the time. My Baby girl should be here soon; my bro Iceman's old lady Scarlett took my Baby girl out shopping.

Scarlett and my Baby girl are close since they experienced a horrific day a few months ago. Scarlett was abducted by the motherfucker that was after her. My Baby girl did everything she could to stop the bastard from taking Scarlett but couldn't stop it. She did get the details that helped us rescue Scarlet.

I grab my cell to text Scarlett.

Bear: ETA.

Scarlett: five minutes.

I finish cooking the steaks, and walk over to grab a beer from the refrigerator. I take a long pull looking at the stove.

The food is ready; everything needs to be perfect. I bought roses for my Baby girl. I finish off my beer, throwing the bottle in the trash can.

A few minutes later, I look out the window looking at my Baby girl walking up the walkway carrying a few bags and smiling.

“Babe, I’m home,” Leticia yells, closing the door and dropping the bags and purse next to the sofa.

She gathers her hair, tossing it over her shoulders, and adjusting her dress.

I walk into the living room, stopping next to her. I wrap my arm around her waist, gazing into her eyes.

“I missed you,” I say, kissing her soft, luscious lips.

Leticia puckers her lips; I nibble on them, waiting for her to open her sweet mouth. She opens her lips, and I sweep inside, tangling my tongue with hers, tasting her sweetness.

She wraps her arms around my waist, moaning, melts into me.

Fuck!

My Baby girl fills my soul, and my cock loves her; I’m so ready to love her.

Leticia pulls back, smiling, grabs my hand placing it on her tummy.

I love her smile, especially when those cute dimples flash.

“Babe, the baby is kicking. Do you feel him,” Leticia says breathlessly.

I gaze into her sparkling eyes, focusing on my hand on her tummy.

Fuck!

That’s my baby kicking.

“Fuck, Baby girl, my boy is a strong kicker. I know that he’s going to be strong like me,” I croak, my throat closing up.

“Babe, I’m so excited! I can’t wait to hold our baby. I bought some cute little PJs, onesies, and cute little socks,” Leticia says, beaming, a soft excited flush on her face.

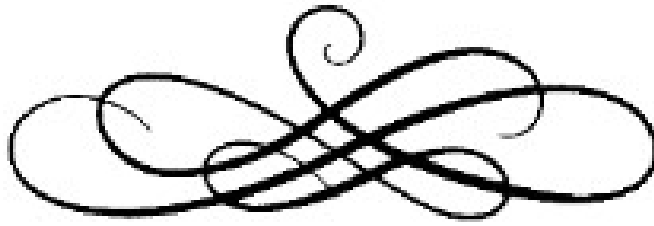
She looks absolutely beautiful.

“I can’t wait to see you holding my baby in your arms,” I whisper, wrapping my arms around her waist, pulling her

closer, burying my face in her neck, inhaling her sweet scent,
and closing my eyes.

CHAPTER 3

Leticia



“BABY GIRL, I cooked dinner, your favorite,” Michail says, pulling away, gazing down at me.

“Oh yeah, that sounds wonderful because I’m starving, and I didn’t want to eat at the mall,” I say, rubbing my tummy, grinning.

“Good, because I cooked some steaks, your favorite. Let’s eat before it gets cold,” Michail says, taking my hand in his, lacing our fingers.

We walk into the kitchen nook, and I gasp, raising my hand to my mouth, gazing up at Michail.

“Babe, you’re so sweet; the table looks so romantic,” I whisper, smiling.

“Baby girl, I’m glad that you like my efforts. Have a seat, and I’ll get our plates,” Michail says, smiling.

“Oh, the roses are so beautiful,” I say, grabbing the vase.

I close my eyes, inhaling the sweet rose scent, smiling.

Michail returns with the two plates, placing them on the table. He sits on his chair, pulling up next to me, smirking.

He looks so happy, and his eyes have a sparkle, and I know that he’s up to something. He’s like a little boy, and I can always tell he’s going to do or say something.

Michail is my everything.

“Baby girl, did you enjoy your day with Scarlett? I really missed you,” Michail says, taking his knife and fork to cut his steak.

“Oh yeah, I did. I saw so many cute outfits for the baby, and I fell in love with the beautiful crib,” I tell him as I’m slicing my steak.

“Why didn’t you get it,” Michail asks, shoving his fork with the steak into his mouth.

I watch him eat because I love those lips. He smiles, and I look up, grinning.

“Babe, because I want you to be with me and help me select a crib,” I say, grabbing the butter dish.

I take a tad of butter with my fork dropping it onto my baked potato.

Yum.

“Baby girl, we can go get the crib whenever you want,” Michail says, taking another bite of steak.

“Ok, that sounds great,” I say, nodding and leaning back into the chair, rubbing my tummy.

“Babe, I loved the steak, the roses, and the music. Thank you,” I say, tearing up.

I rub my hands over my cheeks, take off the tears, inhale deeply, closing my eyes.

I’m such a crybaby.

“Baby girl, don’t cry; I can’t stand it. I love you with my entire soul,” Michail says, taking my hand.

He holds my hand as he falls onto his knee, gazing up with his warm eyes.

“Leticia Maria Sanchez, you’re the light in my darkness, my soul mate, the reason that my heart beats. I love you. Baby girl, will you marry me,” Michail asks in a raspy voice.

Oh my god, he’s so beautiful.

I gaze into his beautiful brown eyes, feeling his soul, his love. I know that he loves me and will never hurt me. I know that we will create a beautiful family full of love and respect.

“Yes, yes! I love you,” I whisper, smiling. Tears fall down my cheeks as I blink rapidly.

“Fuck yes,” Michail growls, pushing the ring onto my finger.

I look at the breathtaking huge diamond engagement ring.

“Wow, Babe, that’s an incredible ring,” I gasp, putting my hand over my mouth.

I wasn’t paying attention to the ring when he was on his knees, asking me to marry him because I was taking in the love that shines in his eyes.

Michail pulls me into his arms as he stands, taking my lips in a deep, hungry kiss. He slides his tongue into my mouth, caressing my tongue, sending a chill down my back.

He walks to our room, kicks the door close, walks over to our bed, placing me on top. He puts his knee on the bed between my legs, kissing and nibbling my ear, going down my neck.

“Baby girl, I’m going to love you all night, making you feel my love, my need for you,” Michail growls, pulling the hem of my dress up.

He pulls my dress off, moving back to look at my breasts.

Yeah, they’re bigger than before.

“I love how pregnancy looks on you. Those breasts are spectacular,” Michail growls, moving his hands to take off my black lacy bra.

He leans down, taking a tight nipple into his mouth, twirling his tongue around my tender flesh, and closing his eyes.

“Yes, Babe, that feels really good,” I moan, moving my hands up and down his back, scratching it.

Michail continues to pay extra attention to each breast, taking his sweet time, driving me crazy. He moves down to my tummy, kissing and whispering to the baby.

“I love you, baby, and I can’t wait to hold you,” Michail whispers, running his hand over my tummy.

“Babe, I need you,” I pant, moving my hips.

Michail releases my nipple with a pop, looks at me, grinning.

“Oh yeah, are you ready, nice and wet for me,” Michail asks, pushing off the bed and taking off his clothes?

“Yes,” I gasp, cupping my breasts.

“Fuck yes,” Michail growls, crawling back onto the bed. He spreads my legs and buries his face into my aching flesh.

He loves to torment me, pushing me over the edge several times.

“Ohhhhh ... Babe,” I groan, pulling his head closer.

Michail runs his hot wet tongue up my honey coated flesh, stopping at my sensitive flesh. He sucks in my flesh, running his tongue in a circle, making me scream.

“Michail,” I yell out, lifting my hips up.

Michail pulls back, looking at me with heated, heavy-lidded eyes. He aligns his hard cock, thrusting deep inside and stopping.

I gasp, grabbing his shoulders and gazing into his eyes.

“Baby, tell me what you want,” Michail asks, taking my hands and holding them above my head.

My breasts thrust forward, and he takes my nipple into his mouth. He sucks and nibbles my nipple and breasts.

“Babe, I want you to fuck me hard,” I moan, moving my hips.

“That’s right, Baby girl, tell me what you want and how,” Michail growls, moving his mouth to my other breast.

He thrusts his hips in and out, building friction as he moves fast and deep.

“Yes,” I yell, holding onto his short hair.

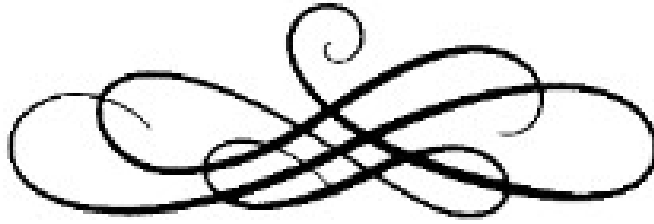
“Baby girl, come with me,” Michail growls, moving his hand down to rub my sensitive flesh.

“Michail,” I yell as I fall over the edge.

“Baby girl,” Michail growls, thrusting one more time.

CHAPTER 4

Michail



I WALK INTO THE CLUBHOUSE,

looking around the main room. The bros are talking, playing pool, and messing with the club whores.

Fuck!

I'm so damn happy that I don't need to use them.

I walk over to the bar, leaning on the bar countertop, looking at the prospect.

"Hey Nico, get me a beer," I say, crossing my arms.

"Right," Nico says, turning to get me the beer.

Nico is one of the new prospects since the other two were patched in a few weeks ago.

Nico places the beer in front of me, nodding. He walks away to finish stocking the clean glasses.

I take a pull of my beer, looking at the mirror behind the bar. I can see the room and what everyone is doing.

"Hey bro," Jaxx says, the VP sliding onto the stool next to me.

"Bro, what's up," I ask since the VP hardly ever has time.

"I'm working on my baby, and I wanted you to help me with the custom parts," Jaxx says, lifting his chin at the prospect.

"Yeah, I can help," I say, nodding, taking a pull of my beer.

“Great,” Jaxx says, taking the beer that the prospect hands him.

“I asked my Old Lady to marry me, and I want the MC to help with the wedding,” I say, looking at the VP.

“Is that right? Congratulations. I’m sure that’s not a problem; we’re family. We will take care of it,” Jaxx says, nodding.

“Thanks,” I say, pulling the stool over. I slide onto it, leaning one arm on the bar countertop.

“Do you know what Church is about,” I ask, looking at Jaxx.

“Yeah, those two motherfuckers that want to prospect, and we can bring up your wedding today,” Jaxx says, taking a pull of his beer.

“Awesome,” I say, finishing off my beer.

“Let’s go into Church,” Jaxx says, pushing off the stool.

I follow the VP across the room and into the secured area, the chapel where Church takes place, and the King’s rooms for those that like to live there.

I walk into the chapel, taking a seat across from the VP and Prez. Jaxx falls onto his chair, looking at the brothers walking in.

A few minutes later, the Prez walks in, closing the door. He walks over to his seat, lifts his chin, and grabs the gravel.

“Church has started, and we have a few issues to review and vote on,” Prez says, looking around the room and hitting the gravel on the table.

“The businesses are doing good, and you will be receiving your share in your account. I want to look into a business that’s up for sale; if it’s good, we can make an offer. It’s a gun shop, and I think that will work to our benefit on so many levels. Jaxx, tell us about it,” Prez says, looking around the room.

“The business is doing good; the owner wants to retire, so we wouldn’t have any issues with the business; it’s a great location and price,” Jaxx says, tapping his fingers on the table.

“Gage will send you the business deets and plan,” the Prez says, nodding.

Gage is the MC’s Secretary.

“We have a wedding to plan. Bear is marrying his old lady, and we’re taking care of it,” Jaxx says, nodding and looking around the room.

“Congratulations, you sucker, all right,” the brothers say, around the room.

“Thanks, motherfuckers,” I say, smirking.

“We need to vote on two motherfuckers that want to prospect. You all know their history, and Bear is sponsoring them. All in favor of allowing Kiko and Nestor to prospect,” the Prez asks, looking around the room.

“Yeah, yes, ok, all good,” the brothers say.

“Okay, Church is now closed,” the Prez says, hitting the table with the gravel.

The brothers stand, stomping their feet on the floor, pumping their fists, and yelling our dogma.

“Anarchy Kings rule, the brothers’ respect, honor, and fidelity!”

We leave the Chapel gathering in the main room; I stay a while with the bros drinking and ribbing each other.



“Baby girl, I’m home,” I yell, entering the kitchen from the garage.

“Babe,” Leticia yells, walking down the hallway, entering the kitchen, smiling.

I love it!

She's always happy to see me come home. I bet she's going to be pleased with the news.

"Baby girl, do you want to go out to dinner," I ask, pulling her into my arms.

"No, I want to stay in, order some pizza, and cuddle," Leticia says, laughing, sliding her hands up my neck.

"Fuck, that sounds good," I say, leaning down.

I kiss her, moving my hands to grab her sweet ass.

I pull back, gazing into her heated brown eyes.

"Baby girl, I have the wedding date set, and the plans are taken care of. All I want you to worry about is getting your dress and looking beautiful," I tell her, hugging her close.

"Oh my god! Are you serious because I do want to have a little say in the wedding," I say, pursing my lips.

"Yes, Baby girl, of course, everything is going to be like you want, but we will take care of it," I say, chuckling, looking at her surprised face.

"Oh, I see. So, I only need to tell you what I want, and you take care of it," Leticia asks, furrowing her forehead.

"That's right, Baby, you take care of getting your dress," I say, kissing her forehead.

I move my lips down her cheek, and I take her lips, kissing her deeply. I pull away, raising my eyebrow, waiting for her to say yes.

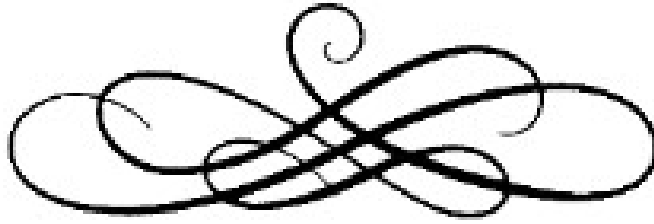
"What do you think," I ask, running my hands up her back.

"I think it might work, and I wouldn't get so overwhelmed, tired, or frustrated. Okay, I do want some specific details, but other than that, I'm good," Leticia says, smiling.

"Fuck yes, give me your list," I say, leaning down to take her lips.

CHAPTER 5

Leticia



“GIRL, LET ME SEE,” Scarlett yells outside of the dressing room.

The store’s associate zips up the dress, adjusting the gown.

“I can’t wait for you to see it,” I yell, pulling the door open and walking out of the dressing room.

The associate follows me towards the stand with the circular mirrors.

“Oh my god, I love this dress,” I whisper, looking in the mirror. I twirl around the mirror, looking at the dress from all angles.

“Yes, that dress is perfect for you,” Scarlett says, nodding.

“I think this is it,” I whisper, wide-eyed.

“We have a matching maid of honor dress,” the associate says, pulling the train out.

“What do you think,” I ask Scarlett, looking at her through the mirror.

“It doesn’t hurt to look at it,” Scarlett nods, smiling.

“I’ll get you the gown for you to try on,” the associate says, walking away.

“What color do you want me to wear,” Scarlett asks, giggling.

“A red color,” I say, pulling up the gown to turn around to look at the dress that the associate is holding up.

“Oh my god, that’s so pretty,” Scarlett squeals, walking over to touch the gown.

“Yes, it’s perfect,” I say, nodding.

“Let me get the dressing room ready for you to try it on,” the associate says, nodding.

A few minutes later, Scarlett walks out of the dressing room.

She looks flushed and bright-eyed, taking long strides to get to the stand.

“I love it,” Scarlett squeals, raising her hands to her chest.

“It looks perfect on you,” I say, nodding.

“Wonderful, let’s get them,” Scarlett says, nodding.

“Awesome, because I’m starving,” I say, nodding.

We order our gowns, and we have some lunch. I love girl time since I’ve never had before this.



Two months later.

I can’t believe it.

It’s finally our wedding day; Michail insisted that it be on this day. I’m starting to think that the man is totally romantic.

On Valentine’s Day, do you believe that?

Yeah, Michail wanted our wedding on Valentine’s Day.

I can’t believe it.

My Babe planned it all, and I was ok with that. The MC’s Prez Stan lives on a ten-acre on the outskirts of Redding; the place is beautiful and peaceful. All of the MC is here, and I’m so excited and nervous. I look in the mirror at my reflection, biting my lower lip. I blink my eyes to clear the tears.

I can’t believe that’s me in a gorgeous wedding dress and pregnant.

My life has changed so fast in the last year.

Now I'm going to be a wife and a mother. I'm going to do everything in my power to be the best wife and mother to the two people that own my heart.

"Leticia, are you ready," Scarlett asks, walking into the room. She stands at the door, staring at me.

"Yes," I croak; my throat feels dry, closing up.

I turn to look at her, nodding, adjusting the bodice.

"Lord, you look incredibly beautiful! I can't wait for my wedding," Scarlett says, laughing, and walks over to me.

"You look beautiful too," I say, looking at my BFF.

"Girl, I'm so happy to have you as my BFF," Scarlett whispers, holding my hands and looking at me.

"Yes, I'm happy too. I never had a BFF, and I'm so grateful for you," I say, smiling and blinking my eyes.

"Hey, it's your special day, no tears," Scarlett croaks, blinking her eyes, hugging me.

"Thanks, girl. I'm so nervous, and I can't wait for Michail to see me," I whisper, grasping Scarlett's hand.

"Girl, it's all good. He's going to fall in love again! Let's go, so you can officially claim your man," Scarlett squeaks, adjusting my veil.

"Ok, I'm ready," I say, nodding. I reach over to grab my red and white bouquet.

I look at my bouquet, sighing.

It's perfect.

"Ok, Stan is waiting outside to walk you down," Scarlett says, smiling.

The MC's Prez, Stan, is walking me down to my Babe because I don't have a father, and Michail doesn't either.

It's ok because the MC is family. I now understand what it's all about and why they live this lifestyle. It's all good with me because now I feel like I have a family.

“I’m ready,” I say, gathering my gown, walking out of the room, down the hall, and out the back door.

The Prez, Stan, is waiting for me at the door, greeting me with a kind smile.

“Leticia, you look lovely. You have a good man. Are you ready,” Prez Stan says.

“Yes, I think so. I’m ready,” I whisper breathlessly.

“Let’s do this,” Prez Stan says, offering me his arm.

I slide my hand onto his arm, trembling. Prez taps my hand on his arm, smiling.

Scarlett walks in front of me because she’s my maid of honor. She’s wearing a halter top gown with a sweetheart neckline in deep rose-red color. She looks so beautiful in that dress that I know that Iceman won’t be able to keep his eyes off her.

My heart pounds faster; I inhale deeply to calm my nerves. My chest feels tight, making it difficult to breathe.

We stop a few feet from the pathway. I look down at the long path filled with red rose petals that stop at the white arch decorated with white lace and red roses. Under the arch, my Babe is waiting for me.

The chairs are positioned to create a circular seating arrangement around the arbor.

I smile and gaze into his eyes. My heart speeds up. I hope he likes my dress because I feel so beautiful. It’s perfect, it flares, hiding my small tummy. It’s an empire waist, sweetheart halter neckline, and beaded lace bodice.

I never dreamed that I would be so happy and have everything I ever hoped to have in a husband. Soon, the baby will be in my arms, making my world complete.

The MC is seated along the sides of the aisle, looking at me. I tighten my grip on the Prez’s arm nervously, teary-eyed.

Oh my god, I’m so emotional. These people are now my family, and I’m so grateful.

The wedding song starts, This I Promise You by NSYNC, and my heart beats faster. Scarlett starts walking down the aisle; everyone stands, turning to look at me.

“Ready,” Prez asks, patting my hand.

“Yes,” I whisper, trembling, looking down wide-eyed.

We start walking down the aisle, looking at Michail, gazing into his eyes. I don’t see anyone else; I only hear the song and my heartbeat as I walk toward the man I love.

I hear Prez Stan respond to the question, who presents this woman to be married to this man? I take Michail’s hand, walking next to him.

It feels surreal, the ceremony takes place, and I feel like it’s a dream.

“The groom may kiss the bride,” the priest says.

Michail pulls me close and kisses me with all of his love.

The MC yells, claps, and whistles.

Then he pulls back, gazing into my eyes, grinning, holding me close, leaning in, and placing his face next to mine.

“Baby girl, I love you,” Michail says into my ear.

“Congratulations,” Scarlett yells, standing next to us.

Michail pulls back, taking my hand, lacing our fingers, and holding me next to his side.

All the Brothers congratulated us, and after, we gathered in the reception area under a huge canopy of trees with lights. The round tables are placed around the dance floor, decorated with red roses, lights, and lace. It looks incredible, so romantic.

I love it.

“Baby girl, are you hungry,” Michail asks, pulling out the chair at the bridal table.

I look around the reception, amazed that I now belong to this huge family.

“Yes, I’m starving because I couldn’t eat breakfast. I was a bundle of nerves,” I say, wrapping my arms around his arm and leaning into his shoulder.

“Good, because they’re starting to serve, and then we’re going to dance,” Michail says, grinning.

“Ok,” I say, looking at the wedding cake to my right at a round table. It looks so beautiful.

“Babe, thank you for taking care of the wedding; it’s beautiful,” I say, looking up into his eyes.

“You’re welcome, Baby girl. Did I tell you that you look beautiful,” Michail asks, leaning down, twisting to kiss me.

“No,” I gasp breathlessly.

“You look so damn good; I’m having trouble keeping my hands off you,” Michail growls, moving his hand on my waist and pulling me closer.

I move my hand up his chest to wrap around his neck, pulling him closer.

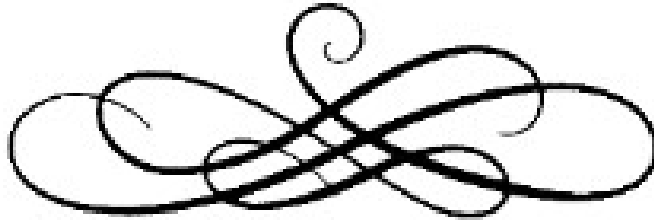
The MC starts to yell and whistle. Michail pulls back, grinning, and winks.

I know that my face is red. I’m so embarrassed.

“Let’s eat because we have a long time to go before, I take you home,” Michail growls, cupping my cheek.

CHAPTER 6

Michail



MONTHS LATER.

The sky is dark navy, and the stars are sparkling bright. A team of Kings' are loading up the cage. We have a shipment that we need to run down to the Oregon border.

"Let's hurry! Get the crates in the cage," Jaxx growls, looking around at the Kings'. He walks over to count the boxes in the warehouse.

I clench my jaw, flipping off the VP.

Yeah, I'm fucking pissed off.

I need to be close to my Baby girl since she will be having my baby any day.

"Don't worry, Scarlett is with your old lady. They were going to have some pizza after the movie," Iceman says, leaning down, and grabbing the box.

"Right," I guff, clenching my jaw.

I pull out my cell to look at the time, and no fucking texts. My Baby girl always sends me a text when she gets home.

Fuck!

I have a weird feeling in my gut. I always listen to my gut. It's late, and I'm so fucking wind uptight, I'm going to explode.

I know she's okay, and I have a prospect watching my house, but I'm on edge with all of the threats from the small

drug gangs.

I take the crate from one end and Iceman at the other end, walking out of the warehouse and stacking it inside the cage.

The hum and explosion of gunshots echo around us, hitting the crates. I fall onto the ground, rolling onto my stomach. I look at the brothers hiding behind the cage and crates.

Motherfuckers dare to come to our territory. What the fuck! These punks can't take our shipment.

I see Jaxx inside the warehouse, behind the crates. Slayer is behind the other cage in the warehouse.

Thank fuck that we're here to protect the VP. Boom, Cisco and me, the Men Of Mayhem and Iceman, and Tex, the Enforcers. We have other members here to help with the run, but now it appears we have to deal with that, the fucking drug gang, the Cougars.

"It's the Cougars," Iceman murmurs, crawling next to me.

I clench my jaw, taking out one of the Cougars running towards the cage.

Motherfucker!

The gunshots rain all over, hitting the crates, the warehouse, and the trees. I see the motherfuckers crawling forward from behind the garbage dumpster.

I'm ready to take them out, aiming my Glock; I pull the trigger.

Hell yes!

It's hard to see through the gun smoke. I crawl forward to help my bros on the right near the gate.

"Ooouf," I hiss as a motherfucker land on top of me.

He wraps his arm around my neck. I push back, bucking, throwing him off.

The gunshots continue to pop around us as I throw him on the ground. I turn around, grabbing him by the neck, pulling him up, head-butting the motherfucker. I swing my fist back,

punching him in the face, raising my leg, kneeling him in the balls. The punk folds over, falling onto the ground. I straddle him, punching his mug over and over.

“Bear, don’t kill him; we need to get some deets from the motherfucker,” Iceman huffs, taking hold of my arm.

“Fuck,” I growl, glaring at my bro, shaking my head.

I stare at the motherfucker laying on the ground with a broken nose, split lip, and blood running from his head. I turn him over to look at his colors. He’s wearing a black leather jacket with the Cobra on the back.

“Fuck, he’s a fucking Cobra,” I growl.

“Motherfuckers had the nerve to come here. I thought they were pussy punks,” Iceman growls.

“You got that, right? Did we get them,” I ask, pushing off the ground, looking around in the dark, trying to see through the fog.

“Yeah, I saw a few run out of the gate and jump into an old cage,” Iceman says, nodding.

“I’m taking this motherfucker inside for the enforcers to work him over,” I say, bending down. I grab him from the fucking armpits pulling him into the warehouse.

“Get the crates loaded and deliver it,” Jaxx walks out to the open garage door, looking into the night.

“The crates are loaded,” Tex says, nodding.

“Right, I need you to stay to work over this motherfucker,” Jaxx says, looking at Boom.

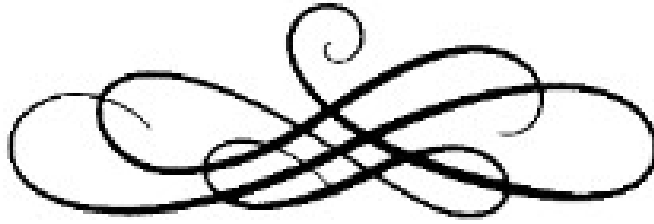
“Right,” Boom says, nodding.

“All clear,” Casper says, stopping inside the warehouse in front of Jaxx.

“Get ready to go in five; this run needs to be done,” Jaxx yells, clapping his hands.

CHAPTER 7

Michail



I WALK OVER to grab my other Glock from my bike, sliding it into my boot.

“Bear, Iceman, you need to get gone because your old ladies are in the hospital,” Tex says, walking towards me.

“Fuck,” Iceman yells, clenching his hands.

“What the fuck,” I growl, glaring at Tex.

“Fuck, what happened,” Iceman asks, turning to Tex, clenching his hands.

“The po-po, Carter, called Jaxx,” Tex snarls.

Carter is a po-po in the club’s pocket. Yeah, lots of po-po’s work for us. You’ll be surprised what money can buy.

“Fuck,” I growl, running to my bike.

I can hear Iceman running behind me. We start the bike, I pull on my helmet, and I pull out of the warehouse.

My heart is pounding so damn fast; it feels like it’s going to explode.

What the fuck happened?

Oh god, please save my Baby girl and my baby. Please.

I ride fast, not caring that I’m going over the speed limit. The good thing is that the road is clear; we get to the hospital in a few minutes.

I park my bike; Iceman pulls to the right next to me. We turn off the bikes. I take off my helmet, sliding off the seat and

placing my helmet on the handlebars. I ran to the hospital doors, Iceman next to me. I look around for the nurse station to get information about the emergency room.

I stop at the nurse station, looking at the older nurse with the name tag Betty.

“Can I help you,” Betty asks, looking at me. Her eyes roam over my cut, my ink, and my face pursing her lips.

Fuck!

I don't need this right now.

“I'm looking for my wife. She was in a car accident,” I snarl, gripping the edge of the desk.

My heart is pounding so fucking hard that I feel like it's going to popped out of my chest. I'm so fucking scared.

I can't lose Leticia.

She's my everything.

My baby!

Fuck no!

“What is your wife's name,” Betty asks, looking at me.

“Leticia Stone,” I snarl, ready to run around the hospital, looking for her.

Iceman is standing next to me, leaning next to me to look at Betty.

“I'm here to see my wife, Scarlett Smith,” Iceman growls, leaning over the counter to look at the screen.

“Give me a minute to look them up,” Betty says, wide-eyed.

“Thank fuck that the baby is with Paige,” Iceman growls, running his fingers through his hair.

Paige is Casper's old lady and always offers to babysit.

“Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Stone are in the operating room. You will need to wait until the doctor comes looking for you,” Betty says, nodding.

Betty pushes her eyeglasses up her nose, looking at me stone-faced.

Fuck!

“Do you know how long that’s going to take,” I ask, furrowing my forehead.

“I don’t have any idea,” Betty says, pursing her lips.

“Right,” I say, turning to walk out of the hospital.

A few minutes later, Iceman walks out looking fucked up, just like I feel.

“All I know is that those motherfucker doctors best take care of my Baby girl,” growl rubbing my neck, and looking up at the moon.

“Fuck, I hear you,” Iceman says, nodding, pulling out a cigarette.

He offers me a cigarette; yeah, I fucking take it. My nerves are shot, and I need to relax.

Fuck!

“Thanks,” I murmur, taking a light.

I inhale deeply and exhale, looking out into the parking lot.

I wonder how fucking long it’s going to take because I can’t take this. Leticia is my world, my everything.

I close my eyes, grinding my jaw, trying to control this raw, overpowering emotion in my throat.

I can’t fucking cry!

Fuck!

I open my eyes, and I see Iceman leaning against the wall, smoking. He stares at the sky, exhaling the smoke.

We stand outside for a while, and then we walk inside, looking to see if they’re out. We walk over to ask Betty for an update.

“Betty, is my wife out yet,” I ask, grabbing the countertop edge.

Iceman stands next to me, waiting for his turn.

“No, they’re still in the operating room,” Betty says, pursing her lips.

“Right,” I say, walking away. I walk over to stand by the window to look outside.

“Scarlett still in the operating room,” Iceman says,

The side door opens, and a doctor walks out, pulling off his face mask.

“Mr. Smith,” he looks around the waiting room.

“It’s me,” Iceman says, walking over to the doctor.

“I’m Doctor Kirkland; the operation went well. Mrs. Smith is in the recovery room; she’s doing well. I was able to repair the liver that was torn open from the impact, the force of the car accident. She has two cracked ribs, and I’m sorry that I couldn’t stop the miscarriage,” Doctor Kirkland says, crossing his arms.

“Fuck! A miscarriage,” Iceman croaks, staring at the doctor.

“Yes, it looks like the fetus’s gestation was a few weeks. I’m sorry,” Doctor Kirkland says, clenching his jaw.

“Thanks,” Iceman croaks, rubbing his neck.

“No worries,” Doctor Kirkland says, nodding.

I walk over to my bro, giving him some support.

Fuck!

“Iceman,” I say, crossing my arms.

“Yeah, I need a few minutes,” Iceman says, walking out of the hospital.

My heart aches. My babies have to be ok. I’m glad that Scarlett is okay.

God always has my back.

I walk back to lean against the wall waiting for the doctor. I close my eyes, and I pray.

Thirty minutes later, Iceman returns, taking a seat in the chairs next to me. I look at him, stretch out his long legs, resting head-on against the chair's backside, clenching the armrests.

Fuck!

I don't know what to say to him.

"Bro. Sorry for your loss," I croak, looking at him.

"Thanks," Iceman says, leaning forward, cradling his head in his hands.

Fuck!

I look at the round-the-clock on the wall, looking at the red army tick away the seconds, the minutes driving me insane.

Finally, the side door opens, and a doctor walks out, holding a clipboard.

"Mr. Stone," the Doctor calls out, looking around the room.

"Yeah," I respond, pushing off the wall. I walk over to him, fisting my hands. My entire body is fucking wound uptight.

"I'm Doctor Garcia, the car accident caused your wife to go into labor, and we had to do a c-section. Your wife and the baby are doing well. "Congratulations, you have a new baby boy," Doctor Garcia says, furrowing his forehead.

"Fuck! I need to see them," I say, crossing my arms and inhaling deeply.

"Mr. Stone, she's in recovery; you will be able to see them soon," Doctor Garcia says, nodding.

"Right, fuckingtastic. Thanks," I croak, my throat fucking close up.

"You're welcome," Doctor Garcia says, nodding. He walks away and disappears behind the fucking doors.

I want to run after him!

Fuck!

I pace around the waiting room, running my fingers through my short hair.

I fucking can't wait to see my Baby girl and baby boy!

Fuck!

I have a boy!

Iceman walks over, watching me pace.

"Hey bro, congratulations," Iceman says, nodding.

I stop; I look at him feeling happy and sad for him.

"Thanks, bro," I say, grinding my molars.

The nurse walks out of the damn special doors.

"Mr. Smith," she calls out, looking at us.

"Yes," Iceman pushes off the chair, walking over to her.

"Your wife is in her room. You can see her," the nurse says.

"Thanks," Iceman says, following the nurse through those special fucking doors.

I stare at the doors waiting for the fucking nurse to come out to get me.

Fuck!

An hour later, a nurse walks out of the fucking special doors.

"Mr. Stone," the nurse calls out.

"Yes," I say, walking over to her.

"Mrs. Stone is awake; you can see her," the nurse says.

"Wonderful," I say, nodding, fucking anxious to run.

Fuck!

It's about fucking time!

I follow the nurse down the halls, into the elevator, and up to the delivery rooms. She stops at the door nodding.

I walk into the room, looking for my Baby girl.

There she is, holding our baby. She's had the baby on her shoulder, and she's rubbing his small back.

"Babe, come over here and meet your son, Michail Alessandro," Leticia says, smiling.

"Baby girl, that's a mouthful, but I like it. Thank you, you did it," I say, walking over to look at my baby boy.

"Isn't he so beautiful," Leticia purrs, rubbing his back?

"Yes, he's a perfect Baby girl. You did good. Baby, you scared me to death, don't ever do that again," I croak, leaning to kiss her lips softly.

I pull back and gaze into her warm eyes, smiling. I lean over to kiss my baby's forehead, inhaling deeply. His sweet baby smell seeps into my soul.

Fuck!

He's mine.

I look at the baby's little nose and his little red lips. I touch his little hand.

I look up at my Baby girl smiling.

Leticia smiles, flashing those cute dimples that I love.

"I'm so happy, Babe; our baby boy is healthy, in my arms, and I'm going to take care of both of you," Leticia says, beaming.

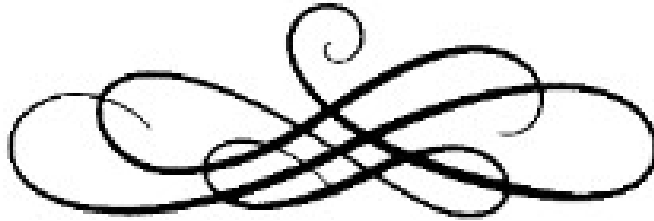
"Baby girl, I'm here for you for eternity, I promise you! I love you," I say in a raspy voice.

"I love you, Babe," Leticia says, kissing my lips.

"Leticia Maria Sanchez Stone, you're mine today, tomorrow, and for eternity," I growl, taking her lips in a deep kiss.

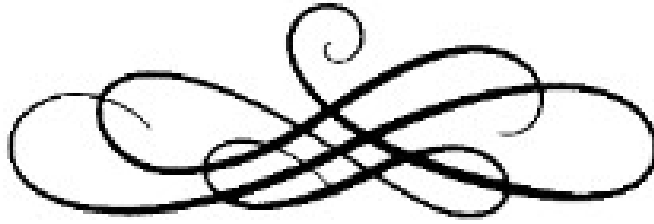
The End

Note From P.T. Macias



If you enjoyed Love At Full Throttle, Anarchy Kings MC, Michael's, and Leticia's story, please consider leaving a review. Reviews are awesome and help tremendously with the reader's decision to read the story.

P.T. Macias

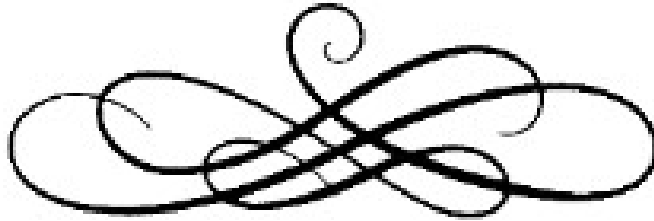


I live in California with my husband, children, and grandkids. They're my pride and joy. We adore Bella, our sassy, sweet Maltipoo.

When I am not writing, I enjoy spending time with my family, going on cruises, seeing concerts, eating white peaches and pistachio ice cream, walking with Bella, and sipping margaritas.

Enjoy my stories about the dark, sexy, dirty-talking mafia, bad boy bikers, alpha billionaires, MMA cage fighters, and paranormal romance. My stories are full of action, suspense, danger, secrets, a dash of romance, and HEA.

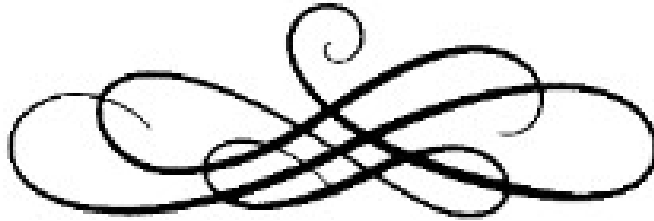
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Note To Reader



Dear Reader, I'm inviting you to check out Elite Power, Blue Blood Deadly Sins, Blue Blood Deadly Sins Mafia Crime Family Romance, Russian Mafia Romance, Forged In Twilight, and Angels Of The Fallen, The Watchers.

I know that you will enjoy these dark, sexy alphas!

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