



*Nanny's Baby*  
for the *Italian*

**MAFIA BOSS**

**ROSALIE ROSE**

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# **Nanny's Baby for the Italian Mafia Boss**

**By Rosalie Rose**

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# **CONTENT WARNING**

This story is intended for mature readers and contains themes that may be sensitive to some, including violence, mentions of blood and killing, and explicit love scenes.

# Prologue

*Sophie*

I've always had issues listening to my instincts, the ones that scream at me, that come from down deep within my gut. I chalk the voices in my head telling me to run in the opposite direction up to being nervous, or paranoid. I'm inherently distrusting, and I tell myself that it's my fault people leave, but I still try to be patient, and give people the benefit of the doubt.

How many chances are too many before you feel stupid for not listening to your intuition?

I think I hit my limit because right now, I feel like a complete idiot for forcing myself to try and trust another person.

I'm across the street from Flower's Café, my favorite place to grab a muffin and caramel latte. It's the perfect spot to read and relax, with blooming flowers everywhere, Victorian furniture, and light pink wallpaper with tiny roses on it that would seem excessive, but it's perfect.

Unfortunately, all my issues lie in the outdoor sitting area of the beautiful café.

Michael, my boyfriend—soon to be ex—is sitting with my best friend, Courtney. His hand is outstretched across the table, her fingers intertwined with his. They share smiles, and even from across the street, while cars go by, I can hear her giggles as she laughs at one of his jokes, which I'm sure are lame. He isn't a funny guy. Not with me. He's very intense, almost unsettling in a way, but again, I convinced myself I just wasn't used to someone giving me so much attention.

Michael and I have been fighting because I won't have sex with him, but that's the one voice I have been listening to. It's been screaming in the back of my head to not have sex with him, plus I didn't feel comfortable rushing things.

Now, I know why.

I watch them for a moment, my arms crossed over one another, and my fingers automatically feel the raised burn scars on my forearms under my long sleeve shirt. It's another thing Michael hates. He can't stand that I always cover my arms, but I refuse to let him see just so he can turn around and be hateful.

My breath catches in my throat and my eyes burn as I watch Michael and Courtney lean over the table and kiss, but tears don't fall; my feelings for him do not go that deep. I'm upset because, again, I've put myself in this position. His hand cups her jaw, an affection he never shows me, and when they break apart, she has a goofy love-drunk grin on her face.

"Idiot..." I whisper to myself, staring up at the sky to stop the tears from falling. I won't miss him, but I can't help but wonder when it will be my turn to have a lover; a true companion that I can trust, where my instincts aren't screaming at me to run.

I've been by myself for a while. When I was young, a house fire took my family from me, and I was the only survivor, left severely burnt on my arms. I bounced around from foster home to foster home until I settled on a great one. One where I was the only child, and no one called me a freak for having these scars. Kids are brutal, and even now, I see the adults aren't much better. So I hide.

I'm tired of hiding.

Throwing my shoulders back, I look both ways before crossing the street to approach them. The breeze brings the smell of coffee and scones, and my mouth waters, my stomach grumbling, reminding me I haven't had breakfast. But I don't think I could eat before doing this.

I nearly trip over the curb and almost run into a man in a business suit. We barely miss shoulders, but his scent tickles my nose, and it smells fresh, like stepping outside on a foggy morning while pine trees surround me. He smells so good.

But I can't lose focus, I have to keep my eyes forward. My determination can't waver. I stop in front of the small iron fence that separates the café from the sidewalk. Colorful flowers line the top, and bees happily settle in the middle of the petals.

My shadow falls over their table and I snag their drinks. His is a hot coffee, black, just like his cold, dead soul. Hers is iced, with extra whipped cream, and I hope it is freezing.

Before they can process what's happening, I dump their drinks over their heads and Michael shouts in pain as the hot liquid heats his skin. Courtney screams, standing so fast that the chair skids across the ground. Her arms are up by her side, her lips parted, and a scoff leaves them as she slings her hands to get the coffee from her skin, like a wet dog after a bath.

She's about to say something when she lifts her head and recognizes me. Her eyes widen and her arms drop to her sides. Ice falls from the top of her head and clatters to the floor.

"Sophie," Michael's voice has me turning my head. "It isn't what it looks like."

I roll my eyes. "You really must think I'm stupid if you think for one minute I'm going to fall for that cliché, bullshit line." I keep my voice level and calm, even though on the inside, it's storming. All I want to do is scream. I glance at Courtney, tears threatening to fall as I look at my best friend.

Well, my ex-best friend.

"Sophie," she whispers my name, her bottom lip trembling.

I hold up my hand to stop her from saying anything else. "Nothing you say, no apology you make will matter to me. You are no longer my friend." I turn to Michael, wondering how the hell I ever ignored my instincts about him. "And we are over. You can have Courtney. I'm sure she'll give you the sex you're looking for."

"We haven't—"

"I don't care, Courtney. You haven't *yet*. I bet you would have, and I wouldn't have known. Fuck you, kindly." I tell her, spinning to Michael. "And fuck you kindly, too. We are



obviously done. I'll be getting my things soon." I turn on my heel and walk away.

The other customers must have been listening because I see everyone's eyes on us, and several people actually give me a thumbs up as a sign of approval, putting a smile on my face. Tears don't fall. I will not give that asshole the satisfaction of making me cry, ever again.

I knew he wanted to have sex. He's been pressuring me for two months, but I never thought he'd cheat.

Who am I kidding? I did know. My instincts told me to run, and I didn't listen.

I march down the sidewalk, not knowing where to go but needing to get away from here.

"Sophie! Sophie, wait!"

I ignore Michael calling for me, rolling my eyes.

"Sophie!" he growls, gripping my arm. He tugs hard, spinning me around, and holds my biceps until it hurts. "Stop and fucking listen to me."

I shove him away. "You have major issues and I want nothing to do with them. Stay away from me."

His nostrils flare and coffee drips from the wet ends of his hair. "This isn't over," he says. "You're mine, Sophie. I've put in months waiting for you."

I rear back, shocked by his statement. "You're a disgusting human being. I am not yours. I'll never be yours and you will never have me." I hurry away before he can grab me again, then cross the street just in time for a car to drive by, blocking him from following me.

This is a new beginning. Away from Michael. Away from friends I thought I could trust.

It's the start of me listening to my instincts. They haven't proven me wrong yet.

I have an interview tomorrow for an amazing job, which could turn out to be the opportunity of a lifetime. It's a

position to become a nanny for a little girl and to maintain the house, with an amazing salary and benefits. I also get to live in the home, so I'll save on rent.

I can't wait.

I need this job.

If I don't get it, I'm not sure what I'll do. I've been on my own before and I can do it again, but bouncing around from place to place is exhausting compared to finding roots.

I want to settle.

This could be my chance to do it.

# Chapter One

*Matias*

Having to take over for my twin brother Ari after only a few years of him being in charge is daunting. I never wanted to be in charge. When my oldest brother, Carmine, asked me years ago if it was something I was interested in, I said ‘no’ without hesitation. It isn’t because I’m not capable. I am. I am more serious than Ari, quietly planning out a way of strategy, while Ari is very charismatic, funny, and lighthearted; it was those characteristics that made him a leader difficult to dislike. Everyone wanted to make Ari happy. He was just that kind of man. Everyone wanted to be on his side. Anyone stupid enough to be on his bad side ended up dead, and that’s how he made his name.

Granted, being on the mafia’s good side only leaves the other option to be death, but it was more than that with Ari. People wanted to be his friend.

Me?

I don’t care about friendship. I only care about the job.

Everything is different now. The compound has changed since Ari and his wife left. They are in a new territory since we are expanding so much, and we decided it is best if this compound remained headquarters. Carmine has currently settled in Boston, making new frenemies with the local Irish mob. As much as I am proud of us, there is a part of me that mourns how it used to be. I’ve always lived with my family. Ari and I have always been at each other’s sides. I can’t count on him to be there when I turn my back now.

It’s a circumstance I’m going to have to get used to soon.

“Your eleven o’clock is waiting, Matias,” Gianni announces as he enters the office.

At least I have him. He's been a constant in our lives as well, and when Ari gave him the opportunity to live with him, Gianni decided to stay with me.

He's a father figure to me, and maybe he knew he would be needed more here than with Ari. I'm not sure. I am grateful that he decided to stay, though.

"Daddy?" Fiorella, my daughter, rushes into the office with her arms wide.

I grin, picking her up and swinging her around. She giggles, and it's music to my ears. "Ella Bella, what chaos do you bring me this morning?" I call her by the nickname I gave her the moment I adopted her last year, when she was five years old.

I have always wanted a family, but since I wasn't in charge of the mafia, I didn't have the pressure of having to find a wife. I saw Carmine and Ari with their families, and I knew I wanted one of my own. I knew I didn't need a wife to have a family, so when it came to having a child, it was simple.

Adoption.

I've always wanted to adopt, and when the opportunity presented itself, I grabbed it. Ella's parents died in a terrible accident, leaving her the only survivor, and when we met, it was an instant connection. I knew I wanted to protect her with my life.

She's the best part of me and keeps me optimistic.

"I just wanted to say hi," she says, placing her head on my shoulder.

I wrap my arm around her and sit down, lifting my head to look at Gianni. "Tell him I'll be with him in ten minutes. Okay?"

Gianni knows that no matter what, my daughter comes first. Everyone else can go straight to hell.

"I'll let him know."

When the door shuts, Ella buries her face into my neck and gets comfortable. "What's wrong, Ella Bella? Talk to me." I

rub her back in soothing circles and she sighs dramatically, as if she has the weight of the world on her shoulders.

“I miss you. Can we go get ice cream later? Or go to the playground?”

We have a playground in our own backyard, but I know it isn't the same. It doesn't have other children.

“Anything you want. I have this meeting and then we can go.” My phone dings and it's Gianni. He must be standing on the other side of the door and can hear me because the message says:

*Remember, you're interviewing the nanny this afternoon as well.*

Damn it. That's right. “And I have to interview the nanny, remember?”

She sticks out her bottom lip. “I remember. Will she play with me when you can't?”

“Absolutely.” I clear my throat when regret bubbles up. “You know I always want to play with you, right? You know how much I love tea time.”

She gives me a big smile that shows her dimples. “I know, Daddy. I love you, anyway.”

I snort, placing her feet on the ground. “I love you too. Why don't you go set up your room for tea time and I'll see if we can't get tea in before I interview the nanny? I can't make any promises, but today we will be having tea.”

She squeals with excitement and runs out of the room. Her feet patter on the floor as she sprints down the hallway.

I chuckle, but it doesn't stop the ache in my heart, wishing I could give Ella my undivided attention. It's why I'm hiring a nanny. I need help here. Being a single dad is much harder than I thought it would be. I wouldn't change it for the world, though.

I pick up my phone and text Gianni.

*“Bring him in.”*

I place my elbows on the table and wait for a potential customer or victim to walk through the door.

When he does, I watch as a tall lanky man with slicked back hair and a nervous smile stumbles through the door. Gianni rolls his eyes and gives me a look that says I do not need to be worried.

“Mr. Milazzo,” his voice quivers as he stretches out his hand. “It is nice to meet you. Th-thank you for taking the time to meet with me.” He stutters slightly with nerves. There’s sweat on his brow, and he reaches to wipe it off with his forearm.

I stare at his hand, knowing it will be sweaty, and decide against it. “Please, sit down, Mr. Rochester. Interesting name,” I say, looking at his file that Gianni gave me.

No criminal record. Decent credit score—not that I care about that—and he is married. Good. If he’s married it means he has something to live for. He’ll be more diligent with the money and honest if he truly loves his wife. Oh, and he has a child. Eighteen. Fantastic.

He drops his hand and sits down. His legs begin to shake, and his fingers intertwine with one another.

I narrow my eyes. “Do you plan on attacking me, Mr. Rochester?”

His eyes widen in horror at the accusation. “No, Mr. Milazzo. Never. I would never do such a thing.” He shakes his head so much, sweat flies from the ends of his hair and onto my desk.

I curl my lip in disgust. “Please, stop shaking. You’re getting your sweat everywhere.”

“Oh god, I’m sorry. I’m so nervous.” he says again, trembling more with fear.

“I’m not going to kill you or hurt you. This is a business meeting you wanted, remember? If I wanted to kill you, I would have done it already. You wouldn’t have gotten through these doors,” I remind him, and somehow, that helps him calm down.

“Right. That makes sense.” He lets out a deep breath and nods, wiping the sweat from his forehead again.

I didn’t know someone could sweat so much.

“How can I help you today, Mr. Rochester?”

“As you probably already know, I run a successful food truck.”

I nod, having the food from his business myself a few times. He makes a delicious Philly cheesesteak hoagie.

“I do,” I say, folding my arms together. “Are you looking to franchise?”

“No, Mr. Milazzo. My daughter got a part-time scholarship to Harvard. I only have enough money set aside for thirty percent of what is owed. I’m looking to borrow the other twenty. I’m good for it, Mr. Milazzo. I’m not rich by any means, but my family and I live comfortably. I can pay you back in weekly increments.” He hands over a folder. “This is what I’ve made in a year. I’ve broken it down per week for you and how much I can pay you back at the end of every week, which will still allow my family and I to live without worry.”

I flip through the pages, loving how he has come prepared. I study his numbers, pleased with how much he has made and how he plans to pay me back. He’s really done his homework.

“I like you and your truck, Mr. Rochester.” I tap the folder with my finger. “And you’ve impressed me today. You have yourself a deal. You’ll begin paying me back when her semester begins. I also want proof you’ve used that money to pay for her education. Do not lie to me about where my money is going.”

“Absolutely, Mr. Milazzo. I promise. That I can do.”

“I’ll have my lawyer make our contract. You’ll be hearing from me soon. I’ll deposit the funds in your account by tomorrow.”

“Don’t you need my account information?”

I give him a bored look, lifting a brow.

He chuckles. “Right. Of course, you don’t. Thank you so much, Mr. Milazzo. I appreciate this.”

“You’re responsible. It’s a big thing going for you and if you ever want to franchise, come see me. I’ll happily invest in your business.”

He beams. “Really? I’ve never considered it.”

“You should. Your food is delicious. Think it over.”

He holds out his hand again for me to shake, and I fist-bump him instead.

“I will. Thank you. Thank you so much, Mr. Milazzo.”

“Mr. Rochester?” I call out for him before he can leave.

“Do not fuck me over,” I say in a warning. “You know what I’m capable of.”

His face loses all of its color. “I wouldn’t consider it, Mr. Milazzo. You have my word.”

“You may go,” I tell him, and he runs out the door as if vicious dogs are biting at his ankles.

I let out a breath when the door shuts behind him, and rub my eyes as they begin to burn. It is still early in the day, and I could go to sleep. Ari advised that I’d get used to the job, the stress, and the responsibility, but I have doubts.

I have always had doubts. It was one of the reasons why I turned down Carmine to begin with, but now that I’m a father, I’m not sure how I’m going to keep up. I saw Carmine and Ari do it, so why can’t I? They did have partners. My brothers got very lucky with whom they chose to have contracts with. They fell in love with those women, and it’s worked out for them.

While Ari was in charge, I adopted Ella, and there was no pressure for me to have a wife. Now, I haven’t heard the end of it from Ari and Carmine.

The pressure is on.

It doesn’t look good that I’m the mafia boss with a child, but no wife. I find it a little too traditional. In this day and age,



I don't see why I can't be a single dad and a mafia boss, but our family rules say otherwise.

Carmine believes it shows power and a sense of family. I'll do it because I want to keep my brothers happy.

And so that I don't receive another text message from Ari saying I need to make a plan to get married.

It won't be difficult for me to find a wife. I know a few women who would jump at the opportunity, but I want someone specific. I want certain qualities. I don't want someone by my side just to feel like a trophy.

I truly want a partner, and I don't know the first thing about making that happen, especially when I have my daughter to think about.

"Matias?" Gianni's voice has me lifting my head, and that's when he gives me a soft smile as if he feels bad for me.

Then, I notice my position.

He caught me with my head in my hands and my elbows on the table.

"You're doing great, kid," he tells me, walking into the room to drop a file on my desk. "Rome wasn't built in a day."

I snort, tapping my fingers on the folder. "I know. I appreciate it, Gianni."

"You're like your twin. You wear your worry on your sleeve, while your brother wears his emotions."

"Worry is an emotion, is it not?"

He lets my words sink in and rubs his chin with his fingers. "It is, but it is the only one you let show, unlike your brother. He let everyone know what he was feeling when he was feeling it. Happy, angry, sad, you name it, he showed it. You constantly worry about doing well in this position, but it is a position you were meant for. Carmine knew it and so did Ari. Ari wanted you in his place. Let things come naturally, Matias. You'll be just fine."

“Thanks, Gianni. I appreciate it.” I take a deep breath and try to relax. I hadn’t realized my worry was showing so much. I’ll have to rein that in.

“The file on your desk is for the nanny. You’ll be interviewing her soon. I’ve pulled everything I could find on her. Anything you need to know will be in that file.”

“Thanks, Gianni. Hey, can you do me a favor and—”

“Check on my wonderful niece? You don’t have to ask me twice.” He closes the door behind him, and his footsteps tell me he is on his way down the hall.

“Uncle G!” I hear a scream from Ella. It’s the kind of squeal that is loud and full of happiness.

Taking a sip of water, I lean back in my chair and open the file. Paperclipped to the folder is an image that has my breath catching in my throat and my heart slamming against my chest.

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter, not caring about anything else in the folder besides this photo.

She is gorgeous, but not in the way I’m used to. She’s real and refreshing. I’m typically surrounded by fake women with fake lips, breasts, hair extensions, and anything to ‘enhance’ their beauty. I typically have found most of those women superficial. They were only interested in my money and status.

Leaning forward, I hold her picture with both hands, wanting to memorize every aspect of her face. She’s not wearing any makeup. Her hair is long, the color of honey, and in soft waves down her shoulders. She’s smiling, her big bright smile adding to her charm. Her eyes are the show, in my opinion. They are bright blue, so stark, I can’t help but wonder if they glow in the night.

It’s a ridiculous thought, but they are that striking.

I guess in the scheme of things, other men would consider her plain or the girl next door. Someone who is easily passed over for someone superficial, but there’s no way I could ever miss an opportunity with this beauty.

I glance at her file, catching her name, and I can't help but smile when I see it. It matches her.

"Sophie Matthews," I say to the photo, rubbing my thumb over her face. "You're going to be mine." I don't know how I'll manage that. She's here for a job, not for anything else.

My plan will have to get her to want me, to fall in love with me, to have her want to be a mother to Ella.

Then, she won't be a nanny.

She'll be my wife, the mother to my children, and her beauty will forever be mine.

## Chapter Two

*Sophie*

My Volkswagen Beetle decides to screech as soon as I pull up to the iron gate blocking off the entire property. I roll down my window by the handle, and even that sounds like a banshee screaming in the night. I wince, then my entire body heats with embarrassment because there is no way the person who lives in this mansion didn't hear everything wrong with my car.

Yes, it needs a new fan belt, new air conditioning, tires, an oil change, and brakes. The entire car shakes when I press the brakes and I don't think that's a good sign. Every now and then, the exhaust pops too, like a gunshot.

I just hope it doesn't do that while I'm here.

It's one of the main reasons I need this job so badly. I know this car isn't pretty to look at. It has faded blue paint and rust around the fenders. It needs a lot of work, but it's my car. I bought it with my own money. That's important to me. I want to be able to fix it with my own money too.

In hopes that I get the job; I might have my bags packed in the trunk from being a little too hopeful. Michael wasn't happy when he had come home to empty drawers with no note, but honestly, what is there to say? It's time to move on. I have nowhere else to go now; if this doesn't work out, I'm not sure what my next move is. But I had to get away from Michael. I had to take this risk.

"Milazzo Residence," a deep voice sounds over the speaker.

I tug on my shirt sleeves to make sure my burns are covered. "Hi. My name is Sophie Matthews... I have an interview for the nanny position?" I swallow nervously, wondering if maybe I'm at the wrong house or if they made a mistake calling me.

I stare out my windshield at the most gorgeous home I've ever seen. The windows arch, allowing sunlight in, and the light and dark brick complement each other. It has a gothic feel to it, something old, and possibly a dangerous story to be told.

"Welcome, Ms. Matthews." There's a buzzing sound and the iron gate opens, creaking to add to the dark quality the estate seems to hold.

Easing on the gas, my car lurches forward, sputters, and does the one thing I didn't want it to do.

It backfires.

"So embarrassing," I groan, and park in one of the few parking spots off to the side.

A house with designated parking? There's a first time for everything.

I still have both hands on the wheel when there's a knock on my window. I scream, placing a hand to my chest. I scramble for the pepper spray I keep in the middle of the console and point it to the window.

The man on the other side gives me a ghost of a smile, lifting up his hands in surrender. I'm still trying to catch my breath when he opens the door.

"Ms. Matthews, I come in peace. Apologies for scaring you. That was not my intention."

I drop the pepper spray and it clatters on the floorboard. "Oh my god. I'm so sorry. I should have known. It's a habit."

"It's a good habit to have. I'm Gianni." He offers his hand to me, and I take it so he can help me out of the car.

"You can call me Sophie," I kindly correct him.

He gives a curt nod while giving my car a look of quick disapproval. "Sophie. Mr. Milazzo is waiting for you in his office."

"I'm interviewing *with* him?"

Gianni's dark brows pinch together as he stares down at me. "Of course. It is his daughter you'll be looking after."

"I'm just surprised. Sometimes people of his...status have someone else to do the interview process."

He shakes his head as he shuts my door. "Mr. Milazzo would never trust another person to hire someone else to be around his child. He is too protective of his daughter. And any parent who hires someone else to interview the person who is to watch their children is a sorry excuse of a human being," he adds with venom, before clearing his throat. "Mr. Milazzo isn't that kind of man."

I'm not sure why I recognize the last name. It's tickling a memory in my mind, something familiar that I can't put my finger on.

"That's great. I love it when parents are involved."

"You won't have to worry about that with Mr. Milazzo. He's very involved. When he is working, he needs help. He is a single father."

"Did something happen to the mother?" I want to make sure I don't say anything offensive or hurtful if his wife passed away or something else.

"Mr. Milazzo has never been married. He adopted his daughter last year. Her biological parents died in a car accident. She was the only survivor."

"Oh god, that's... that's terrible."

"Don't let him know I told you," he grumbles as we climb the steps. "I have said too much, but I think it's important for you to go into the interview with some information rather than none."

"I appreciate that. Thank you, Gianni." I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear and step out of the way when he opens the large wooden door with a big iron handle.

"After you, Ms. Matthews."

"Sophie," I correct him. "Just Sophie."

“Just Sophie.” He gives a slight bow of his head, spreading his arm to allow me inside first.

Stepping forward, my mouth drops open when I step inside. My eyes travel the walls, then the ceiling, focusing on the large chandelier hanging above me. On either side of the walkway are parallel wooden staircases swirling from the ground floor up.

It’s beautiful and unique. The style reminds me of something from another time... It’s like I stepped into a different era. “This place... It’s gorgeous.”

“He’ll be glad you think so. Follow me. I’ll show you to Mr. Milazzo’s office where he is waiting for you.”

I tug on my shirt sleeves again as I follow him through a house I feel like I have no business in. Gianni’s steps are long and calculated, proving he has walked this house a hundred times. Even from behind him, I can tell how confident he is. His shoulders are back, his spine is straight, and the expanse of his shoulders is impressive and muscular, even from this angle. For his age, he stays in great shape.

He walks with the confidence I wish I had.

I’ve never been the type to catch anyone’s eye. I don’t have the “in your face” beauty or body. I’m not what society deems beautiful. I’m plus-size. I have curves. I’m still learning how to appreciate my body. After bouncing around so many foster homes for most of my life, I heard horrible things from my foster siblings and parents. The abuse was never-ending when it came to body shaming me, but I’m working through it every day. It isn’t easy, especially with my scars.

One day, I’ll walk with as much confidence as Gianni.

He takes a hard left, knocking on a large French door that’s painted white.

“Come in.”

The depth of his voice from the other side of the door has shivers running down my spine. Even the two simple words sound commanding and powerful.

Gianni opens the door, and he gives a reassuring nod, silently saying everything will be okay. Letting out a breath, I throw my shoulders back and step forward, but of course, my foot catches the back of my heel. I squeal as I trip, soaring forward.

Arms wrap around me, catching me before I can hit the ground. I gasp, placing my hands on his chest. My back is touching his knee, protecting me from the floor, and I'm left staring up at the most handsome man I've ever laid eyes on.

Our gazes lock. Time stands still, and I lose any train of thought I had while in his arms. The palm of his hands spread across my back, making me feel small, fragile, and delicate. That's hard to do. I don't have the body of a model but while he's holding me, I feel like I do. His gaze is darting between my eyes, a concerned darkness to them. I shouldn't notice, but his top lip is slightly smaller than the bottom, and there is a scar on his chin.

I want to ask what happened, but I don't want to seem intrusive, especially when this man is about to be my boss—hopefully.

“Are you alright, Ms. Matthews?” he asks, his tone intimidating as he peers down at me. He straightens, bringing me upright with him, and it somehow brings us closer. I feel like I can't breathe in his proximity.

“I'm fine.” I finally report, unable to move or step away from him. He's a magnet, forcing me to be pulled into him, and I can't fight it. I slide my eyes from his stupid, perfectly structured face to his chest.

His wide, muscular, defined, and hard chest.

I lick my lips and then drop my arms fast when I realize I've been staring at him far too long. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to trip. I'm a little nervous.” I know my cheeks are on fire and probably as red as they are when I get burnt in the summertime.

If I'm not mistaken, he looks me up and down, taking his time. I hold my breath for him to be done. I don't know if he's



checking me out or assessing me, but his cold gaze leads me to believe that I shouldn't be so confident. Maybe he thinks I'm not in good enough shape to be running around after his daughter, but I am. I love to run.

“There's no need to be nervous.” He licks his lips and takes a deep breath, walking over to his desk, speaking in a clipped tone. I hope I didn't screw this up before I even made it through the door. “Please, sit down. Do you need anything? Water?”

I could go for a cold shower, but I'm not going to tell him that. “Water would be lovely, thank you.”

He opens a small fridge next to his desk and grabs the bottle, untwisting the cap for me. Our fingers brush as he hands me the water. A simple thing. There should be nothing special about that, but I swear, something passes between us. Maybe I'm going crazy. Either way, I need to stay focused. I need this job, and I can't get distracted by my attraction to this man. Who is insanely attractive.

My adopted mom's words echo in my mind, “Your career won't ever leave you alone and heartbroken like a man will.”

The man standing in front of me has heartbreak written all over him.

No, thank you. I do not have time for that.

I take a long drink of water, casting my eyes around the room so I'm not caught in the snare of his gaze.

I bet he weaves a dangerous web and plenty of women fall into it.

He stands in front of the desk, one ankle crossed over the other, and my attention drops to his cock.

Oh my god, even the black slacks can't hide how big he is.

“What do you like to do?” he asks out of nowhere.

I stop drinking the water and screw on the top to the bottle. “Don't you want to know my school—”

“I’ve read your resume. You have your degree, you’re C.P.R. certified, and you have plenty of experience with kids. You have glowing recommendations, and that’s great. That tells me you care about your job and kids, but it doesn’t tell me what you like to do or who you are as a person.”

“Oh,” I state with surprise. I’m not used to that. “Well, um... I love being active, going to the park, amusement parks are my favorite, dressing up, going out with friends.” I stop myself from listing anything else when I realize my best friend stabbed me in the back and now I don’t have anyone I can trust. “I always love to have blankets on me when I’m sitting down on the couch. It doesn’t matter how warm it is. I always want a blanket.”

His dark demeanor slips for a moment, and I catch his smile, showing his perfect teeth which makes me want him more. I hate it.

“A blanket lover. Okay, I can respect that,” he says, rubbing his face back into its solemn state. “Nothing like being cozy.”

“Exactly.”

“And what kind of things do you hate?”

“I’m sorry?” I ask, once again, surprised by his answer.

“Things you don’t like? Like what makes you happy, what makes you mad? What are you intolerant of?”

This is such an odd interview. I stay silent for a minute, gathering my thoughts as confusion whirls around in my mind.

He tucks his hands in his pockets. “I’m asking because my daughter’s happiness is important to me. I need to know you’re kind, compassionate, funny, and easily adaptable. I need to know you want to be part of this family because I won’t let my little girl fall absolutely in love with you only for you to leave. So, while your resume is impressive—” he picks it up from his desk and tears it in half. “It tells me nothing about who you are as a person.”

“I understand.” Pushing the fear from my mind, I clasp my hands together on my lap, wanting nothing more than to be close to the family I work for. “Well, I don’t like radishes, I

think they are gross.” I crinkle my nose. “Or dragon fruit. Both remind me of dirt. I dislike when someone says they will do something and then they don’t.”

“My daughter does not like radishes either. It’s something you have in common.” He suddenly sits down in the chair next to me and holds out his hand. “We never got a proper introduction. I’m Matias Milazzo.”

I jump out of the chair and back away when the name finally clicks. He gets up, slow and steady, as if he is dealing with a wild animal.

“What’s wrong? What is it?”

“Milazzo. You’re mafia. I don’t get in business with dangerous families. Not after—” Not after what happened to my family. “It was nice meeting you—”

“—Wait.” He wraps his hand around my arm to stop me. “What you have heard about my family is true. I am in charge of my family’s...organization.”

“You’re a crime family,” I correct him with a bit more sass than anticipated.

He tilts his head and the friendliness in his eyes is gone, replaced with the same darkness I’d expect to find in a man who is about to do something I do not like.

“We are. We are successful, too. You’ll find we run most of the city. While you might not like my business tactics, I am a different man personally. I want to offer you the job. A million per year? Benefits included.”

An odd sound escapes me, something between a yelp and a gasp. “A million is a bit much.”

“Not for my daughter’s happiness. You have one last interview to pass, and I have to warn you, she’s high energy. Unless you want to walk out the door because you don’t want to be associated with a crime family,” he says.

His hand is still on my arm, his fingers clutching firm enough to have me stay still but gentle enough for me to melt into his arms.

“I—I don’t know. You don’t understand.”

“I don’t,” he agrees softly, and I can tell he’s trying to calm me so that I don’t run out of here like a maniac. “But, maybe I can prove I’m someone you can trust so one day I can understand.”

I lift my eyes to his, and his attention drifts all over my face before landing on my lips.

I lick them and I don’t know if the two are related, but he grunts before letting me go.

“Ella!” he shouts for his daughter. “Her name is Fiorella, Ella for short. I call her Ella Bella or Ella Bella Bear. Depends on the day.”

“It’s funny to think of a man like you saying those words.”

“Ah, I’m not so big and evil.” He winks, and I have to look away quickly, wanting to hide my reaction to him. What the hell was that?

Fast little footsteps pound down the hall and the door bursts open. An adorable girl flies through the room and slams herself against her dad. He picks her up and sets her on his hip. If I didn’t know he adopted her, I would think they were related.

She has dark hair like his, inquisitive eyes, but a smile that’s honest and innocent.

Ella is wearing hot pink leggings and a white shirt that has a unicorn on it that’s jumping over rainbows. There’s a big red stain on it too. Probably from a popsicle.

“Ella. This is Sophie. She might be your new nanny.”

“Hi, Ella.” I take a step forward and hold out my hand, careful not to drop my tone too much. In my classes, I read it’s important to talk to them normally. It helps with development.

“Do you like ice cream?” she asks.

“I love ice cream.”

“Would you dress up with me for tea time?”

“Are you kidding?” I scoff. “I would love to do that. It’s been so long since I’ve had a good cup of tea.”

She giggles. “Not real tea, silly.”

“Oh, duh.” I slap my forehead. “I love pretend tea too. Will there be tiaras?” I give her a skeptical glare.

“Yes! Yes! I love tiaras. Daddy wears one too. Well, he calls it a crown,” she rolls her eyes. “But whatever.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I use the same tone as her, and Mr. Milazzo sets Ella down. I realize a moment too late that I may have overstepped, and look back to him. I feel relief wash over me as he smiles at his daughter.

“I see I’m going to have my hands full with you two.”

“Come on. Let me show you my room.” Ella grabs my hand and ushers me out of the office. Kids are so trusting.

I follow her, then make the mistake of looking over my shoulder to see Mr. Milazzo staring at me. It’s an image I never want to forget. His domineering gaze is pinned on me as we run down the hall, and I feel a shiver run down my spine, unsure if it’s fear or pleasure.

“Look! See? They are all ready.”

Her stuffed animals sit in chairs surrounding a child-size pink table. They are wearing fake jewelry and tiaras.

And Gianni is there, giving me a ‘save me’ look. He is wearing a tiara, too, and strapped to his shoulders are a pair of fairy wings that are way too small for his body.

“I guess you got the job.” He picks up the teacup that’s too small for his fingers and sips. “You better get used to teatime.”

Ella giggles, which has Gianni’s tense shoulders loosening.

I place my purse down and sit in a free chair, allowing Ella to place the tiara on me.

*Yeah, I guess I did get the job.*

“Tea?” Ella asks.

“Yes please.” She tilts the pot and pours the fake tea out.

I hold up my hand. “That’s good. Thank you.”

I think I hear Gianni chuckle under his breath, but we’re interrupted by his cellphone ringing. “Sorry, Gummy Bear. I have to go back to work.”

“You owe me for tea then,” Ella huffs.

“I always do.” He kisses her forehead and hurries out the door.

“I guess it’s just us girls,” I tell her, picking up my cup.

“Finally. The boys in this house—” she shakes her head which causes me to laugh.

I think I’m going to like it here.

## Chapter Three

*Matias*

I can't stop thinking about Sophie. How she felt in my arms after she tripped felt too right. It was like I held what home finally felt like.

And I want to do it again.

The thought of seeing her has nerves fluttering through my system. I'm not a man who ever gets nervous. I have never been afraid of not getting something I wanted because I just go for it, I take it, but Sophie? I don't think she will be that easy.

Rejection isn't something I'm used to, so yes, I admit that I am so fucking nervous, I don't know how to walk out the office doors to greet her. I need to welcome her to her new home, perhaps through a party? No, no, a party is too much. She doesn't seem like the type. Especially when she's surrounded by people she doesn't know. I can't do that to her.

Not yet.

A knock at the door sounds.

"Come in," I rasp, hoping it's her.

I watch the door swing open, only to see Gianni, and my hope falls.

He grins. "Well, you look like you wished I was someone else."

"Sorry, Gianni." I rub my eyes and sigh. "I'm always happy to see you."

"Mhmm," he hides a smile. "You weren't hoping I was a cute blonde-haired woman with bright blue eyes?" he bats his lashes, teasing me.

I chuckle, standing from my desk to call it a night. "Maybe." I glance at her file and tuck it under my arm. I want to look over every detail of her past. I want to know

everything about her. I could wait and hope she'd tell me herself, but it would take so much time for her to open up to me.

I need to know about her now.

"She's beautiful." He sounds like he is testing the waters to start a conversation of how I feel about her.

"She's the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on."

"Will you do a contract for her to be your wife? Will you offer it? Carmine and Ari have been messaging me about you, too."

I grind my teeth together as frustration builds. "I'm sorry you have to deal with them," I clip, debating if I want to call my brothers to tell them to back the fuck off. They shouldn't be roping Gianni into it.

"It's fine. I'm used to it, but are you?" he prods.

I slowly nod. "Eventually. I want to. I want her to be mine. I just... know. It was just like I knew Ella was meant to be my daughter. Sophie is meant to be my wife, but I can't breach that topic with her yet. She's here for a job, not to sign a contract into being my spouse."

"Ah, so you're going to somehow be sly, try to have her fall in love with you, and then offer the contract?"

"When you put it like that it sounds bad," I grumble.

"No, I think it's honorable. It is messy because she is here for a job. You don't want to push that too soon."

I nod, thankful he agrees with me. "What's she doing now? Is she okay?"

"She's hanging out with Ella still."

"I'm going to pour us a glass of wine I think. Maybe we can get to know each other better." I swallow, trying to hide my nerves.

"This isn't your first time with a woman, Matias. Don't be so nervous. It isn't like you."



“I know, but I can’t help it. She makes me unsteady.”

“That’s how you know she’ll be worth it.” He claps me on the shoulder and gives it a good squeeze, staring directly in my eyes. “I’m proud of you, Matias. You’re doing great.”

I clear my throat, not wanting him to see how much his words mean to me. I’m not sure if Gianni knows I look at him like a father figure, but I do. I’ve idolized him since I was a kid.

“Thank you, Gianni. That means more than you know.”

He gives a cut tilt of his chin. “I’m going to do one last sweep and check in with a few runners, check security, and call it a night.”

“Thanks, Gianni,” I tell him. “Keep me updated about the runners.”

“Will do.”

The runners are the ones I keep in the city, or near any well-known pick-up and drop-off locations. They find me new information, new customers, deal what drugs need to be dealt, and keep the cash flowing.

After Gianni leaves, the door remains open, and I take the stairs up to the second floor while keeping her file tucked close. When Ari left, I redesigned the entire inside of the house. I wanted my own wing, my own space, and I wanted the men who lived here to have their own area, too.

I’m upstairs to the left, they are upstairs to the right. Ella’s bedroom is next to mine, but her playroom is downstairs, which is where Sophie is right now. I need to get down there soon, before it becomes too late.

Pressing my finger against the scanner, the doors open to the large bedroom with two walk-in closets and a master bath connected. Hurrying, I toss the file on my nightstand, and undress, slipping on comfortable sweatpants and a t-shirt.

I look in the mirror and run my fingers through my hair, noticing I need to shave, but there’s no time. “It isn’t going to

get better than this,” I say to my reflection, before turning off the light and rushing out of the room.

I fly down the steps, holding onto the rail so I don't fall. When my feet touch the floor, I inhale, forcing myself to relax, then head to the kitchen. Grabbing two wine glasses, I set them on the counter, then open the door to the wine cellar. I have no idea which to choose from, so I snag the nearest bottle I can find and notice it is a semi-sweet red, aged perfectly.

“Good enough.” When I enter the kitchen again, I let the bottle air out while I prepare a tray of cheeses and fruits. Then, I pour the wine.

I don't pour a little. I can't stand that shit. I fill each glass more than halfway, and the bottle is nearly empty by the time I'm done.

Hearing laughter from coming down the hall, I leave the treat on the counter while I go investigate. I peer into the room and when I see them, I step into the doorway, leaning against the frame, and cross my arms as I watch them.

Ella's room is fit for a princess. The walls are painted different shades of pink and there are LED lights everywhere that twinkle. There's a huge bean bag in the corner, settled under canopy netting. The bag itself can fit three people and it's full of memory foam, not beads.

I got the best of the best for my little girl. She deserves it.

“And when the princess got to the bridge, a hunchback frog walking on two legs with one eye stepped in front of her.”

I can't help but smile when I hear Sophie tell a story off the top of her head.

“Who says you can come on my land, little gal?” Sophie deepens her voice, raising her fist as the talking frog would.

“Please, Mr. Frog. I need to cross your land. I'm lost. This is the only way home.” This time, Sophie makes her voice higher to simulate the princess.

My attention falls to my daughter, who is looking at Sophie as if she has hung the moon. Emotion bubbles up my throat,

but I keep it locked away. Ella doesn't have a mother or any strong woman in her life. She deserves that and how she looks at Sophie makes me want to make sure my new nanny can't go anywhere. I won't have my daughter love Sophie only for her to leave.

No. That can't happen. I have to bind her to me.

I have to make her mine.

"What's in it for me?" Sophie drops her voice again as Mr. Frog, but this time it is a snarl.

I don't like this Mr. Frog. He's rude.

"I'll make sure my father pays you greatly," the princess speaks again.

Ella's eyes hood and I know it's my time to step in. "I hate to interrupt, but it's time for bed, Ella Bella."

"But Daddy, I want to know what happens to the princess," she begs, giving me giant, puppy dog eyes that I hate to turn down.

"How about we save the story for tomorrow night? It's such a long journey for the princess," Sophie says.

"And Sophie wasn't supposed to start working tonight, Ella. Tonight was her night to get settled."

"No, I don't mind," Sophie says quickly. "I don't consider it work. I loved hanging out with you and I can't wait to hang out with you tomorrow." Sophie boops Ella's nose.

"Okay," she says, defeated.

Ella sags against the bean bag. "Daddy, can I sleep down here tonight?"

Anxiety slams hard against my chest.

"Just tonight? Please?" she begs.

"Ella, you know how I feel about you being too far away from me at night."

"I'm protected, Daddy. I'll be okay. You keep the house safe from all boogeymen," she tells me, reminding me of all the

security I have.

She will be safe, but it's the thought of something bad happening. "I... I don't know."

"Pleeeeeease," she drawls out. "Please, please, please."

"How about you go to bed and while me and Sophie go over a few things, I'll see?"

Which is code for yes.

Ella gives me a big grin. "Okay."

I sit down on the bean bag and wrap her in a hug, squeezing her tight. I hold her as if she's about to disappear just like I do every night.

"I love you, Ella Bella." As much as I hate it, I let go. "I love you very much."

"I love you too, Daddy."

I kiss her forehead and stand, flipping on the sound machine. I keep the LED lights on because Ella is afraid of the dark.

Naturally. Bad things happen where people can't see.

I keep the door open so I can hear her if anything happens, and stop in the hallway, watching her like a hawk.

Sophie's hand suddenly lands on my arm, her touch being the only thing to ever take my attention away from Ella.

"She's okay. She's safe. She'll be alright."

"I don't ever let her sleep down here," I admit, staring at where Sophie is touching my arm. "I don't like to let her out of my sight. Sometimes she has nightmares. She calls out for her mom."

"Oh god, I can't imagine how hard that is. Poor baby. She has to miss them so much."

"She does," I nod, involuntarily inching closer to Sophie.

The move was a mistake. She lets go of my arm and tugs on her sleeves.

Before it can be awkward, I start down the hallway, and she follows behind me. Her presence makes the heaviness in my chest feel a bit lighter.

“What’s this?” she asks, staring at the wine and cheese board in awe. A smile plays on her pouty lips and my eyes fall to them, wondering how they’d feel wrapped around my cock.

God, she’s so fucking beautiful. She’s curvy with wide hips and thick thighs. An image of her riding me, owning my cock as her own flashes in my mind, and my cock begins to stir. Her breasts are large, more than a few handfuls, and they push against her shirt, stretching the material, and I can’t help but notice her nipples are hard, toying with me.

Fuck, I want to worship her body. It’s perfect. I always loved curves compared to thin women. They couldn’t handle how I like to fuck.

I don’t want my partner to break when I drive my cock into them while I have them face down in the mattress.

“I wanted to welcome you properly.” I sit down quickly to hide my arousal. Pushing the wine glass over to her, she takes it, and takes the spot next to me. “It’s been a busy day. I just wanted to thank you for hanging out with Ella. She loved it.”

She waves my words away after taking a sip of wine. “Don’t worry about it. She’s a great kid. She’s very sweet and so smart.”

“She is. She’s all those things and more. I’m very lucky to have her.” I glance down the hall, fighting the urge to check on her again.

“She really loves you. She wouldn’t stop talking about you over our tea. She also says you let her talk about her parents whenever she wants.” She’s prying, but I’m surprisingly not bothered by it.

I pop a grape in my mouth and chew, wondering how I’m going to answer. “Of course, I do. Their deaths are recent to her. She loves them. She misses them. She deserves to always remember her mom and dad. I’ll never be the kind of person who gets angry or jealous over a child missing the one thing

they should always have.” I realize how I sound. My voice is far away as I think back to the childhood I wish I had.

“I think that’s a very amazing quality you have. Not many people would do that. Others think they are in competition with ghosts.”

“There is no competition. Her parents will always be her parents. I’m lucky enough for her to make room in her heart for me and call me her dad.”

“How was it when you first met? What was it like? If that’s okay to ask. I don’t want to pry.”

“No, it’s fine. You should know the family you’re working for, right?”

She nods, nibbling on a piece of cheese.

“I filled out the adoption paperwork, took all the classes, and got approved. They called me and said they had a little girl they thought would be perfect for me. I didn’t waste a second. I got in my car and drove over to the home she was in. I don’t know what it was, but when I saw her, she was so…” I lift my hands, thinking back to the day. “Little. Her eyes were red from crying. Her hair was messy like it hadn’t been brushed in weeks. Her clothes were wrinkled. She looked like someone who was mourning. They had told me about her and what had happened to her parents. I don’t know what it was, but I got out of my car, and we locked eyes. I think both of us felt relief. I don’t know how or why. It was like we sensed we needed one another, I think. She ran to me, and I caught her, wrapping her in a tight hug. She cried, clutching onto my jacket for dear life. She never fought me. She never yelled at me or hated me. She only wanted to grieve and have a parent. I wanted to give that to her. It was an immediate connection. I knew she was mine and I had to protect her. She was my daughter from that moment on. We’ve been inseparable ever since.”

I realize I went on a rant, but before I can apologize, I hear Sophie sniffle and I peer up to see her blue eyes watering. A few tears hit the apples of her cheeks.

“Hey, no. I didn’t mean for you to cry.” I wipe her tears away with my thumb and when I realize what I’ve done, I slowly lower my hand. “I- ...sorry.”

“No, don’t be. That’s... really beautiful. When did she start calling you dad?”

I let out a breath, thinking back to another moment that changed me forever. “God, that was a happy fucking moment.” I roll my lips together and laugh. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to curse—”

“I don’t fucking care,” she jokes, giggling.

It has to be the wine.

I don’t care what it is. I want to hear that sound every damn day.

I take another sip of wine and the glass hits the counter with a clink. “Kids are smart. Adults don’t give kids enough credit. Often times, they aren’t treated with the respect they deserve because adults don’t think kids really know the real world, you know what I mean?”

“I do,” she agrees.

“I never told her she had to call me dad. I introduced myself as Matias Milazzo. Whatever she was comfortable with, I was happy with. I didn’t want her to feel pressure. She didn’t call me anything for a few months. To get my attention, she’d find me and tug my hand. Then one day,” I grin, unable to stop the happiness bursting from me. I don’t ever get to talk about this. It feels so good.

“Then one day? Don’t leave me hanging!” She slaps my shoulder playfully, another giggle escaping her.

We are somehow closer than we were a moment ago. Her cheeks are flushed from the alcohol, causing her eyes to look ethereal.

“It was so basic. Nothing special was happening. It was a regular day. I was making her breakfast and she was taking a bath. She had forgotten her towel. And she simply just... shouted for me. She yelled, “Daddy! Can you bring me a

towel?” And the egg in my hand fell to the floor as I stood, stunned. I ran as fast as I could to grab her towel. Then, I started doubting myself. What if she didn’t mean to call me that? What if she was calling out for her biological father? I tried not to get too excited, but the pain of rejection kept me just outside her bathroom door. I got... scared.”

“You? The mafia boss of all the land was afraid of a little girl?” She teases me again, a playful expression crossing her face.

“Terrified,” I say, all too honestly. “Not much scares me in the world. I’ve seen and I’ve done horrible things.”

The smile fades from her face.

“But that little girl has the power to make me happy one second and fucking scared the next.”

“What happened?”

“She called out for me again. She was yelling, “Daddy? Can you hear me?” I could hear her. I didn’t make a big deal about it when I gave her the towel. I acted calm, even if, on the inside, I was freaking out. I wanted it to feel natural, with no pressure. I didn’t want her to see how happy it made me just in case she ever changed her mind.”

“And then?” she rolls her hand in the air to tell me to continue.

“She put on her pajamas like the big girl she is—which she likes to remind me of—and plopped in my lap. She said, “Daddy, will you brush my hair?” So, for the first time in my life, I brushed someone’s hair that wasn’t my own. She asked me to braid it, but I had to admit I didn’t know how, but I learned. I watched videos and practiced with her.”

“God, you’re... you’re...” She searches for the right words.

“I’m... what?” I lean forward, needing to be closer, wanting to feel the connection growing between us.

“Different than I thought. You’re an amazing father. You didn’t hire me to pawn your kid off on me.”

I flinch, feeling like I’ve been slapped.



“I’m sorry, but single father, mafia boss—which scares me, by the way—but that’s a conversation for another time.” Her eyes dance back and forth between mine as if she’s trying to figure me out. “You really just need help. You want to be with her.”

“As much as possible,” I say. “She’s the world to me, Sophie. I don’t care who it is, but if they hurt her, I’ll kill them. I’ll make it painful.” I lean so close she has to pull away. “I won’t blink twice. I might be a good father, maybe a decent man, but I won’t think twice about murdering someone who hurts my family.”

“Is that a threat to me?” she whispers, fear drenching her voice suddenly, and my eyes roam down to her breasts.

“Yes. Even someone like you, Sophie. If you hurt my daughter, as much as I would hate it, you’d never be a nanny again.” No matter how I feel about Sophie, my daughter is first. Sophie doesn’t know me, and I don’t know her. For all I know, she could try to backstab me by hurting Ella.

Her hand lands on top of mine. “I promise, I won’t hurt her.” Just as quick as her hand fell on mine, she slides it away, then stands. “I should get to bed.”

“Do you know where your room is?”

“Gianni showed me.”

It better be near mine.

I stand as well, not wanting this night to be over yet because I didn’t get to ask her anything about herself.

“Goodnight, Mr. Milazzo.”

“Matias, please.”

“Matias,” she corrects herself. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I look forward to it.” She fades into the dark as she goes to the steps, giving me one last look before her footsteps sound above me.

Fuck.

I want her even more now.

## Chapter Four

*Sophie*

*I scream as the flames lick my arms. Fire surrounds me. I can't breathe. The smoke is heavy. I can't see my parents. Glass breaks. The whoosh of flames grows and climbs up the walls like vines. I try to crawl, but my eyes burn from the heat. I flip to my back and give up, knowing I'm going to die. I feel myself being lifted. Cool air bursts over my skin and when I open my eyes, I see the night sky.*

*"Sophie? Sophie, wake up! Sophie. It's a dream. You're okay. Wake up."*

*I stare at the man carrying me out of the house.*

Right as I open my eyes, the man's face from my dream transitions to Matias. Unless, it was Matias who pulled me from the fire? That can't be.

I scurry away from him until my back hits the headboard. I glance around, my breath coming out in rapid gasps. Matias holds up his hands, showing he means no harm. He still looks half asleep. His hair is messy and he's shirtless. My eyes can't help but wander down his chest. Dark hair covers his chest, trickling down his abs before disappearing into a faint line down his sweatpants.

He is the definition of sexy—no—hot—no—handsome.

All of the above. He is every single option.

"You were screaming, so I came in here to check on you. Are you okay?"

I hold a hand to my chest, my heart racing so fast, and I remind myself to take deeper breaths to calm down. My entire body is hot all over. Sweat dampens my pajamas and my scars under the long sleeves ache as if the burns just happened.

“I’m so sorry,” I croak. My throat is so dry, my voice rasps. “I didn’t mean to wake you up. Did I wake Ella? God, I feel so bad. I don’t typically have nightmares anymore.”

The bed dips from his weight. His voice drips with worry and I can’t help but feel butterflies flutter in my core. “Anymore? Did you use to? Don’t apologize. It’s okay. I just want to make sure you’re alright.”

I nod. “I’m fine.” I glance at the clock and groan when I see it’s three in the morning. “Oh my god, it’s so early. Mr. Milazzo—”

“—Matias,” he corrects.

“Matias,” I repeat. “Am I fired? I can’t promise it won’t happen again.”

He stands, heading to the corner where the mini-fridge is. He grabs a bottle, twists off the cap, and sets it on the nightstand.

“Drink.”

“I’m fine, Mr.—Matias. I’m fine.”

He snags the bottle, yanks my head back by gripping my hair, and my eyes widen at what he is doing.

“Open, Sweet Sophie,” he demands.

My mouth remains closed because I’m too shocked. My body ignites with lust. The valley between my thighs becomes hot and slick. My nipples bead at the rough treatment as he tugs my hair, forcing me to look up at him.

He sighs, tsking, and his thumb pressing against my bottom lip. “I said open, Sophie.” His thumb pushes between my lips. The pad of his finger rubs over my tongue, and I swear I hear him grunt. Matias pours the water into my mouth, and I guzzle it down, sighing when the cool liquid hits my throat.

Dying of thirst, I snatch the bottle from him, and guzzle it down.

His fingers relax on the hold they have in my hair and rub my scalp. “There you go. How about you get out of your

pajamas and into new ones, then try to go back to sleep. If you need me, I'll be in my room."

There's a part of me that doesn't want him to leave. I feel safe. He's made me feel calm with his radiating power and sincerity.

"That's a good idea. I don't know if I'll be able to go back to sleep, so maybe I'll just stay up and start working."

"You will do no such thing. Your day doesn't start until my daughter wakes up and it ends when she goes to bed. Okay?"

"But I'm a nanny for the entire house. I have more to do than that, Matias."

"You'll go back to sleep," he growls in warning. "Understood?"

"Okay," I relent, placing the empty bottle on the nightstand. "I'm sorry for waking you."

"Don't ever apologize for having a nightmare, Sophie. I'll be here when you do, though. Goodnight."

"Night," I whisper, locked in his stare and waiting for him to move.

Even in the dark, I think I can see his eyes fall to my lips. The moonlight peeks into the windows, the shine casting against his silhouette. His shoulders are broad, shadowed by the darkness, while his chest expands with every breath he takes.

"Sweet dreams, Sophie." He stands suddenly, his strides long and fast as he walks to the door, as if he can't wait to get away from me.

The door eases shut, and I'm left alone.

"God," I drone, flopping onto my back as I think about him shoving his finger into my mouth. That was so fucking hot. No one has ever been so assertive with me.

I wonder how he is in other ways. I bet women fall into his lap and his bed. My stomach turns at the thought of seeing one of the women he brings home. I'll have to get used to the idea.

He's single, wealthy, probably the most eligible bachelor in the area. Women will probably come and go every day.

Why do I do this to myself?

I'd never have a chance with him, anyway. He's my boss, which means he is off-limits. Still, I can be attracted to him and hide it. I have to be professional.

"Him sticking his thumb in my mouth is *not* professional," I grumble, rolling off the bed to change and freshen up. I strip out of my shorts and long sleeve shirt, toss them in the laundry hamper and go to the bathroom.

I rinse off the sticky sweat in the shower which only takes a minute before I'm dried off in a warm towel. The burns on my arms have me staring into the reflection of the mirror, wishing like hell they were gone. The burn scars start at my wrist, travel up my forearms, and elbows, and stop just below my bicep. I've had plenty of surgeries to try and make my arms look normal, but there is only so much that can be done.

Turning away from the mirror, I get dressed, then climb back into bed.

I stare at the clock glowing three thirty in the morning and I sigh, turning to my other side. Closing my eyes, I try my best to fall asleep, but the reply of Matias telling me to open my mouth plays through my mind.

My body begins to heat again and the temptation to slide my hand down my body and under my panties is a force I can barely fight. If I do this, if I orgasm to the thought of him, I won't be able to look at him the same. Everything will be different in my mind. It's a line I can't cross, no matter how badly I want to cross it.

I yank the blanket to my chin and settle into the mattress, doing my best to get comfortable. I groan in frustration, tossing and turning until I look at the clock again and notice it is already six in the morning.

So much for rest.

I decide to get up, tossing the blankets off with a little bit of attitude, and throw my hair in a messy ponytail.

For the second time, I get dressed, choosing comfortable leggings and off the off-the-shoulder long-sleeve shirt. I might not show my arms, but I show my shoulders when I can. I feel cute and confident.

After brushing my teeth and washing my face, I throw on a little mascara to make my blue eyes pop, then decide to start my day.

The first thing I do is go to the kitchen and make coffee. The house is eerily quiet, which leaves me alone with my thoughts. I think about what Matias said last night. He gushed about his daughter and it's apparent how much he loves her. The more he talked, the more we slowly leaned into one another. Every time he is near, I can't help but to get closer to him. Despite the voice in the back of my mind that's telling me I should be terrified of him and everything he represents, there's a much stronger, lustful part of me that can't keep my mind off him. It's scary how much control he already has over me.

I was so lost in being close to him last night, listening to his love for his daughter, I forgot to speak or say anything about myself. It's all for the best. I don't trust the mafia, even if their leader is handsome, kind, and compassionate. The mafia had something to do with my house burning down and killing my parents. I don't know why or who it was, but seeing as I'm from this area, there are so many people it can be.

I plan to see if Matias had anything to do with it and if he did, I'll be crushed. Since I'm here, I might as well make the best of it, and get as much information as I can without being confrontational.

As the coffee is brewing, I begin breakfast. Scrambled eggs, fruit, and toast. I sprinkle salt, pepper, and other seasonings on the eggs with cheese, give it a good stir so the cheese melts, and make everyone's plate.

Matias is first.

I grab a tray, filling it with breakfast, then a cup of orange juice, and his coffee. I set sugar and cream to the side since

I'm not sure how he takes it. Probably black like most hardcore murderous mafia men, right?

Clearing my throat, I snag the tray and carefully go downstairs to his office where I hear him shuffling papers. Taking a breath, I knock on the door, hoping he allows me inside.

“Come in.”

“Good morning,” I say, plastering a grin on my face as I set the tray down. “I brought you breakfast.”

He looks up from his paperwork and a relaxed smile brushes past his lips, seeming genuinely happy to see me. Matias has changed from the last time I saw him, just a few short hours ago. His hair is perfectly parted, his suit is wrinkle-free, black on black with a red tie.

He seems domineering, readying himself to take on the world.

“I don't often eat breakfast. You didn't have to waste your time,” he says, whisking the wind right from under my sails.

Not wanting to back down, I straighten my spine. I severely hope he doesn't take this the wrong way. “You'll start your day with breakfast. I won't take no for an answer.”

His lips tilt to the side. “Yes ma'am. I'm sorry for my manners. This looks delicious. Thank you.”

“You're welcome. I'm going to go check on Ella now.”

“Make sure you two are ready in to go in a few hours. I have a fundraising event to go to. All of us are going to go shopping for the appropriate attire.”

“I'll make sure Ella is ready to go with you.”

His brows furrow together in confusion, and he tosses his paperwork next to his food tray. “You'll be going to the fundraiser, as well. Ella will be here with her Uncle Gianni.”

I twine my hands together. “What is my purpose of going?”

He stands, buttoning his suit with a quick flick of his fingers, proving he has done it a thousand times. “You're

going to be my arm candy. I need you to ward off all the women there, so they don't bother me."

I scoff and then it turns into a laugh, but when he stands there with a serious look on his face, my laugh slows to an awkward cough. "Um, why? I'm sorry, I don't understand. There's no way I'm going to ward off anyone from you. I'm... me. You're used to another class of women and those women will know that."

"What kind of woman is that? You're beautiful. I don't see what the issue is." He doesn't hide how he looks at me up and down, his eyes dragging as if he is taking his time. He leans against the desk and crosses his arms. When his eyes finally meet mine, I swear there is heat swirling in his eyes. "Explain yourself, Sophie." He tucks his hands in his pockets.

"I need to go check on, Ella." I try to change the subject so I can leave. Conversations like this make me uncomfortable, and under his inscrutable gaze, I can't tell if he's just messing with my head.

"Ella won't wake up for another thirty minutes," he informs.

"Well, she might be awake."

"She isn't. I'll have to wake her, or she'll sleep all day. The girl loves to sleep."

"I can relate."

"Don't change the subject. Why don't you think you're good enough to accompany me to the fundraising event?"

I sigh, tugging on my long sleeves again. "Look at me," I whisper, swallowing awkwardly. "I'm not the models you're used to seeing and they will notice that." I look down, unable to meet his stare.

A shadow falls over me and a finger lifts my chin. "I am looking at you, and all I see is a beautiful woman. I want you to go with me."

I sigh, knowing I can't say no. He's my boss. I pretty much have to do anything he says. "Okay."

"Great."



I back away which causes his finger to slip from my chin. Any second longer, and I think I'd melt into a puddle on the floor.

“And I never want to hear you talk about yourself like that, Sophie. You're beautiful. You're better than any of those fake women that surround my world.”

Shocked into silence, I am only able to give him a small smile and make my way out the door, and rush to the playroom Ella is staying in. I want him even more now. I'm sure he's only trying to reassure me, but God, the words sounded so good coming from his lips.

“It's only for work. It's only for work,” I chant to myself, peeking my head into Ella's room.

I can't help but laugh. The poor girl is hanging off the beanbag. I don't see how that can be comfortable. Her knees are on the floor and her face is planted in the oversized soft chair. The blanket is wrapped around her ankles. She has to be freezing.

Maneuvering her body back on the beanbag chair, I cover her up with the blanket. She doesn't stir.

Matias wasn't lying. She really does love to sleep.

It doesn't help that his attractiveness level is through the roof right now because of how well he knows his daughter.

Why can't I just despise the man? Liking him is making my life even harder.

Maybe this job isn't what is best for me after all. Not if I can't focus on the task at hand.

The task is not, and will not be, Matias Milazzo.

## Chapter Five

*Matias*

I probably shouldn't have bombarded her with shopping for the fundraiser, but I didn't want to let the opportunity pass me by. I should have waited until she was settled, but I wanted to do something with her. I wanted to get out of the house and show her the world she could have if she stayed with me.

If she were mine.

And she is. Sophie just doesn't know it yet.

"Daddy? Can we go to the carousel while we are out? Pleeeeeease," she begs, staring up at me with her big eyes that shouldn't have this much power over me.

"You know it. We're going to go shopping, get lunch, and ice cream." I tickle her sides and she giggles, kicking her legs as I try to put on her shoes.

"Ice cream! With sprinkles?"

"All the sprinkles you want, Ella Bella."

"Yay! Nanny Sophie is coming, right? I don't want to go without her."

"Yes, she is." I peer up from my daughter to see Sophie sliding her purse onto her bare shoulder. She's changed into a tight pair of jeans and her shoes are a chunky white wedge.

She looks like summertime.

I love summer.

Her shirt hangs off her shoulder, showing the smooth skin that I want to trail my fingers across until I grip the back of her neck to pull her in for a kiss.

Something about showing the slight amount of flesh has desire burning so deep, I feel the vines of it gripping my soul, pulling me forward to claim Sophie.

“What are we going shopping for, Daddy?” Ella asks.

I finish tying her shoe. “Well, we have to get some formal clothes and maybe get you a few things too, but we are going to spoil Nanny Sophie. What do you say?”

“Yay! Can I pick things out too for Sophie?”

The grin is forced because I’m trying to imagine the things Ella would buy for Sophie. They would probably be all pink.

“Maybe. That would be fun,” I state, keeping it neutral and Sophie laughs in the background.

“Are we ready?”

“Ready.” Ella leaps off the couch and flies down the stairs. “Uncle Gianni!” She says so loud, it echoes through the house. “You’re coming too?”

“Someone has to keep an eye on all of you,” he replies.

“She’s excited,” Sophie says as she walks down the steps.

I follow beside her. “She is. I can’t promise what she’ll choose for you.”

“I’m excited to find out. You know I can purchase my own clothes, right? I don’t expect you to buy them.”

I open the front door for her so she can exit first. “I know, but this is for work, so I’ll be paying. Don’t argue with me, okay?”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Okay.”

I snag her wrist and gently spin her to me. “And don’t roll your eyes at me, Sweet Sophie.”

“And why not? If it causes for an eye roll...” she tests, giving me an unsure look.

I lean forward and whisper. “Because, Sophie, I’m the kind of man who proves there is only one reason to roll your eyes and that’s in bed.” Before I do something she’ll hate me for, I head to the car where Gianni is waiting for us with the car door open.

“You play a mean game, Matias,” Gianni says.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He hides his grin with a shake of his head. “Mmmhmm,” he replies.

I climb into the SUV, double-checking Ella’s seatbelt in her booster seat before settling next to her. Sophie climbs in next, cheeks tinted from what I said.

At least, I hope that’s why they are red.

“So, where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise,” I tell her. Gianni will know where to go because it’s the only area where I shop.

It’s all designer brands. The best of the best.

“What if I don’t like surprises?” she replies from the corner of her mouth, hiding her amusement.

“Then that’s too damn bad, isn’t it?” I snap playfully, her gaze dropping to my lips for the—I’ve lost count of how many times she’s done that.

What would happen if we gave in?

“Daddy, you owe me a dollar. You said a bad word.”

“Can we call it even with the ice cream, Ella?”

She snorts, crossing her arms. “In this *econonemy*?”

My brows rise in shock before every adult in the car begins to laugh. I fish out my wallet and wade through the bills until I find a dollar. “The word you’re looking for is *economy*. Where did you learn that?”

“Uncle Gianni watches the news every morning,” she chirps, tucking the dollar in her pocket.

“I got hustled.”

“She’s definitely your kid,” Gianni says, laughing under his breath.

“And I couldn’t be prouder.” I tug on her pigtails, noticing how long her hair has gotten.

When did that happen?

“Thank you,” I say to Sophie. “For doing her hair. I usually do, but I got caught up on a call—”

She places her hand on my arm to stop me. “Matias, it’s why I’m here. To help. You can brush out all the knots from her pigtails later. We’ll call it even,” she winks. Her sudden confidence is startling, but I’m pleased that she’s getting more comfortable around me.

“Deal.”

She removes her hand and places it on her lap quickly. I stare at her hand longingly, wanting to touch her without permission because I’d already have it. I’d be able to touch her, pull her against my side, kiss, and do whatever else I wanted.

Sophie tugs on her sleeves again, breaking my thoughts as her fingers play with the material of her shirt. Gone is the curiosity of her skin against mine and worry replaces it. She’s always covering herself up, always hiding, and I want to know why.

“We’re here,” Gianni says, pulling into the parking lot.

“You brought me to the luxury mall?”

I unclip Ella and set her on the ground. “Is that a problem?”

“This is too much. I can go to other stores.”

“No,” I say in a tone that leaves no room for argument. I take Ella’s hand in mine and Gianni surveys the surroundings, watching for anything out of the ordinary.

“I can empty the mall so it’s just us, Matias. You know they won’t mind. Not for you,” he reminds.

“No. I like it when people are here. It’s fine, Gianni.” I squat in front of Ella, my knees cracking and reminding me of my old age.

I hold in a grunt, hoping I’ll be able to stand without a problem. I’m young, newly forty years old, but this life is rough on the body. I’ve been shot, stabbed, had both my legs broken, and a dozen other things happen. I’m lucky I’m in one piece.

She hops on my back, knocking the wind out of me when a sick thought twists my mind.

What if something happens to me and she's left all alone? What if she goes into the system again. It only solidifies the fact that I need to marry Sophie. She'd take care of Ella. I know she would. Even though she's only been here a day, she belongs.

We have plenty to learn about one another, but something about my life feels complete now, and I know it has everything to do with Sophie.

"Will they allow me in looking like this?" she points to her outfit.

I turn, lifting a brow as I look her up and down. "There's nothing wrong with what you're wearing."

"I'm wearing a fifteen-dollar shirt and jeans. You're wearing a thousand-dollar suit."

It was much more than that, but she doesn't need to know.

"It doesn't matter. Once they see me, they wouldn't care if you were wearing a plastic bag." I wait for her to catch up and when she's next to me, I lean down. "And what did I say about talking about yourself like that? I don't like it."

"I wasn't talking bad," she argues, but still sounds sweet. "I was stating a fact. Some places have dress codes."

"And if they did, I'd handle it." My tone is dark, a tone she hasn't heard before, and she gasps.

"How?"

"That's for me to worry about. Not you."

Gianni opens the door, and two police officers are on either side of the entrance, giving us a firm nod.

Unlike Carmine and Ari, I made it clear I don't want a chummy relationship with cops. They are on the payroll. That's it. This is a working relationship, but I know the two cops. The officer on the left needed cancer treatment for his wife, so I fronted bill because he's been loyal.

I take care of them. They take care of me.

But the moment they don't have my back, I won't be afraid to kill them and get them off my payroll.

I'm not afraid to kill to prove a point and even worse, I'll be quiet about it. No one would understand what happened to the cop. He would just go missing one day. No note, no outside circumstance to make them question if he'd ever abandoned his job or family.

He simply wouldn't exist anymore.

"Wow." Sophie glances around the luxury mall and I have to say, it is impressive. It's two floors of pure marble with name-brand designer stores on either side. Above us, a marvelous chandelier that is easily the size of my foyer.

If it fell, we'd be dead.

"Why don't we start on the right and work our way to the left side?" I offer, heading to the first store I see. I turn around to see Sophie at the entrance but she is not going inside.

"Sophie, come on."

"I can't have you do this."

"You won't be able to stop me, so get in here now before you do something as silly as upsetting me by not spending my money," I command, trying to keep the infliction in my voice light.

I'm serious but I don't want her to know that. I want her to have anything she wants and if she won't allow me to give it to her, how will I get her to stay?

"Nothing too flashy." She points a finger at me.

"I'm not the one picking out the product. You are."

"Mr. Milazzo," Greg, the owner of this store greets me. "I'm surprised to see you so soon. Was the family ring not to your satisfaction?" his thick, but well-groomed, gray brows pinch together.

I lift my hand, showing the remarkable job he's done for this ring to fit my finger. Carmine passed it down to Ari, who

gave it to me, and I needed to get the ring resized and polished.

“No, it’s perfect. My…” I try to introduce Sophie, but I don’t know what to call her. “My friend is looking for jewelry and it is on me so anything she wants, put it on my card.”

Greg’s entire face changes from tired and dull, to happy and bright. A smile takes over his face that reminds me of the Grinch, wrinkles crinkling his eyes.

“Of course. So glad to have your business back, Mr. Milazzo.” He looks over my shoulder, smiling at Sophie. “Please, I’m happy to help in any way I can. Is there anything specific you’re looking for…” he trails off, not knowing her name.

“Sophie,” she says, inching forward as if she’s timid.

“And what are you looking for, Sophie?” he places his hand lightly between her shoulder blades before dropping it.

“I’m not sure.” Her eyes plead for help as they meet mine. “Matias?”

“Everything,” I answer. “Bracelets, necklaces, earrings. Whatever she wants.”

If I’m not mistaken, Greg’s eyes glaze over as if my words cause him to get high. “Wonderful. I’ll close the store—”

“—That’s not necessary,” Sophie interrupts, panicked.

“Please, keep the doors open.” I have a feeling my Sweet Sophie will want a way out if she feels the need to run.

That’s okay.

I love a good chase.

I sit down with Ella on the large leather sofa, and Gianni stands in the space between Sophie and my daughter.

Smart man. They are the only two people in the room that need protection.

I spread my arms across the back of the couch and Ella places her head in my lap, her eyes closing to take a nap. She



always hates stores like this. Anything too “adult,” and she’s bored. I don’t blame her. I want her to enjoy every single part of being a child while she can because being an adult is overrated.

“Oh yes, that’s a beautiful piece, Ms. Sophie. Would you like to try it on?”

“I couldn’t. I—”

“—She’d love to,” I state, carefully standing so I can ease Ella’s head down on the couch.

Gianni gives me a firm nod, switching places with me so I can give Sophie the push she deserves.

When I stand next to her, my body heats with recognition of her being so close. Our arms barely touch, but it’s enough for me to hear the hitch in her breath. I angle my body so I’m looking over her shoulder. If she were to turn, she’d run right into me. Leaning down, I whisper, “Has anything caught your eye?”

She startles, jumping and her back hits against my chest.

My hand wraps around her arm to steady her and her ass settles against me, my cock rising from her nearness.

“I didn’t mean to scare you. I only want to help,” I say gently, not wanting her to run away from me. “Tell me. What do you like?” I speak soft and sweet, wanting to prove that it’s okay for her to voice her opinions.

She points. “I love that necklace. I’ve always thought emeralds were beautiful.”

I snap my fingers at Greg. “I want your entire emerald collection out so Sophie can look at it,” I state.

“Yes, Mr. Milazzo. Gladly.” He fumbles with his keys to unlock the case.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she says. “I could have asked him.”

“You wouldn’t have.”

She gives me the side-eye and clicks her tongue. “I don’t think I like how well you’re figuring me out.”

“I’m good at reading people, Sophie. It’s one of the many things this job of mine requires.”

Greg places all the stands containing the jewelry on top of the glass counter. Sophie immediately reaches for a beautiful diamond chain necklace with a large emerald as the setting piece.

“Wow,” she whispers. “I didn’t know anything could be so beautiful.”

I open my mouth to say something cliché back but decide to keep my lips sealed. “We will take it.”

“Matias, no. That’s so expensive. I can’t have you—”

“In fact, Greg. Box up the entire collection, please. For the rings, please size her first.”

“Let’s see if they fit, shall we?” Greg takes Sophie’s hand and slides on a wide gold band with emerald and diamond accents. “Looks like they will be a perfect fit anyway. This collection was made for you, my dear.” Greg tries to slide the ring off and I stop him.

“She’ll wear it out.”

The room brightens as soon as the smile graces Sophie’s face. She stares at the ring, her eyes becoming watery, and when she looks up at me, I know right then and there: I’ll do anything anyone asks me to, if it means getting to see her look at me like this again.

“Thank you... No one has ever—I mean—I haven’t—No one—” She gives up trying to find the words. “Thank you.” She goes to wrap her arms around me, and I go still, not expecting a hug.

Surprising to everyone in the store, including myself, I hold her in return, wrapping my arms around her, tight. It’s hard to believe this woman has only been in my life a day when I feel like I’ve known her so much longer. Our connection, the ease

of being around her, makes me wonder if maybe in a previous life we were together.

If I believed in that sort of thing.

*If.*

“Is there anything else you want from here?” I ask, pulling away but keeping my arms around her waist, my body refusing to detach from hers.

“No... I have everything I want. Thank you.”

I try not to interpret her stare as anything but polite, but it’s difficult when she’s looking at me like that.

“Here you are, Mr. Milazzo.” Greg hands over six matte black bags with gold foil lettering. I take them just as Sophie tries to.

“I can carry them,” I say. “A gentleman never has a woman carry her own bags. That’s one of the main principles.”

“I wouldn’t know. I haven’t ever met a gentleman before,” she states quietly, looking away from me.

“Mm. That time has come to an end. You’ll see how a woman is supposed to be treated.” I glance up to tell Gianni we are leaving, but he’s already walking toward us, a sleepy little girl lying in his arms.

“I believe we need a stroller of some sort.”

“She’s too big for a stroller, Gianni.”

“I can’t protect you or Sophie with Ella in my arms, Matias,” he replies, genuinely worried about our safety.

I suddenly raise my brows in amusement, wondering how Gianni doesn’t know this trick yet. “You know what sounds good?” I say a little loudly to wake the girl on purpose. “A pretzel. All dipped in cinnamon sugar.”

Ella stretches, yawning, then rubs her eyes. “Pretzel?”

Gianni rolls his eyes and sets her on her feet. “Food. Of course.”

“How was your nap, Ella Bella?” I hold out my hand for her to take and her little palm meets mine.

“It was good. I’m hungry.”

After getting a fresh, hot pretzel to keep her busy while we step inside another store, I find myself sitting and waiting for Sophie to come out of the changing room as she tries on a few dresses for the gala. Ella is munching on her snack while Gianni is standing behind the couch, back turned to keep us protected.

“I don’t know if I want to come out,” Sophie yells from the other side of the changing room door.

“Nanny Sophie! We have to see. Please,” Ella begs, drawing out the ‘e’ in please.

“Yeah, please?” I mock my daughter, giving her a wink and she giggles.

“Okay, but you can’t laugh.”

Anger possesses me so fast; I have to bite my tongue to keep myself from saying something crude. Who the hell would laugh at Sophie? She’s perfect. I make a mental note to ask her who talked so badly to her so I can fix the problem.

I stand, heading to her door when it doesn’t open. I give it a soft knock. “Sophie? I swear to you, the last thing I’d ever do is laugh at you. Open the door, Sweet Sophie.”

She sighs and finally the door opens. “Ta-da!” but she doesn’t say it with a smile.

My eyes widen as I take her in. I don’t know where to focus. The dress is bright red, tight, hugging every dip and curve of her body. The straps fall off the shoulders and morph into long sleeves. At the wrist, the material changes to lace where she’s looped her middle finger through it. Cleavage spills from the heart-shaped neckline and I want nothing more than to show her off.

But at the same time, I don’t want anyone seeing her like this.

She’s mine.

She's fucking beautiful.

"You're breathtaking." I know she can't miss the breathlessness in my words. My lungs can't figure out a way to work when she's standing in front of me wearing this. There are so many things I want to say, but I know it's too early. I will scare her away.

"Really?"

I hate how surprised she sounds.

"Truly. If you don't get this, I'll have to fire you because you not owning this dress would be criminal."

She fails to hold back her smile, and runs her hands down her hips. I don't miss how her palms settle in the dip below her ribcage. I hold in a growl when a fantasy of me fucking her from behind as I grip that same spot overtakes me.

"I have a few more to try on, but I won't let you see them. I think I'd rather surprise you on the gala day."

"Well, I hope it's this one because you look beautiful in it." I don't move. I can't say anything else.

We stare at one another before she grabs the handle. "Um... I have to close the door, Matias."

I shake out of my funk. "Of course. Sorry." I step away and the door slowly closes, but not before our eyes meet one last time.

"She looked pretty, Daddy."

"She did, didn't she?" I say loud enough so Sophie can hear me.

A few hours later, I'm holding twenty bags and so is Gianni. Sophie didn't hold back once she got into the groove of shopping. I hope as our relationship grows, she'll shop whenever she wants and get whatever her heart desires.

"Daddy, can we get ice cream?" Ella asks just as we load the bags in the car. "And go to the carousel?"

I buckle my daughter in. "Where else would we get ice cream if not where the carousel is? What do you think this is?"

My first rodeo?”

“I don’t know what that means, but it sounds fun.” Ella shrugs her shoulder.

“A rodeo is where you see people ride bulls and horses. They have barrel races, too, where they ride the horse as fast as they can to the barrel. The horse isn’t allowed to touch the barrel though. It’s a big no-no,” Sophie explains.

“I want to go to a rodeo! Please!”

“You just had to encourage her,” I mutter playfully.

“You started it,” My new nanny sasses at me. “You mentioned a word she didn’t understand. How else is she going to learn unless she’s told?”

Damn it, if she were truly mine, I’d find a way to silence her sass later by slipping my cock between those plump lips.

“You’re right.” I lift my hands in surrender. “You have such a smart nanny, Ella. I think she’ll fit right in here.”

“I do, too.” Ella kicks her legs as much as she can in her booster seat.

A few minutes later, we are pulling into the park and the carousel is visible. It’s new, an attraction they just added to the park a few months ago. We climb out of the car and Ella zips by us to run to the ice cream stand.

Sophie gets a chocolate and vanilla cone. I get a strawberry cone while Gianni and Ella get vanilla with sprinkles.

“Sprinkles, Gianni? Really?”

He simply grumbles, licking them from the ice cream. “They make me happy.”

Sophie snickers and we begin to walk toward the carousel. Gianni and Ella are ahead of us, practically racing to the ride. Gianni doesn’t like to admit it, but I know he loves going on the carousel with her.

I sit on the bench, right under a tree sprouting green leaves. Sophie takes the spot next to me while we watch the two get on the carousel. Ella picks her horse and I’m not surprised

when I notice it's the same one she always wants. Gianni helps her up and she grips the pole with one hand, eating the ice cream with the other.

Gianni takes the horse next to her to stay close, eating his ice cream with sprinkles.

Yet, he still looks intimidating.

"I have to ask," I start, giving one more lick of my ice cream cone. "What made you need this job?"

"Well, I went to school and—"

"—I know you went to school, but you seem like the type of woman who didn't need this. Yet, you did. Why?"

My gaze falls to her tongue, licking and circling the ice cream as she watches the carousel go round and round. The spark of desire I feel for Sophie lights to a full, raging blaze while I watch her tongue-fuck that cone.

She might not actually be tongue-fucking it, but my cock disagrees.

"I... needed a new start. I got the interview, and I was so excited because it meant I could finally leave my boyfriend's place—"

"—Boyfriend? You have a boyfriend?" Possessive jealousy engulfs me. It's too bad if she belongs to someone else. I'll kill him and have her to myself. I don't care what I have to do.

She snorts, quickly licking the ice cream that melted and is dripping down her hand. "No. I wanted this job when I saw I could live at the house. I wanted out of my relationship, but come to find out, he was cheating on me anyways. I broke up with him then and there. Packed up what I could and went to the job interview. All I could do is hope you hired me."

I let out a breath, relieved I don't have to kill anyone. "Lucky me," I say, taking a bite out of my cone.

"You say that now," she teases, bumping my shoulder. "My ex didn't seem to think so."

"Your ex is an idiot. You deserve better than him."

“He was upset that I wouldn’t...”

I look over at her, noticing her cheeks pinkening. “You wouldn’t, what?”

“I wouldn’t have sex with him. We were only together for a few months, and something told me not to, so I didn’t. He found my best friend to have sex with, though. I guess guys will get it anywhere, right?” Her tone is regretful and defeated.

“No. Not good men. Good men don’t fuck other women when they have the best there is,” I answer, placing my arm on my thigh so she can’t see my erection.

Knowing she’s a virgin, knowing she’s never been with another man, has every instinct inside me screaming to claim her as mine.

I’ll be greedy. I’ll be obsessive. And I’ll show her what it is truly like to be with someone who sees nothing else but her.

She’ll be mine.



## Chapter Six

*Sophie*

It's been a week since arriving at the Milazzo home, and I'm still not sure what to think. Matias has gone out of his way to prove he isn't a horrible man, but flashes of the house fire that killed my parents when I was a child flip through my mind. At the end, when someone is carrying me out, it's his face I see.

Which is impossible.

Why would he save me and why would he come into the house?

Unless he was the one who started it.

I shake the thought out of my head, because there is no way he'd do that to me or anyone. He seems too kind.

Then again, he is a mafia boss, and no man gets to that position by being kind. I just find it hard to believe that he'd start the fire, save me, and then all these years later, hire me as a nanny.

Unless, he wants to finish the job. I am the only one who survived the blaze.

But then why would he take me shopping and spend thousands of dollars on me?

I groan in frustration as I make lunch. I have too many conflicting thoughts going on. If they don't make sense, then there is no reason why I should be thinking of them at all.

I flip the grilled cheese sandwich in the pan and scoop a ladle of tomato soup into a bowl. It's homemade and I hope Matias likes it. I made enough for everyone.

"Ella? Lunch is ready," I shout, and hear her little feet pounding down the hallway. She slides to a stop and almost runs into me while my hands are full. "Woah. Be careful," I chuckle, not wanting to say it too harshly.

“Do you think we can go to the park today?” she asks, climbing onto the high barstool.

I set the soup and grilled cheese sandwich in front of her, and she digs in, the cheese stretching as she pulls it away from her mouth. Ella giggles the further away the creamy, yellow melted cheese gets.

“I’ll ask your dad when I take him lunch, okay? I don’t see why we can’t.” I bring down a tray from the cabinet, then a bowl, a small plate, and load it up with food. Then, I pair it with some sparkling water that I noticed he likes. “I’ll be right back.”

I head to his office, hearing his voice rising as he speaks to someone.

“I don’t give a fuck what it takes. You’ll find him. He will not steal from me. When you have him, bring him to me.” I hear him smack the phone on the receiver.

Swallowing, I choose to knock.

“What?” The word sharp as a knife with frustration.

I enter the room with his lunch, not meeting his eyes. “I’m sorry to bother you. I’ll just leave this here.”

Right as I set the tray down, his fingers encompass my wrist.

“Wait—I’m sorry, Sophie. I didn’t mean to yell at you.” His thumb rubs over my inner wrist and I can’t remember how to breathe because of his touch. “It’s been a rough morning. I found out one of my runners stole from me. I’m not happy, but it’s not a reason to take it out on you.”

“You didn’t know it was me. It’s okay.”

I can tell by his stare that he doesn’t believe me, then sees his lunch. “Tomato soup and grilled cheese? I haven’t had this since I was a child.” He sits in his chair, contemplating the meal in front of him. I should have asked if he even liked it. Great. “This looks delicious... Thank you.” He dips the sandwich into the soup, taking a huge bite, then groans.

That sound does something to my entire body. His eyes close and his tongue flicks out to lick the tomato soup from his lip. “God, that’s good.”

“I’m glad. I was wondering if I could take Ella back to the park? She’s asking and I’d love to get her around kids again.”

He nods and swallows. “I don’t see why not. I can’t go with you, but Gianni will.”

“Oh, it’s okay. You don’t have to do that. I’ll be fine.”

“There’s no way I’m letting my daughter or you out of this house without protection. Never trust anyone outside this house. Now that you’ve been seen with me, it won’t be long before it might cause you issues.”

“Issues, as in, another mafia boss could kidnap me?”

“Yes.”

Well, he doesn’t hold back any punches.

I gulp, wondering if I made the right decision taking this job. “I understand.”

“You won’t be gone long?” he questions, finishing his grilled cheese sandwich.

“I’m not sure, why?”

“I was hoping we could have a movie night. I have a theater —”

“—How about just the living room? In front of that beautiful fireplace.”

“I can have a TV installed by the time you get home.”

I was about to argue, but I really wanted a night in front of the fireplace, and I knew better than to fight with a man who has more money than I’ve ever seen in my life.

“Sounds great. I’ll see you later then. I’m going to get Ella ready, and we will be ready to go.”

“Gianni will be waiting out front for you,” he says, polishing off the soup already.

“I can take that—” I reach for it, but he slides it out of the way.

“Nonsense. I can do it. You’d be surprised what all I can do, Ms. Matthews.”

I nibble on my bottom lip, thinking about all the things I wouldn’t be surprised at all that he could do. “Okay,” I manage to say. “I will leave you to wash your own dish.”

I hurry out of the room, closing the door behind me, and sigh as I lean against it.

Holy hell, that man has power.

I don’t stand a chance.

“Ella!” I shout. “Make sure you get ready. We’re going to the park.”

A loud shrieking pierces the air while her tiny footsteps cause such loud stomps. I chuckle, getting myself ready. I stay in the same pair of jeans and long sleeve shirt, but slip on my Converse shoes. I pack a bag of snacks, juice, and water.

I’m barely at the front door for a minute when Ella comes flying through the foyer.

“I’m ready. I’m ready! Let’s go!”

“Say bye to your dad,” I tell her, pointing to his office.

She snags my hand and pulls me out the door. “Bye, Daddy!”

I hear his voice echo from behind the doors, and I can just imagine the gorgeous smile that paints his face as he speaks. “Bye, Ella Bella. Have fun. Be safe. Love you.”

“Love you too!” Her eyes are straight ahead, locked on the car, and I nearly miss grabbing the handle to shut the door because she’s tugging me so hard.

“Slow down. The park isn’t going anywhere,” I muse, finding her excitement adorable.

Gianni opens the car door for us, and she leaps into her booster seat, buckling herself in.

“Let’s go! Let’s go!” she shouts.

I toss the bag in and take a seat. “You heard the lady, Gianni.”

He cracks a smile, shaking his head before closing us in and hurrying around the front of the car. As Gianni puts on his seatbelt, I look to the right to see Matias standing by his window. Our eyes lock as he watches us drive away. He lifts his hand to wave goodbye, and I do the same in return, wondering why it feels like I’m leaving something important behind.

He’s just a man. A man I barely know. A man who is dangerous and would hurt me in the long run, anyway. The chemistry between us needs to stop. A way to do that would be to meet someone else. I should start dating again and leave Mr. Milazzo as my boss.

*Only* my boss.

Ella has on headphones while watching *Paw Patrol* on the small screen that unfolds from the ceiling, while Gianni drives. I’m lost in my thoughts about Matias. I don’t even realize when we pull into the parking lot.

“Where do you want to go first? Playground or Carousel?”

“The playground.”

“You got it.” I climb out of the car and swing the bag over my shoulder, take Ella’s hand, and walk to the massive playground. It’s overwhelming. There are swings, monkey bars, slides, a water pad, anything and everything a kid could want, it is here.

I don’t have to peer behind me to see Gianni. I feel his presence. His shadow follows us to make sure we are safe.

I take a seat on an empty bench and drop the bag next to me. “Ella, make sure you stay where I can see you, okay? And you don’t talk to strangers. You don’t walk away with anyone. Understand?”

She rolls her eyes at me. “I know that. Daddy taught me that. Never talk to strangers.”

“That’s right. Okay, go, go have fun. I’ll be right here if you need me.” I didn’t bring a book or anything to keep me busy. My eyes are going to stay locked on Ella. I cannot lose Matias Milazzo’s daughter. If I do, I’m sure my body will never be discovered again.

Immediately, Ella makes a friend. Another girl. She has braided red hair and fair skin with a hefty amount of freckles. She looks adorable.

What would Matias think about setting up play dates with new friends? I’ll have to talk to him about that.

Ella runs with a big smile on her face while her new friend chases her. I think they might be playing tag by the looks of it.

“Which one is yours?”

I glance up to see a very handsome man sitting down next to me. He has salt and pepper hair and green eyes, the color of the sea on a beautiful day. He is wearing slacks and a button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbow.

Why do men become so much hotter when they do that?

“I’m sorry. I don’t know you and I’m not going to point out which child is mine,” I say with a tight smile.

“I understand. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. My daughter is the redhead right there. Her name is Gwen,” he states. “I can prove it.”

“By all means.”

“Gwen!” he shouts, his daughter stopping in her tracks as she chases Ella. “Come here.”

Gwen whispers something to Ella and the two girls skip towards us hand in hand. Kids make having friendships seem so easy. I miss that kind of carefree life.

“Is everything okay, Nanny Sophie? Did we do something wrong?” Ella asks, snagging a juice box from the bag.

“No, nothing is wrong. Are you having fun?”

“Yes! Gwen is so fun.”

“Are you hungry or thirsty?” the stranger asks his daughter.

“Nope. I’m fine, Daddy.”

“Great. Okay, go on. Be careful,” he says.

And just like that, they are off running around the playground again.

I chuckle and admit defeat. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be such a bitch about it. I’m Sophie.” I hold out my hand.

“Dean.” He takes my hand and squeezes it lightly. “Don’t apologize for looking after your child. I would have done the same thing. I guess it’s a little weird for a stranger to come up to you and just start talking.” He places a hand against the middle of his chest and smiles genuinely. “I apologize for that. I just wanted to come sit next to the prettiest woman at the playground.”

I toss my head back and laugh, cheeks heating from the obvious pickup line. “Do you say that to all the women at the playground?”

He crinkles his nose at the distaste of his line. “It was bad, wasn’t it? God, I’m sorry. It’s been a while since I’ve done this.”

I can’t stop smiling. “It’s okay. It wasn’t a bad line. It was... sweet. Only if you were sincere?” I state, hoping he hears the question.

“Very.” He scoots a little closer, keeping his eyes on me until a loud happy squeal rings through the air, ruining the moment.

I look away, watching Ella on the swing.

“So, I heard her call you Nanny Sophie. Who do you nanny for, if you don’t mind me asking?”

A flip in my stomach tells me that’s something I always need to keep to myself. I can’t imagine what would happen if people find out I work for Mr. Milazzo.

“I’m sorry. I can’t talk about who I nanny for. I hope you understand.”

His brows raise in surprise, but he doesn't seem angered. "No, it's okay. I understand. Your job must be very hard—" A hand on Dean's shoulder stops him midsentence.

We turn our heads to see Matias standing there behind the bench. Even behind the dark lens of his sunglasses, his eyes are on me, and the scowl twisting his lips says everything that needs to be said.

He isn't happy.

"Her job is hard, but you speaking to her only makes it harder."

"Excuse me?" Dean stands to defend himself. "She's a single, capable woman who can speak for herself."

Matias grips Dean by the shirt and yanks him across the bench.

"Seriously? At the playground? Get it together," I hiss, then plaster on a fake smile as people walk by. "This is not okay. Matias, back off."

He doesn't listen. "She is capable. She can speak for herself, but do not think she is single because she is here alone."

"And who are you to speak for her?" Dean asks, ripping himself away from Matias's grip.

"Matias Milazzo."

The color drains from Dean's face as he takes a step away. "You work for the mafia?"

"Mafia," Matias snorts. "That's all hearsay, isn't it?" Matias walks around the bench and takes a seat. "But I'd go if I were you."

"Matias," I clip his name in frustration.

"Gwen!" Dean shouts. "Gwen, we are leaving!"

"I don't want to leave." Gwen cries from the monkey bars.

"We will come back another time." Dean rushes to his daughter and snags her, running in the other direction and leaving Ella alone, wondering what she did.



I stand to run after him to explain that I am single when a hand wraps around my wrist and tugs me to the bench.

“Leave him.”

I rip my hand from his grip. “How dare you? Who the hell do you think you are? You are my boss. You don’t get to decide who I spend my time with.”

He wraps an arm around my waist and tugs me to his side, then grips the side of my hair, and tugs. Matias forces my head down so he can whisper in my ear.

I hate to admit it, but the roughness is turning me on more than I am mad.

“Make no mistake, Sweet Sophie, you are mine. You and I both know that.”

I lick my dry lips, my heart pounding with desire as he drags his lips across my neck. “I only work for you,” I say weakly, my voice shaking. I can’t believe he would be so blunt about whatever has been going on between us.

He scoffs out a laugh, but it’s dark and full of disbelief. “Whatever you need to tell yourself.”

I somehow find the strength to pull away from his magnetism, but it’s difficult. The more I try, the more I want to sink into his embrace. He is a force, a pull, and resisting is nearly impossible.

He can’t get away with thinking he can control my life.

“Just because I’m your nanny doesn’t make me your property, Matias.” I stand, stepping away. “You are my boss. This can’t happen. And for you to come here and interrupt a good day because of your... ego? I’m actually not sure why you came at all. Now, Ella is playing by herself when she had met a friend. You shouldn’t have been thinking about me, but about Ella. You could have talked to me if you think it’s inappropriate for me to speak to other people while I’m with your daughter.”

He’s up and in front of my face before I can blink. He towers over me. His scent invades my headspace and causes

me to lose my train of thought. There's a hint of his body wash, something with pine like all men use, but his cologne is different. It's warm, reminding me of the sweet twist of honey bourbon and how it slips down your throat with ease.

"It isn't about you talking to people when you're with Ella. It's about you talking to other men. With or without Ella. You feel this between us, and you can fight it all you want, but you can't ignore there's something here. So yes, when I find out there's a man wanting what I want, I tend to go a little feral. You are mine in my mind, Sophie. Right here." He taps his temple. "But if it helps you, then you need to know, you *will* be mine." His voice deepens to such a low point, the baritone rasps.

The kids laughing and running around us fade away. All that's left is me and him, the breeze trying to push me closer, and the curious watchful eyes of Gianni.

"I won't be," I manage to say, hating that I have to say it. "While I can feel something here, it's something that cannot happen. I don't trust men like you to be in my life so intimately, Matias. Men like you changed my entire life for the worse when I was younger. Men like you take. I refuse to be another object of your desires only to leave me wounded again." I hike the bag that's full of snacks up onto my shoulder.

He stares at me, lost, a bit hurt, and I can tell he has no idea what to say to that. "I am not those men," he says in a whisper just as Ella runs and slams against his legs.

We'll see about that.

"You came!" Ella squeals.

He looks down and the turmoil on his face disappears when he sees Ella. The smile is real. He is so happy to see her. He picks her up and swings her around.

"I couldn't stay away from you. I had to come see you. Have you tried the monkey bars?"

She rolls her eyes. "Daddy, you know I can't reach them yet."

He scoffs and starts walking. "I'm here now. You can do anything."

He makes it so hard to fight him when he is such an amazing father. Maybe he isn't the kind of man to take until there is nothing left, but it's a chance I'm not willing to risk. Matias is powerful, in more ways than one. He has the ability to play me like a damn violin until all my strings break. I can build myself back up, connect the strings again, but instruments never sound the same when their originality is broken.

I watch from the bench as Matias helps Ella onto the monkey bars. He looks so out of place in his expensive suit, but he's just like any other parent. He stays with Ella the entire time, his arms open and ready to catch her so she doesn't fall and hurt herself.

"You're doing it! You're almost there!" he celebrates her as she swings her body to grab the other bar.

She's nowhere near close to the end. She's four bars in, but his belief in her causes Ella to smile, pushing her forward.

"He isn't like those men. None of the Milazzo brothers are takers. They are givers." Gianni sits down next to me and crosses one leg over the other.

"You told him someone was talking to me. That would be the only way he would know."

"I did." He doesn't bother lying.

"Why? You had no right to do that. I am my own person. I can choose who I want to spend time with."

"Whether you like it or not, Sophie, your life will never be the same. You agreed to that when you took this job. If you want other men in your life, you need to be prepared that Matias is willing to fight to be the only man you consider."

"Why?" I ask, just as Ella screams.

Gianni and I both stand thinking she fell and hurt herself, but she's jumping up and down and Matias is swinging her around. When he sets her on the ground, she bolts to me.

“Sophie! Nanny Sophie, did you see me? I did it!”

“I did see you. You did such a great job.”

“How about we get ice cream to celebrate?” Matias asks.

Ice cream seems to be a common theme in this family.

Sad? Ice cream. Happy? Ice cream. Celebration? Ice cream.

There’s no fault in that logic.

“Because he knows a gem when he sees one, Sophie. To him, you’re the rarest of them all,” Gianni whispers, so no one else can hear.

His words still my breath and I watch them walk ahead of me. There’s no way he feels like that so soon.

But why do I feel the same?

## Chapter Seven

*Matias*

Sophie is still angry with me. She hasn't spoken to me in a day. I have learned that I fucking hate it when she's upset with me. I truly despise it, but I wouldn't change what I did. When Gianni called me and told me a man was flirting with Sophie, showing interest, and asking her out, I felt rage.

But also jealousy.

A lot of it.

I had never felt so out of my depth. I've never cared about any woman enough to think twice. Even my longest relationships, I wouldn't care if other men flirted. I knew those women were a means to an end. They weren't permanent. I never felt the overwhelming need to love them, to let me love them, to let me consume them.

Sophie is different.

Ever since Sophie walked into my office, I've known she was mine. I knew there would be no other woman in my life.

The call I was on when Gianni sent me the message immediately ended and I said I'd reschedule. When I saw that man close to her, laughing, leaning in, wanting more of what was mine, I knew I had to put an end to it.

I did. I was successful in my efforts, but those same efforts have pushed her away.

She hasn't spoken to me since the park yesterday.

"How are you doing, Matias?" Gianni asks, just as I take off my blazer and undo my tie. I plop on the couch and take a swig of beer.

"I'm fine. You?"

"You lie," he says, taking the spot next to me.

“I’ve had a long day.” The runner that stole from me has been found and dealt with. I hate having to kill my own men, but I have to make an example of them when they turn their backs on me. “Castillo wants me to meet him at his casino. I think he wants me to go into the business. Own half of the casino and he says I can use the basement for my own dealings, but I’m not sure I want to do that.”

“Sounds perfect. What’s the holdup? That could open new doors for us.”

“I don’t know if I want new doors, Gianni.” I take another drink of my beer. “We have enough on our plates. I can’t have any more time taken from Ella.”

“You wouldn’t have to. Delegate.”

I blow out a breath, unsure, but relent. “I’ll think about it.”

Gianni leans back and checks the monitor. I have those monitors all through the house so I can keep an eye on Ella at all times and so can everyone else.

She’s taking a nap right now and it makes me wonder if this life is what is best for her. She’s just as much protected as she’s in danger. I don’t want her to grow up and realize she hates me for my job, for this business the family runs. She’ll have it one day if I never have a son. Usually, men are in charge, but I think that should change.

“How is it going with Sophie?”

“It isn’t. She won’t speak to me. I need to apologize to her for how I handled the situation yesterday, but I’m not going to apologize for the outcome.”

“She’s a tough one. She’ll keep you on your feet.”

I smirk. “Yeah, she will.”

“Have you looked at her file yet?”

“No. I didn’t want to read too much. Why?”

“I think we need to keep an eye on her ex-boyfriend.”

That grabs my attention. I lean forward, placing the beer on the table, and my elbows on my knees. “Why? What’s going

on?”

“I’m not sure. His background is too clean, and he didn’t actually exist until five years ago.”

I sneer at his words, knowing this guy is dangerous then. No one ever just comes to existence randomly like that. Not without a bad reason.

“I want you to dig as deep as you can. I don’t care who you have to kill in the process,” I tell him.

“I was thinking the same thing.” Just as he stands, his eyes move across the room, and he nods politely. “Ms. Sophie, how are you doing today? You look beautiful.”

I spin around to see her, and suddenly, I can’t remember how to breathe.

“Thank you, Gianni. I appreciate that.”

“I have to go update my security team on something. Excuse me.” Gianni leaves us, and the moment we’re alone, I feel it.

The air becomes heavy with tension and chemistry. Anger ticks her jaw as she gathers her purse from the rack. Unable to stop myself, I let my gaze run down her body, noticing her outfit. She’s wearing another off-the-shoulder long-sleeve shirt.

I fucking love those shirts. Her skin is flawless and shines from how smooth it is. I am desperate to touch her, to feel us touch and explore this bomb between us as the fuse burns.

When this explodes—and it will—we will burn together.

I’m about to apologize for how I acted yesterday when she turns to face me. Her makeup is done, and her hair is up in a deliberately messy bun, a few long curls framing her face. The delicate curve of her neck is available for anyone to lean in and kiss, to drag their lips against her skin, to have her gasp for breath while kissing the spot under her ear.

God, I bet she’s begging for more.

“Where the hell are you going?” I let slip out, not wanting her to go anywhere that doesn’t have me glued to her side.

“It’s my day off, Matias. So, it’s not your business what I do or where I go on personal time.”

I’m in front of her before she can even think about spouting off her next sassy word. I pin her against the wall and her breasts rub around my chest. Her nipples harden, poking through the material of her t-shirt, and it takes all I have not to rip her shirt off, and suck one of them into my mouth.

“The fuck it isn’t my business. You’re my business, Sophie. Whether you like it or not.”

“How is it—”

I do something I shouldn’t. I use my daughter as an excuse. “Where you go and whom you hang out with matters because anything you do on the outside could come here and I won’t have my daughter in danger.”

She laughs, but not in the sense that she finds something funny. It’s more of an ironic, sarcastic laughter. Sophie shoves me in the chest, but I don’t move.

“Oh, you’re something else. You’re worried about me bringing home something dangerous when it’s you—” she pokes me in the chest “—That literally kills and bribes for a living? Screw you, Matias.”

My hand gently traps her against the wall by wrapping it around the nook where her shoulder meets her neck. I lean in, brushing my nose against hers, and whisper. “Name the time and place, Sweet Sophie, and I’ll give you the best fuck of your life.”

Her mouth parts in shock, desire, and curiosity brewing in her gorgeous blue depths.

I shove her legs apart and insert my knee, dragging my fingers across that bit of bare skin showing on her shoulder.

Goosebumps rise on her skin, and I drag my nose across her jawline, one hand gripping the thick curve of her hip. I press



my pelvis against her so she can feel what she fucking does to me. She has me testing every ounce of control there is.

“You say the word, Sophie. And I’ll be your first.” I slide my hand down her spine. “Your last.” My eyes flutter shut as I inhale her scent, reminding me of flowers on a spring day. “I’ll fuck you every day, so all your wants are met. All your needs. Just say the word, Sophie. And I’m yours.”

She swallows and I’m able to see her throat bob, guiding me closer to her pulse. One kiss. It’s all I want.

“Matias,” she says my name on a gust of air, her fingers digging into my arm.

“Sophie.” My lips are so close to hers, I can feel every exhale.

She groans, then shoves me hard enough to let me know she wants me to step back. I do, giving her space to breathe. Both of our chests are rising in hard beats as we stare at one another. Her eyes fall to my cock, and I don’t hide how hard I am or how much I want her.

Goddamn it, I’d make it good for her. Every fucking time she allowed me to have her body, I’d make sure every experience was better than the last.

Her eyes widen when she sees the massive tent in my pants. I expect us to talk about what just happened, but instead, she runs.

“Sophie!” I call for her as she runs down the steps and swings open the front door.

A few of my men are standing there smoking, and Gianni is walking up the driveway from the gate.

“Sophie, wait. Let’s talk. Whatever it is you have planned, cancel. I’ll take you out to dinner and we can talk about this.”

She’s looking around frantically, not listening to me.

“Sophie, please. Stay.” I grab her arm and she yanks it free.

“Where is my car, Matias?”

Fuck.

The car.

I forgot to mention that.

Gianni walks up the stairs and lights a cigarette, joining his security team to enjoy the show.

“I got rid of that damn death trap and got you a safe car. A car that is reliable and will protect you if anything bad were to happen.”

Her eyes glass over, filling with tears, and I immediately miss the lust. I want her desire back, not her sadness. “That was not up to you. You can’t just get rid of my car without talking to me about it, Matias.”

“I made sure to stick with the Beetle you like so much. It’s a newer version. Safer, Sophie. It isn’t hazardous. I need you to be safe.”

“I want my car back.”

I rub my chin and shake my head. “No. I won’t budge on this, Sophie. You’re going to have my daughter in your car sometimes and I want her, and you, to be safe.”

She steps closer to me, cheeks red from how angry she is. “I bought that car with my own money, and I never want anyone to do me any favors. That car was mine and you have no right to take that from me.”

“This car is yours, too, Sophie. I’m not trying to take from you. I’m trying to give.” I speak with my hands, flinging them in an outward motion toward her. “I want you safe.”

“And I could have gotten a new car with my salary. I can take care of myself.”

“Maybe I don’t want you to.”

She heads down the steps. “That isn’t up to you!” she shouts. “Where is my car?”

“The keys are in it.” I point to the new Beetle. “Your old car has been dealt with.” I actually have it in a garage that holds a few of the other vehicles I like to trade out every so often. I didn’t get rid of it, even though it deserves to be in a junkyard.

She lets out a growl of frustration, throwing her hands in her hair as she stomps to her new car. And when she gets in, Sophie slams the door.

She can be mad all she wants, but I know she loves it.

The bright red Beetle fits her personality perfectly. She gasses it out of the driveway, the tires spinning against the driveway, and for some reason, I step forward to chase after her to tell her to drive safe, but Gianni grabs me by the shoulder.

“Let her go, Matias.”

“I can’t.” I tug the ends of my hair. “She drives me insane.”

“You need to remember she has only been here a few days. Days, Matias. You can’t take over her life when she already feels submerged by moving in to be a nanny. You’re coming on too strong.”

“I don’t know another way to be. She’s mine,” I seethe, through tight teeth. “I want you to follow her. Tell me where she’s going.”

“Matias, that is not a good idea. She’ll come back.”

“Follow. Her. There’s a GPS in her car. It’s programmed into all vehicles. Keep me updated.”

“This is a mistake.”

“And it’s mine to make,” I sneer.

Gianni nods reluctantly and hurries down the steps to the nearest SUV. “I’ll let you know her every move.”

“Good.”

I’ve never felt so out of sorts.

“Mr. Milazzo?” Sergio, a new member, stops just outside the door with the monitor in his hand. “She’s asking for you.”

“Thank you, Sergio.” I rush inside, a headache threatening.

When I get to Ella’s room, she’s crying.

“Ella Bella, what’s wrong?” I lift her into my arms, noticing how flush her cheeks are.

“I don’t feel good, Daddy.” I place my hand against her forehead.

It’s warm. “Aw baby, it’s okay. I have you. I’ll get you some medicine, okay?” As soon as I say it, she throws up all over the front of my shirt, then starts to wail again.

“I’m sorry,” she screeches, holding onto her stomach.

“I don’t care about that. Not one bit. Come on. Let’s get you some medicine and get you cleaned up. Do you want to lie in my bed?” I know how much she prefers that when she’s not feeling well.

She nods, sniffing, while big fat tears run down her cheeks.

“Come on.” I lift her into my arms to see Sergio at the end of the hall with Micha and Santino. “Can you please do me a favor and grab her dirty sheets? She’s sick. We’ll be in my room for the rest of the evening. If you need me, call.”

“Yes, Mr. Milazzo,” Sergio says quickly, eager to please.

“And please bring me water, juice, and crackers, and an ice pack,” I add.

“Right away.” Sergio busies himself in the kitchen.

“Knock before you come in.” Ella needs to change and wash the sick from her arms, mouth, and neck. It got all over.

She starts crying again when her stomach rolls.

“It’s okay. We’re in the bathroom now.” I lift the toilet seat and set her down just in time for her to throw up again. “My poor Ella Bella.” I rub her back in soothing circles. “I’m going to start a shower, okay? And bring you fresh clothes.”

She nods through the tears, and I notice that the ends of her hair by her face have vomit on them too.

After cleaning her off, washing her hair, and putting on her new clothes, I tuck her into bed. She rolls to my side just as a knock on the door sounds.

I rip off my soiled shirt. “Come in.”

“I have the items you requested, Mr. Milazzo. I hope you don’t mind, but I placed it all in a cooler.” He rolls the cooler into the bedroom. “Medicine is in the side pocket.”

“Thank you, Sergio. I appreciate it. You’re in charge while Gianni is away. Do regular sweeps. Keep me updated on what’s going on in the city. There’s no doubt I’ve made noise having to kill a runner.”

He nods, trying to hide his shock of being in charge. “Absolutely. Thank you for the opportunity.” He bows before he leaves.

I toss my dirty laundry in the hamper and take a fast shower, dress in fresh clothes, and snag the medicine from the side pocket of the cooler.

Only my little girl is already asleep. I decide to wait, not wanting to wake her, and crawl into bed. She rolls over and places her head on my shoulder and I wrap my arm around her, wanting to keep her close.

The only way this moment would be better was if Sophie was on the other side so Ella would be protected by both parents.

Gianni is right. I’m moving too fast.

But when it comes to something I want, I only know one speed.

## Chapter Eight

*Sophie*

The nerve of him.

I can't believe he'd get rid of my car without talking to me. He had no right. It isn't up to him to decide what is best for me. I only work for him. Nothing else. He has no claim over me, no matter what beautiful words he spouts.

All men do that. All men tell lies and I'm so tired of believing them.

I wipe the tear away from under my eye, so I don't ruin my makeup. The last thing I want is for my ex-best friend to think I'm taking my break up with Michael badly.

I grip the soft leather of the steering wheel, appreciating how beautiful this new Beetle is. I can't lie or ignore how much I love this new car. The dash matches the bright cherry paint on the exterior and the seats are black with red stitching. The detail is unlike anything I've ever seen. There are seat warmers and an actual radio with Bluetooth instead of a cassette player that didn't work.

It's an obvious upgrade, and I should be more appreciative, but it's hard to let go of the car I got by myself. That old piece of crap Beetle was a statement of my independence. That if I worked hard, I could get what I wanted without help. I've been on my own for a long time and I don't need a knight in shining black Armani suit to save the day.

I don't need saving, and the quicker Matias realizes that, the better off we will be.

When I get to the city, I notice how smooth the car drives, and I start thinking about the long apology to Matias. The car is generous, but talking to me about it would have been better.

There is a parking spot between two cars near the café I'm meeting Courtney at. When I parallel park, a beeping sounds,

and the screen on the dash shows the car behind me.

It has a camera!

I feel guilty for loving this car more and more.

Parking is a breeze. I take a moment to touch up my makeup, fix the running mascara under my eyes and put on a little lip gloss. I climb out of the car and walk confidently down the sidewalk to the café. I didn't want to go to a place that served lunch. I wanted to be able to have a quick exit, so after she called and texted a hundred times, I finally decided to hear her out. Then I can be done with her forever.

When I get to Beans and Cream Café, I check the place to see if Courtney is there yet.

She isn't.

I'm relieved.

There are a few people sitting in the booths and tables. Most have their laptops out or earbuds in, losing themselves in something other than the reality of the world. I stand in line to order coffee, inhaling the aroma that calms my nerves a bit, when my phone goes off.

When I look at the screen, I'm surprised to see a text from Matias.

*Him: "Who are you meeting at the coffee shop?"*

*Me: "Whoever I want."*

*Him: "Better careful, Sweet Sophie. Do not make me come down there. Remember. You're mine."*

*Me: "Sorry. Got to go. My date is here."*

I send a winky face for good measure. I don't know why I'm playing with him like that, but it isn't his business who I'm meeting.

"Hi. How can I help you?" A happy young guy with curly hair and a bright smile asks me.

I love it when people are happy at their job. "I'll take a caramel latte please." I debated on getting something to eat,

but my stomach is twisted with nerves and anger. I don't care about Michael anymore, but it's the betrayal from my best friend that eats away at me.

"Name for the order?"

"Sophie."

"What a cute name. I love that. It will be right up."

"Thank you," I smile, feeling a bit lighter.

I look down at my phone when it vibrates with Matias's name.

*Him: "Sophie, you better not be meeting with a man."*

*Me: "\*eye roll\* I'm not. I'm meeting with an old friend. Her name is Courtney. Not that it's any of your business."*

*Him: "Everything you do is my business. I make it my business."*

*Me: "Caveman."*

*Him: "You haven't seen anything yet."*

*Me: "And I don't want to."*

*Him: "We'll see about that."*

I don't know why, but his last message makes me blush. As much as I despise his threats, I find them just as sexy.

"Sophie!" The barista calls out my drink order.

I snag it and take a quick sip, sighing as the sweet caramel bursts across my tongue. The quick taste gives me a pep in my step, and I choose a back corner booth, away from people for privacy.

"Sophie."

Her voice turns my stomach, and I look up from my drink to see Courtney. She doesn't look great. She has no makeup on, which is unlike her. Her hair is up in a ponytail but it's obvious it hasn't been brushed. Her eyes are red and have dark circles under them. She looks like she hasn't slept in days.



She sits down across from me, her bottom lip already trembling as she holds back tears.

I lift my hand, wanting her to stop. “Don’t cry. This isn’t going to be me letting you back into my life because you shed a few tears, Courtney. I’m here so both of us have closure, but the moment I walk out of the café, this friendship is officially done.” My breath catches in my throat as I say that. There’s one side of me that doesn’t want this friendship to end. I loved Courtney as if she were my own sister. I can never trust her again. Not after what she did.

What if... Matias and I start something and he meets Courtney, wanting her instead? I wouldn’t blame him. Even without makeup, Courtney looks like the typical model.

“I know. I know that. Just, please, listen to me. I’m so sorry. Sophie,” she begins to cry, and I have to look down to hide my own tears. “I am so sorry for hurting you. I don’t have a good reason. What I did was horrible. Nothing I say will make you feel better. I just—I needed to see you. I needed to apologize.”

I know the only way for me to move on with my life is if I forgive her. I take another sip of my latte and tap the lid with my finger. “Why?” I ask. “Why did you go behind my back and fuck my boyfriend? I don’t care about him now and I barely did when I was with him, but it’s the principle, Courtney. You don’t sleep with your best friend’s boyfriend.”

“He said you were okay with it. He said he you liked the idea of him and me together.” She blinks up to the ceiling, tears rolling down her cheeks. “I should have known better, but he was so...” She makes a frustrated noise. “He was so charming about it. It was hard not to believe him. He even said you wanted to watch, wanted us to be a throuple.”

“You would have been okay with that?”

“You were my best friend. I figured it was the best of both worlds, honestly. I was stupid. I’m so sorry, Sophie. He even had texts he showed me of a conversation he had with you to prove you were okay with it.”

“He and I never talked about that. Ever.”

She chuckles, wiping her face. “I knew that when you came up to the table. I knew he had lied.”

“He must have stolen my phone and texted himself. I wouldn’t have been okay with it. I don’t like to share, Courtney.”

She nods, sagging against the back of the booth. “I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you. It isn’t all your fault. He was a real piece of work. I have to go to his apartment today and pick up a few of my things.”

“Do you want me to go with you? You shouldn’t go alone. He has a temper.”

“I know, but I think it’s best if I go without you.” Now that I know Michael was lying to both of us, I can’t fault her forever. “You should have talked to me,” I say. “To confirm what he was saying.”

“I know,” she agrees. “I understand if you want nothing to do with me ever again.”

“I think I just need some time. I was angry at your betrayal, but knowing the truth, I don’t know, maybe one day we can be friends again.”

She grins, hopeful. “I’d love that.”

I check the time and groan. “I’m sorry. I have to go. I want to get to Michael’s. I don’t want to wait too long.”

“Be careful. Thanks for meeting me. I hope... I hope we will talk soon?”

“Soon,” I agree, standing on shaking legs.

I blow out a heavy breath, and welcome the breeze as soon as it hits me in the face when I leave the café. I’m proud of myself that I didn’t cry when she started talking to me. I’m not ready for her to be in my life again, but I think I’ll get there.

I’ll get there quicker once I get the rest of my things from Michael’s. I just hope he doesn’t give me a hard time. He wouldn’t meet me to bring me my things, so of course, I have

to drive all the way to his house. I know this isn't going to go well. He has always made things difficult.

When I get into my car again, my phone vibrates again, and when I look at the screen, I chuckle when I see it's Matias.

Again.

*Him: "Are you still with your friend?"*

*Me: "No. I'm on my way to my ex's house, though. It's only to get a few of my things. Don't freak out."*

*Him: "Do not go there without me. Sophie, don't you dare see him alone."*

*Me: "I'll be fine. I promise. I'll text you when I'm on my way back."*

I toss my phone in my purse and turn the new car on. I might be loving the fact that it isn't noisy or backfires. The more time I spend in this car, the more I love it, and the less angry I am at Matias. I need him to know I'm appreciative of what he did. He only got me a new car because he cares. How can I argue that logic?

The closer I get to Michael's house, the more nervous I become. It makes me wish I wasn't alone, but the independent stubborn side of me says I need to do this on my own.

I pass a gas station on the left, before taking a turn down the street leading to his apartment complex. The road is empty and the trees on either side are still, calm, reminding me how serene it is before it storms.

But then, a storm can be catastrophic, and I can't help but wonder if the universe senses impending doom. Okay, that might be a little dramatic, but it's true.

I flip the blinker on and turn left into the apartment complex. A cold dread washes over me when I pull in front of his unit. He's on the first floor and I can see him through his window now. He's staring at the window, staring straight at me.

"Get it over with, Sophie. You can do this." I leave my purse and phone in the car so he can't take them from me.

I don't bother looking at him as I walk up the pathway. I can feel his eyes on me, searing into me with anger and hate. I don't know what I did to make him so hateful toward me, but I just want this to be over with. I want to move on.

Stopping outside the black door that matches his heart, I lift my hand to knock, but the door swings open and he's already there.

"Sophie," he greets, looking me up and down.

"Michael." I squeeze by him since he doesn't move to allow me inside. I look around for my things that I asked him to pack, but I don't see them. "You didn't pack my things?"

"Why would I pack them when you aren't going anywhere, Sophie?"

I roll my eyes and head down the hallway. "Fuck you, Michael. I'm leaving. We are over. It's been over. I'm not sure what delusion you have in your head about us, but I'm ending it. We are done. Broken up. Finished. I'll be getting my things and leaving. You can move on with your life and fuck whoever you want."

He grabs my wrist, spins me around, and holds me close to him. The pressure on my wrist begins to hurt and I whimper. "Michael, let go of me. You're hurting me."

"I only fucked her because you wouldn't give it up, Sophie." One hand trails down my side, squeezing my ass. "Come on. I earned it."

I pull myself away from his grasp and rub my wrist. "You didn't earn anything. You cheated. I don't want to have sex with you. My body isn't yours to have. I'm not yours." I turn around again to enter the bedroom when he grips me by the back of the neck and throws me against the wall.

My head smacks against the wall, an immediate throb spreading across my skull.

"You fucking bitch." He wraps the other hand around my throat, pinning me against the wall with his body. "You're nothing but a whore, aren't you? You tease and play hard to

get, but I know you're just like any other bitch and will get on her knees."

"Let go of me! Get off me!" I scream and he shoves his other hand over my mouth to smother my cries for help.

His hand around my throat tightens, making it difficult to breathe. My eyes burn and well with tears, wishing I never would have come here, but I have a photo album under his bed of my family and me before the fire took my parents' life.

I have to have it.

"Get off you? Fuck you," he seethes, taking the neckline of my shirt, gripping it in his hands and yanking it. It rips down the middle and my breasts spill free, showing the black bra I'm wearing. "I've waited too long for you to get on board, so I'm going to take it. You'll like it, baby. You'll see. There's nothing to be nervous about."

I whimper, just as the front door bursts open which causes him to release my neck.

And I'm finally able to take a deep breath.

When I turn my head, I see Matias.

He's pissed.

## Chapter Nine

*Matias*

When Gianni told me the address of where her ex lived after she parked at his apartment complex, I left the compound and got to her as fast as possible. I trust no one. Sophie's safety is very important to me.

Gianni is behind me when I kick the door down. My eyes zero in on him. His hands are on her, she's pinned against the wall, and when she sees me, I see the relief.

And the tears dripping down her cheeks.

He releases her. "Who the fuck are you? Get the hell out of my apartment."

With a sneer, I tackle him to the ground, then wrap a hand around his throat. He tries to bat my hand away, but he's too weak.

I lift him by his neck before slamming him against the floor again. The breath is knocked out of him.

I do it again.

And again.

Loving the sound of his head smashing against the wooden floor.

Grabbing my gun, I slip the barrel under his chin, and lift him to his feet, pinning him against the wall. I pull back on the hammer, sliding a bullet into the chamber.

"Holy fuck." The words tremble from Michael's mouth.

"'Holy fuck' is right, you piece of shit," I seethe.

I turn to Sophie to see her arms wrapped around her waist, her shirt torn, and her throat reddened from his hand. "Are you okay?"

She doesn't say anything, just nods, but her body says otherwise. She's shivering.

"Gianni. Give her your jacket." I'd give her mine, but I don't want to remove this gun from Michael's face.

Gianni does what I say without a fuss. He would have given her the jacket anyway. He's a gentleman like that.

She tightens the blazer around her to cover herself up.

I growl, knowing he's seen her bra, her gorgeous body, without permission.

"I should kill you. I've killed for less. You won't be missed. I should torture you and make your pain last for putting your hands on her."

He struggles against me, trying to get free of my hold. "You have no idea who I am. You have no idea how fucked you are."

I laugh, truly amused by his audacity. "How fucked *I* am? *Me?*" I shove the gun into his mouth, chipping his front tooth. "You have no idea who the fuck I am. That's what you need to worry about, Michael," I sneer.

"Matias, don't." Sophie's small voice has me taking a deep breath. "Don't kill him."

I grunt in disagreement. "Why? The world would be better off."

"I wouldn't be. I don't want to be the reason he's dead."

"He would be the reason. Not you. His actions are his alone." I shove the gun further into his mouth and he gags. "So, tell me why I shouldn't kill you, Michael. What makes you so special?" I slip the gun free so he can speak.

"You are fucking dead." He spits. Literally spits into my face.

I slam my head forward and hit his nose with my forehead, causing it to bleed as it breaks.

"I would fucking kill you if it weren't for Sophie. She's the only thing keeping you alive."

“Wait until my father hears about this.”

“I don’t give a fuck about your father,” I tell him. “You need to know that with every step you take, you have the Milazzo Mafia watching you.”

His face loses color. “Milazzo?”

I lean forward and grin. “Milazzo.” I point the gun at his heart. “So, when I say I don’t give a fuck about who you are, do you believe me? Because I can promise, who you are doesn’t compare to who I am.”

He nods so fast, the sweat dripping from his temple slides freely down his jaw.

“I’m not going to kill you, but know you’re officially tagged, Michael. If you speak to Sophie, if you contact her, if you’re in the same place as her, if you do anything other than forget about her existence, I’ll kill you. I’ll dismember your body and spread it across the fucking United States, so you’re never found. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” he bites, looking over my shoulder at Sophie.

I adjust my stance and cock my head, moving the gun to his shoulder and pulling the trigger.

“Ah, fuck!” he shouts, sliding down the wall and leaving a blood smear on the wall.

“When I said not to look at her, I meant starting now. That’s a warning. The next one will land between your eyes, Michael.”

He stares at the ground, holding a hand to his shoulder to apply pressure to the wound.

“Get what you need from here, Sophie. And we will leave.”

I keep the gun aimed at Michael, waiting for him to move his eyes to get another look at her. She comes back with a photo album in her arms.

“Gianni, please take her outside.”

She doesn’t argue, but stares at me until she’s out the door.



I punch him again, then dig my finger into his wound to hear him scream. “I will bring you so much fucking pain, every day of your life, if you don’t listen to me. I will enjoy taking away your will, your pain, your freedoms. I will enjoy making your life hell until I kill you. Stay away from her, understand?”

“I understand!” he yells, his face red from the pain.

I straighten. “Good.” For good measure, I shoot him in his leg and the pain causes him to fall over.

“What the fuck?”

“Because I felt like it. Neither wound will kill you.” I tuck the gun in the holster and walk away, wishing I could kill him. I’ll do anything Sophie wants, so if she doesn’t want me to kill him, I won’t.

It doesn’t mean it takes away the urge to.

When I’m outside, I hurry out of the apartment to see Gianni and Sophie near the SUV. I let the bravado fall and my concern is evident. I lift her chin with my finger, brush my other hand down the redness on her neck, and tighten my jaw.

“Are you okay? What did he do to you? Are you hurt?” I lightly pat her arms, then bend down, checking her legs.

“No,” she sniffles. “No, you got here just in time.” Her voice wavers with emotion. “Thank you for coming. I just... I needed this album. It’s all I have of my parents. It must have fallen out of the box when I was packing and—”

“—There is no need to explain. Okay? You should be able to get your belongings without issue. And Sophie?” I caress her chin with my fingers and her watery eyes look up at me. “I’ll always come for you. That’s something you never have to worry about. Okay?”

She nods, a few tear drops breaking free of her lash line to trickle down her face.

I bring her in for a hug, needing to feel her safe in my arms, and I kiss the top of her head. “You’re okay. I have you, my sweet. I have you. He’ll never touch you again.”

I feel her nod against my chest.

“Gianni, drive her car back to the compound. I’ll drive her home.”

“No problem. I’m glad we got here in time, Sophie. I’m happy to see you safe.” Gianni gives me a nod before walking to her car.

“He needs the key,” she says, the words muffled against my chest.

“He has one. I made copies of your key and gave it to those who will need it.”

“I would argue about that if I had the energy.”

I kiss her forehead. “I know you would. Let’s get you home, okay? You need to rest.”

“I won’t argue with you there,” she rasps, placing her hand against her throat. “I think he would have choked me to death.” Another wave of tears comes as I open the passenger side door and help her inside.

“Death would not have happened because I’ll always get to you before that’s ever a possibility.” I reach over and buckle her in, wanting to embrace her in close proximity, but we need to get away from this apartment.

I hurry around the front of the car and jump in, slamming the door in hopes Michael hears us leaving. The tires skid across the pavement as I peel out of the parking lot. I’m furious. My hand tightens on the wheel and my heart lurches in my chest with how close I was to losing Sophie. My palms sweat.

It’s then I realize she’s weakened me.

Instead of saying anything stupid like why the hell she’d go to his place alone, I keep my mouth shut because my frustrations are not her fault. She’s been through enough and I don’t need to make her feel worse.

I slip my hand in hers, lacing our fingers together, and she doesn’t fight me. She leans over, placing her head on my shoulder as we drive home.

We get home all too soon, faster than I want because I'm enjoying her touch all too much. When we park, we stay in the car, not rushing out. I think both of us are finding the alone time welcoming.

"I'm sorry," she finally says. "I shouldn't have gone alone."

"It's okay." I cup the back of her neck and press our foreheads together. "I'm just happy you're safe." Her breath puffs against my lips just as she tilts her head.

So I do the same, inching closer. Her breath catches. I pause, waiting to see if she changes her mind but she doesn't move. My hand slips from the back of her neck to her jaw, cupping it gently, and I bring my lips to hers at last.

Her lips give easily, and I take it in, groaning softly when I finally experience the one thing I haven't been able to get out of my mind. Her hand slides up my chest, fisting my tie to pull me closer. My tongue slips between her lips, hers lightly flicking against mine.

Perfect.

The kiss deepens, somehow becoming hotter, and my cock hardens painfully.

Now isn't the time for lust, so I bring the kiss to an end. "I want to do that again and again, but I think we need to stop."

She nods, her fist still clutching my tie.

Sophie just gave me the best kiss of my life and in return, I want to give her the best life possible.

"Let me open the door for you and help you to your room. Anything you need, ask, okay?"

"Okay," she whispers, licking lips that are red from our kiss.

Goddamn it. I want to kiss her again.

I head to the passenger side, open her door, and before I can think better of it, my arm wraps around her waist and I pull her to me. She slides across the leather seat, her legs on either side of me, and I kiss her again. My hand finds that spot under her jaw so I can control the way we move against one another.

Her palms land on my chest and the slightest moan escapes her, drenching my tongue in need while I gently slide it between her lips. This kiss is slow, controlled, and savored.

“I had to taste you again,” I say.

“I wanted you to.”

I’m finally making headway with Sophie Matthews. “Good. I plan on doing it often.”

She looks down, hiding her smile.

Sliding my arms under her, I lift her, placing her against my chest and she squeals.

“No! Put me down, Matias. Put me down. You can’t—You can’t. I’m too heavy.”

I kick the car door shut, narrowing my eyes at Sophie. “Don’t ever say that. You aren’t heavy. You’re fucking perfect, and if this was another day, I’d throw you over my shoulder to show you just how light you really are.”

“You wouldn’t,” she gasps, horrified. “Put me down, Matias. I’m serious. Men have not carried me.”

Gianni opens the front door so I can carry her across the threshold. I nearly fumble, wishing I would have handed her the contract, so she was my wife. I could be her husband right now if I ruled with a heavier fist.

“Then you have not been with the right men,” I state, walking her to her room. She remains silent as I open her door, then gently place her on the bed. “You should be with a man who is strong enough to toss you around how you wish to be tossed.” I glide my hands down her voluptuous curves, giving a slight shake of my head—a pure disbelief that she can’t see how fucking perfect she is. “You are...” I trail off, trying to find the right words. “You are everything a man could ever want, Sophie.” Lifting her up, I slide off Gianni’s jacket, not liking that she’s wearing another man’s clothes. “I’m not undressing you, even if that’s all I have thought about since you stepped into my life.” I throw his jacket to the bench settled in front of the bed. “I really dislike seeing another man’s clothes on you.”

I take her hand and kiss the top of it, not wanting to leave her just yet, but I understand she needs space after everything she's been through. I go to leave, my cock hard and aching.

The moment I leave, I'll be taking care of that.

My entire body is burning with lust.

"Why don't you?" I hear her whisper behind me.

I stop, turning my head until my chin hits my shoulder. "Because I only want you wearing my clothes."

"No. That's not what I mean." I turn around just as she props herself up on her elbows. "Why don't you undress me?"

I shut my eyes, growling low in my throat. "Sophie, be careful with what you say. You don't know how much I hold back with you. You aren't ready. I won't have this be something you regret. I refuse for you to regret me."

"I won't." She shrugs off her torn shirt, revealing that beautiful black bra. Her tits are barely contained, nearly too big for it, and all I want to do is press them together, fuck them, and come all over those beautiful mounds, claiming them as my own.

"Sophie," I rumble her name again in warning.

"I'm a virgin, Matias. I have no idea what I'm doing. I've never felt the need to be with a man like I do with you. I can't promise I'll be good at it, but if there's a man who I know will take care of me, and protect me, I know you're that man. You've proved it already." She unbuttons her jeans and wiggles out of them, kicking them to the ground only to reveal a matching black pair of panties.

They are simple, nothing seductive, but I've never seen anything so tantalizing and tempting.

"Undress the rest of me, Matias."

My breaths come out heavy, my fists clench by my side, and I try to think of a reason to say no again. She doesn't understand that once this happens, she'll be mine.

Always.

This won't be a one-night fling. This won't be Sophie getting it out of her system. No matter what she tells herself. I know she'll second-guess this happening between us, but I'll have to deal with that another day.

"Please, Matias," she begs softly.

I'm in front of her in two steps, grabbing the back of her neck as I peer down at her. "You never have to beg me to fuck you. I'll always give you what you want and what you need when you ask." I slam my mouth against her, the heat rising fast between us, now that we know what's going to happen.

Our mouths melt together. I pry her lips apart, sliding my tongue inside, and flicking it lightly against hers. Her palms glide up my chest and pull down my blazer. It slides off easily, piling on the floor.

"You have no idea how much you consume me," I admit against her lips before owning them again.

She whimpers, unbuttoning my shirt and tugging it free from my slacks. I apply pressure against her lips, forcing her back until she's lying flat against the bed. I crawl over her, caging her head in with an arm and aligning our bodies in a way so she can feel how much I want her.

Her hands find my belt, undo it, and toss it on the floor before unzipping my pants. I'm kicking my shoes off with my slacks until we are in our underwear. I spread her legs with my knee, aligning my cock against her, and start thrusting. I need her to feel me.

"Matias," she whines when my cock rolls over her clit.

I haven't dry-humped since I was a teenager, but I've never wanted anyone the way I want Sophie. I can't contain how much I want to show her how I need her. I groan next, my cock harder with every stroke against her clit. All that's between us is the thin material of our underwear. I feel the heat of her pussy and it causes my cock to leak.

I continue to rock against her, swallowing her sighs and moans. Slipping my fingers through the straps of her bra, I tug them down. I want to take my time exploring her.

This will not be quick.

This will not be fast.

This will be memorable.

“Matias.” Her nails dig into my back, her mouth falls open while she closes her eyes. “Oh, god. Matias.” She rocks against me quickly. “Don’t stop.”

Is she going to come for me? Just like this? Fuck, that’s sexy.

“You’re going to come for me, Sweet Sophie?”

“Yes,” she groans. “Yes. I’m so close. Please, don’t stop. Please.”

Sliding my arm under her back, I unhook her bra, and toss it over my shoulder. Her breasts spill free and I’m in fucking heaven. I knead one and it’s more than I can hold, spilling over my hand. Kissing down her neck, my lips graze every soft inch of her skin, dragging down her chest until I’m sucking a nipple into my mouth.

Fucking perfect.

I nibble, teasing the bead between my teeth.

Taking me by surprise, my own orgasm threatens. I can feel it building as I gain speed, the head of my cock still rolling against her clit.

“Fuck,” I curse, tugging down my briefs so I can feel her against me.

I grab her panties and rip them from her body, my eyes rolling to the back of my head when I get to feel how wet she is.

“Christ. You feel so fucking good.”

“Yes. Yes! Oh my god, this...this...”

“I know. Fuck, I know.” I curl over her, still thrusting between her soaked lips. “You’re going to make me come. Help me take the edge off.”

“Matias!” she shouts my name, dragging her nails down my back as she comes. Her body tightens, a sense of relief washing over her, and I rear back so I can watch the pleasure play across her face.

She becomes wetter, drenching me so much, with every stroke I hear the sound of her slick against me.

“Good girl,” I moan. “I’m going to come all over this pussy. I’m going to claim it. You’re going to be all mine, aren’t you?” I thrust hard one more time, her legs shaking around me from rutting against her overly sensitive clit, and my orgasm hits me. I look down, needing to see my come slide between her pussy, my cockhead peeking out with every shallow thrust I give. She becomes a mess, her pussy covered in me, and my cock begins to slide even easier from our combinations.

I scoop my come up with my fingers. “Open.”

She licks her bottom lip before obeying, her eyes glazing over with lust. Her swollen lips part and her cheeks turn a scandalous shade of pink.

“Taste me, Sweet Girl. Taste what’s yours.” I slide my come-soaked fingers over her tongue, and she wraps her lips around me, groaning as she sucks me clean, as if I’m her favorite piece of candy. My cock twitches from the erotic sight.

“Mmmm,” she hums in delight.

While she’s working on my fingers, I take my free hand and stroke my cock while I watch. I’m still hard, still aching to feel her heat wrapped around me.

“That’s it. Show me how you’ll suck my cock.”

Her tongue flicks against my fingertips and I slide them out of her decadent mouth. With her spit shining on my fingers, I travel them down the middle of her body, appreciating every curve. I love her body. Wide hips, thick thighs, plump everything, and she has no idea how fucking feral I am for it. I imagine her pregnant with my child, round, breasts bigger and leaking with milk as I fuck her.

She’s a goddess and I’m the devil who is going to ruin her.



I slip my fingers between her pussy lips, rubbing my come into every crevice I can find. She gasps, fondling her heavy tits while I play.

“You have such a pretty cunt, Sweet Girl. So soft. I bet you’re so fucking tight. You saved this pussy just for me, didn’t you?” I dip a finger inside her tight hole, my mouth falling open when I feel just how tight she really is. “Fuck, Sophie.”

She glances down, eyes widening when she sees my cock for the first time. “I don’t think you’ll fit, Matias.” She swallows nervously.

“I’ll fit. I’ll get you ready for my big cock, Sweet Girl.” I ease my index finger in all the way with my come as lube until I feel her barrier. She tenses with pain, and I ease back, wanting to claim that when I’m deep inside her. My thumb grazes her clit to help her relax.

“Oh,” she sighs in surprise.

I work my finger in and out, loving how she relaxes when it feels better, as time goes on. I insert another finger and curl over her body, claiming her lips once more while I finger-fuck her pussy to get it ready for my cock.

“You’re going to feel so fucking good,” I praise. “You’re so perfect. Your body is everything I’ve dreamed about. I can’t wait to see you on top of me, owning this cock like you should.” The more I talk, the more she moves her body against me. The most sinful sounds spill from her lips, so I continue while I insert a third finger. “I’ve dreamed about being buried inside you.” I take her hand, wrapping her fingers around my cock until she makes a fist. “Feel what you do to me, feel how hard you make me. You do that. This is all because of you. I’ve never come like I did earlier with another woman. You do that to me. That’s how you make me feel. I can’t hold back with you. You trigger every fucking need I have.”

She plucks her nipples, biting her bottom lip. “Matias, oh my god,” she nearly squeals, reaching up to wrap her arms around my neck. She kisses me with so much intensity, I have to readjust my position, so I don’t fall over.

“Please, I can’t wait anymore. Please,” she murmurs against my lips, her arm disappearing between us. She wraps her hand around my cock, and I grunt from how good her touch is.

“Fuck me, Matias. I need you inside me.”

“Mmm,” I growl, settling between her legs. I lift one leg over her hip to give me better access and she releases my cock.

“It will hurt at first, Sweet Girl.” I kiss the side of her neck.

“But I promise, I’m going to make you feel so fucking good.”

“I trust you,” she whispers against my ear.

My entire body shivers from the admission, wanting nothing more than to show her I’m the one person who she can trust with her life.

I guide my cock to her entrance and lean on one elbow so I can get a good look at her when I’m sinking inside. Her fingers grip my ass, her nails digging into the flesh as she waits for the pain I warned her about.

Inching in, I hold my breath, unable to remember how to fucking inhale when she wraps around me.

“Jesus Christ, you’re tight.” I want to thrust in. I want to take. I want to know how perfect she’ll feel taking every inch of me.

But she isn’t ready.

A groan of pain sounds from her. She tenses, clenching around my cock which causes me to grunt. I hit her barrier, lowering my body against hers, and pushing her hair away from her face while I kiss her cheeks.

Words of encouragement flow freely from me to help her relax. “You’re doing so good, Sophie.” I drift my fingers up and down her arms. “You feel so fucking good. You’re the best I’ve ever felt. I was made to be inside you.” I kiss across her chest, sucking her nipple into my mouth. “God, I fucking love your tits. I’m going to fuck them one day, Sweet Girl. I’m going to come all over them until you’re nothing but a mess. You’ll be drenched in me.”

I feel the moment she relaxes. She releases the tight grip on my cock.

“That’s a good girl,” I praise her again and before I say another word, I slowly ease in, claiming her virginity, taking what’s rightfully mine.

Not *his*.

“Oh fuck, Matias!” she squeezes her eyes shut and her nails sink into my shoulders until I feel the skin break.

I don’t move, wanting her to get used to the size of me. I can’t imagine how uncomfortable she must feel right now, but it will get better.

I tremble, my control slipping.

“You’re cold?” she turns my chin, so I have to look at her and her breath hitches in her throat. “What’s wrong?”

I suck her bottom lip into my mouth, then wipe away a tear dripping down her cheek from the pain. “You feel so good, I’m about to lose control. I’m not cold, I’m burning up for you.” I suck my thumb into my mouth, tasting the salty liquid burst across my tongue. “Controlling myself is almost impossible when I have you under me at last.”

She bites my bottom lip, then licks it. “I’m ready.”

A victorious groan fills the room as I slide out, only to slowly thrust in to test my boundaries. “Oh, my fucking god, Sophie.” I throw my head back when I’m as far as I can go. She’s taking every inch of me. “Baby,” I murmur breathlessly, my hand wrapping around the back of her neck to lift her to me so I can kiss her once more.

I don’t go faster. I don’t go harder. I keep the pace slow and steady until I know she’s okay. First times can be horrible for a woman, and I won’t be that for her. I refuse.

“You feel so good. I knew you would.” Our tongues duel, the kiss turning messy, and as the desire burns brighter, my movements become faster, naturally.

“More, Matias. More. Give me more.”

“I’ll give you anything you want, Sweet Girl.” I grab the headboard with one hand and squeeze her hip with the other, leveraging myself.

Lifting up, I can see her body, and my control snaps. Her tits bounce with every hard thrust.

I drive in.

Wanting to see where we're connected, I release the headboard and let it smack against the wall. I spread her legs, keeping a tight grip on her thighs, in hopes that bruises will be there tomorrow, where I grabbed and fucked her.

"Look at that. Look at you taking me. You're all breathless and moaning for this cock, aren't you? I wish you could see what I see. Your pussy is stretched to the max. You have no idea what it does to me to see hints of your virginity coating my cock. It's making me fucking feral, Sophie."

"You feel so good. I never thought it would feel like this."

I slide out and flip her onto her stomach easily, snagging her by her hair to keep her head lifted.

"Matias," she gasps.

"It doesn't feel like this. It's only because it's us. Do you understand that? Don't even think about giving my pussy away to some other man that will never fuck you like I will." I lie over her, thrusting inside her cunt without issue.

No barrier to stop me.

"Yes! Aaah, fuck, Matias. Yes!" she keens.

"Tell me," I demand while I pound into her.

"No one else. No one. Yours only."

"That's right, Sweet Girl." I force her onto her hands and knees, grabbing her hips while I ram into her, hard and fast.

"Fuck... Oh god, Matias. You... You... I feel like..." she buries her face into the mattress and grips the edge for dear life, while I relentlessly fuck her the way I've been wanting to.

Our skin slaps together and her round ass shakes with every thrust. Lifting my hand, I slap it, and she turns her cheek into the bed, trying to look at me.

“You liked that, didn’t you?” I spank her again and she becomes wetter. I chuckle. “Naughty girl. I knew you were made for me.” I wrap her hair around my fist and pull her against my chest. I squeeze one of her breasts, holding onto her, pulling her as close as possible. Her skin slides against mine. Her hair tickles my chest. The sweet scent of her shampoo infiltrates my nose while I bury my face against the back of her head.

“Ah, Sophie. Damn it.” Moans of every sound spill from us, echoing from the walls.

“I feel like... Matias. You have to stop.”

“Why? Tell me why I’d ever stop fucking you.”

“I’m about to... I think I need to use the bathroom. You’re making me feel like I have to go. But I don’t want you to stop.” Her head falls onto my shoulder.

Gripping her upper throat, near her chin so I don’t hurt her like *he* did, I turn her head and we kiss. I can’t get enough.

“Good. It means you’re about to come.” I drift my other hand between her legs, pinching and rolling her clit. “Your orgasm is building. I hope you squirt all over me. That’s what you feel. You must love this position.”

She nods frantically, her brows drawn together. I shove my thumb into her mouth, watching bliss take over her features. She sucks and groans. I fuck her harder, slamming against her with so much force, we fall forward.

Her head hangs from the bed and I push up, pressing my hand against her back so she stays down. Her screams get lost in the bed while I watch my cock plummet into her pussy, disappearing between her thick ass cheeks. I’ll never understand men who don’t like curvy women.

If you can’t get past the cheeks, just fucking say that, don’t blame her.

“Come on, Sweet Girl. I feel you want to come. Let go. Come for me.” I press her legs together, forcing her to lie flat, the position causing my own orgasm to build.

“Harder,” she pleads.

A violent growl leaves me, and I clutch her ass with each hand, gripping the meat to use to help slam her against me.

But it’s me who can’t hold back.

A continuous moan is forced from my throat as my orgasm bursts from me, filling her cunt. I glance down, watching my come coat my cock and drip from her.

“Oh, fuck, Sophie. Look what you made me do. Oh, damn it. Fuck!” I ram into her as hard as I can, driving my come as deep as possible while the longest orgasm of my life continues.

Her knuckles turn white, and she shoves her face into the mattress as she screams, her body locking and unmoving while her thighs shake. Her orgasm hits her hard, and just as I thought, she squirts. Liquid runs down my cock and splashes against me, dripping down my sack.

I lean back, keeping the head of my cock in to watch her pussy tense with every spasm.

“That’s it, baby. Show me how good I made you feel. Give me every drop.”

There’s no way things can return to how they were. I’ll need her every fucking night. I’ll need her again and again. I’ll never get enough.

When she’s done, I inch my semi-hard cock inside her, wrap my arms around her body, and place us on our sides. I grab the blanket, which has wet spots on it from her orgasm, but I don’t care, and cover us.

“You’re still inside me,” she says sleepily.

I kiss her shoulder.

“And I never want to leave.”

Not until she’s pregnant with my child.

## Chapter Ten

*Sophie*

Oh, *my* god.

It's the only statement I can think about while hiding from Matias.

I'm a coward.

Waking up with his arms around me, an ache between my legs, and the memory of all the filthy words he whispered to me last night made me panic as soon as my eyes opened. I had so many thoughts running through my mind.

As I lay in bed with him, I wondered if I was dreaming. Matias and I really had sex. He was there, arms wrapped around me, keeping me warm and safe.

My heart started to pound with excitement and hope for the future. I started to like him more than I told myself I'd allow. He made it so damn easy. He was perfect in every way. He always did and said the right things.

Then, on top of it all, he was gentle last night, caring, and thoughtful, and it ended up being the best night of my life.

Which is why I slid out of bed, got dressed, and decided to go for a walk around the compound.

It's how I find myself now, hiking through the woods behind the house, and stopping at a cliff that has a gorgeous view of the city.

"Wow," I whisper in awe, wondering what it's like to have so much money that you can literally look down at the city on days you despise it.

Checking the time, I know I have to get back since Ella is about to wake up. Going back inside that house after what happened last night terrifies me. What if he regrets it? What if

he doesn't even look at me? What if that was his plan all along? To get me in bed and make me fall for him.

What if I lose my job?

There has to be a way to fix this situation.

I shouldn't have snuck out of bed earlier. I should have been an adult and talked to him about what this meant. It won't be as simple as me being a nanny and him being my boss. Not when I know how his cock looks, how long and thick it is, and how he truly knows how to use it.

"Jesus." I place my hand on the back of my neck, stretching it when a rush of heat takes over my body.

I've seen a man's cock before. Plenty of times with a few of the guys I dated. Matias's is different. Just like his presence, his energy, his power, of course, his cock would match. It stood straight, without a curve. A thick crown and a wide shaft. I still can't believe he fit inside me, but he made sure I was ready.

He deserves better. He treated me like a queen last night and I returned his kindness by making him feel like a one-night stand. If he cares. He probably doesn't because he's used to having sex with so many women. How many virginites has he taken?

And why does that thought infuriate me?

The idea of him with any other woman has jealousy rearing its ugly head. I have no claim to him, no matter what he said last night. The one thing I can do is apologize. I'm a grown woman. There's no reason for me to run away from an evening that was that amazing.

"Okay, just go back," I say to myself, taking one last look of the beautiful view of all the tall city buildings.

My shoe slides across the dirt as I gather the strength to turn around, but I wait, kicking myself in the ass for not being stronger, to face the music.

It was just sex.

"Ms. Matthews."



I scream, spinning around so fast, my mind going into fight mode, that I rear my arm back and throw a punch. My fist connects to the man's cheek.

“Oh my god!” I shout in horror. “Gianni. I’m so sorry. Oh god, are you okay?” I rush to him, placing my hand on his shoulder as he rubs his jaw. “I reacted. I wasn’t thinking. I was in my head. I am so sorry.”

He rubs his cheek then spits out a wad of blood.

“I made you bleed!” I get lightheaded, thinking about the consequences of hurting someone in the mafia. “Are you going to throw me over the cliff now?” my voice cracks from fear. “Or something horrific involving death? I really am sorry. Gianni, I—”

He cuts me off by grabbing my biceps.

I squeeze my eyes shut, waiting to be thrown in the air and over the cliff to fall to my death.

“Sophie. Open your eyes.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to see my surroundings as I fall through the air. Just do it.”

He chuckles, giving me a slight shake. “Look at me.”

I peek one eye open. When I see him smiling, I relax.

A little.

I open the other eye, my gaze falling to the slightly red patch on his cheek that I left. My eyes begin to burn from fear, embarrassment, and shame. My bottom lip begins to tremble.

Oh, no.

No, I cannot cry in front of the righthand man of the guy I slept with last night. I really hate authority. It’s why I’ve been determined to be on my own, so I can ignore it for as long as possible.

“Hey, hey, hey, none of that. Hey.” He tilts my chin up with the side of his hand instead of his fingers, and for some reason, it reminds me of how my father would force me to look at him after I had hurt myself by falling off my bike.

Gianni has that quality about him, and it has me trusting him with ease.

“No tears. You have no reason to be afraid of me.”

“Minus you being in the mafia, and probably killed someone this morning.”

He chuffs, lifting a shoulder. “Not *this* morning.”

“It’s still early,” I tell him, eyeing the cliffside.

“I’m not going to throw you off a cliff. I’m very proud to see you act so quickly to protect yourself. You should not be sorry for that. You have a mean right hook.” He goes to take my hand, stopping just as he is close. “May I?”

I nod. “You aren’t mad?”

“Mad? No way. You should always protect yourself. You were out here alone, and I came out of nowhere. I shouldn’t have snuck up on you like that. Apologies.” He takes my hand and I hiss, wincing when he presses his thumbs against my reddened knuckles. He tsks. “You need to work on your form. You might have fractured your hand, sprained it, or perhaps it just hurts. But you need to hold your fist like this.” He puts my hand in position, tucking my thumbs over my fingers. “Your thumb probably hurts because you had it tucked inside your fist. You don’t ever want to do that. When you hit your assailant, you could end up breaking your thumb, so always on the outside. And you want to keep your wrist straight. I could give you some pointers, if you’d like.”

I start walking through the woods, holding my wrist as it begins to throb. “Yeah, I think that’s a good idea. Especially, if I’m working for the mafia.”

“Just working?”

I flick my eyes to him, his brows lifting in amusement and curiosity as he wipes the sweat from his face with his shirt. He must have run up here. I’m so embarrassed that I didn’t hear him.

“Oh. I—I mean—I should only be working.” My cheeks heat from being put on the spot. “That’s all there is between

me and Matias. It's just work."

"Sophie, I've been the righthand man and security lead for the Milazzo family for many years. I am profoundly experienced in profiling people. You and Matias crossed the employee/employer work line last night. For a few hours, I might add."

"Oh my god, you heard? You heard!" I pick up the pace as I walk, trying to get away from Gianni. If he heard, then Ella could have heard.

"Hey, no, no. Nothing like that. Well, not fully. I heard the headboard, that's all. It was a very light, muffled sound since the walls were so thick. I came to the conclusion myself. Was I wrong?"

I shake my head. "No, you weren't wrong. It shouldn't have happened."

"Why not? You're both adults."

"Come on. You know why."

The house comes into view as we step out of the tree line.

"You need to understand something about Matias." He stops walking, gently snagging my arm which forces me to come to a complete stop. "I've known him for a long time. He is a deep thinker, feels deeply, but he doesn't wear his heart on his sleeve. If he has a dream in his head, he will make it come true. He doesn't sleep around. He doesn't date, Sophie. If he took you to bed, it wasn't for a night."

My hope rises like a sea during a storm, rocking my fear as if I'm a boat caught in the waves. "It has to be one night. I can't lose this job. I need it more than I need him," I say, the words rancid across my tongue as I speak them.

"Maybe you'll see that things aren't so black and white. There are circumstances where situations can be both."

"I wish I could believe that, but I've learned that this world is black and white, Gianni. There's good and bad. There's live or die. There's hate and love. Anything in between is a lie."

He frowns, his eyes darting over my face in pity. “I’m sorry you had to grow up in a world like that, but you’re missing a lot of color in your life. I promise.”

I check the time, wanting to remove myself from this uncomfortable conversation. “I need to shower and prepare Ella breakfast.”

He nods. “I have to meet Matias in town for a meeting as well. Let me walk you back.”

“He isn’t home?”

“No. You can breathe easy.”

“I’m nervous, is all. I should have talked to him, but I got afraid. I’ve never—” I roll my lips together to stop myself from saying anything else. “Never mind.”

“Ah, I understand. There’s no need to be embarrassed about that. You chose a good man for that. I promise you, he won’t disappoint you. He will give you your space to think and process. For now,” he adds on.

When we get to the house, he opens the back door, allowing me in first. Ella is at the kitchen table already, eating cereal, but there is milk spilled everywhere. The cereal is all over the floor and counter, and she’s swinging her legs on the barstool as if she doesn’t have a care in the world.

I guess she doesn’t. At six, what’s there to worry about?

“Ella, good job making yourself breakfast,” I say to her, not wanting to make her feel bad about the mess when she took the initiative to make herself food.

“I know I made a mess, but I’ll clean it up when I’m done.”

“Don’t be silly. I can do that. You focus on eating.” I open the cabinet under the sink to grab cleaning supplies. Gianni walks out of the kitchen, and I stop him. “Thank you, Gianni. For everything.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Uncle G, what happened to your face?”

He grins. "I got into a fight with a knight, and she kicked my ass."

She gasps, milk dripping from her mouth. "A girl knight? I didn't know that was possible."

"Anything is possible, Gummy Bear." He boops her nose with his finger. "Women can be anything they want to be. They could be kings if they wanted."

She giggles. "We are queens."

"We all know kings get more respect. Women can be kings too. Don't ever settle for less when your power is so much more than what any man has. Promise?"

She grins. "I promise."

He kisses her forehead and shoots me a wink before heading to his room.

My knuckles ache as I wrap them around and hold all of the supplies. I don't think I broke my hand, but I'll need to ice it later. Snagging a few paper towels, I soak up the milk on the floor, then the counter, wiping off the milk jug.

Then I grab the cleaner, spraying and wiping so the floor isn't sticky.

"Sophie?"

"Yeah, Ella? What's up?" I sweep up the cereal and toss the pieces in the trash.

"Can we go to the park again today?"

I think about it, remembering the last time we were at the park, and how our time got interrupted because of Matias.

"I'm not sure. I'd rather we go to the park when your dad is around. How about we have a movie day? I'll pop popcorn, candy, drinks, and we can camp out in the living room, and maybe make a fort? What do you think?"

"Yes! I want to make a fort! I can eat candy, too? As much as I want?"

"Yes. And it will be our little secret."

“Yay! I’m going to go get the blankets now. I’m so excited.”  
She drops her spoon and milk splatters everywhere.

I sigh, chuckling as she zooms by me.

I dump her cereal into the sink, rinse out the bowl, and put it in the dishwasher. I fish out a few bags of popcorn from the cabinet, grab her favorite candy from the pantry, and then second-guess myself.

It’s still early in the morning. I should have her eat something that’s good for her.

“Every now and then won’t hurt,” I say, heading to the living room.

Matias installed a new TV in the living room, just like he promised. I scoot a few chairs over, toss the cushions from the couch on the floor, and hurry to my bedroom to grab pillows.

That’s when I notice a folded-up piece of paper on my nightstand. My name is written in cursive on the front, and with a held breath, I grab the paper.

Tucking a pillow under my arm, I exhale as I open the torn paper with perfect handwriting.

*“Sweet Sophie,*

*You gave me the best night of my life. I understand why you needed space. Please know, I want last night to happen again, again, and again. Don’t wash the sheets. There’s something very special about them I want to keep. Have a good day, Sophie. I’ll be seeing you later.*

*-M”*

“Something special?” I whisper, confused about what he would mean.

I tug off the blanket, searching for what he is talking about when my eyes land on small red dots. It’s nothing significant. I wouldn’t have noticed if he didn’t say anything.

I gasp when I realize what they are.

He wants to keep the sheets. I don’t know if that’s disgusting or flattering.

I'm leaning towards kind of hot. Does that mean something is wrong with me?

Grinning, I leave the sheets as is, just like he wants, and grab the other pillow to take it into the living room.

Ella is there, putting blankets over the chairs and couch.

"It's coming together. It looks great Ella. Have you thought about what you want to watch?"

"I want to watch all the Ice Age movies."

"Oh, I love those movies. My favorite character is the squirrel. I think he's so funny."

She giggles. "Me too!"

"Here are the pillows. I'll make the popcorn." I tuck the note into my back pocket, keeping it safe so I can read it whenever I want.

With a pep in my step, I prepare all the goodies while the popcorn is popping.

I bring over the bowls of gummy bears and skittles. The microwave beeps and the smell of popcorn fills the room.

It's okay to have popcorn in the morning, right?

Well, rules are made to be broken.

I hiss as I tear open the bag, the steam hot and slightly burning my fingers. "Damn it," I groan.

"You said a bad word!"

"No, I didn't! I said, darn it!" I'll have to practice my language now that I'm a full-time nanny.

The TV blares way too loud as Ella starts the movie. I let it go because playing movies too loud is always fun. Tossing a piece of popcorn into my mouth, I head to our fort.

# Chapter Eleven

*Matias*

“What the hell are we waiting for?” I say, getting more annoyed by the minute. We were supposed to meet our distribution team half an hour ago at the West dock, and they have yet to arrive. I don’t like being kept waiting, and an example will have to be made if they take any longer.

“Mr. Milazzo,” Jonathan, my subordinate, points toward the harbor, where our ship is coming in. I nod, thanking him for the head’s up, but still check my watch quite theatrically. I know they’re spying on me with the telescope in the control room, and I hope they see me.

The boat gets closer, and I squint, realizing that I don’t recognize anyone on board.

“Get down!” I yell, turning to see Jonathan get shot in the leg, falling to the wooden dock.

Bullets begin flying, and I dive behind a trash can near the railing of the pier, and Gianni makes it behind another. We give each other a confused look before I hear several men jump from the ship onto the dock. I jump out from my crouched position as soon as one of them makes it to me, and I shoot him in the chest, causing him to slump to the ground. I hit another man who is just climbing off the boat, and Gianni pegs off two more. The only person left was the driver of the boat, but neither of us could see him.

“Check on Jonathan,” I say, pointing my head towards his slumped body. I hold my gun at eye level as I make my way down onto the ship, the loud reverberation of my weight on the hull making my presence known. “Come out, wherever you are.”

“Fuck off,” a voice says suddenly, and a man pops his head up next to me and slams his gun into my shoulder, pulling the trigger. I exhale through gritted teeth at the burning pain, but I



don't have time to focus on it. Before he can shoot me somewhere else, I yank the piece from his hand and use the bottom of my Glock to smash his jaw in. He falls to the ground, attempting to crawl off, and I pop one last bullet into his skull.

"Matias, we have to go," Gianni calls to me, and I jog back to the front of the boat, jumping back onto the dock. I look at the mess we've made and shake my head, grasping my shoulder, before noticing that Gianni is holding his side and hissing out a sharp breath.

"What happened?" I mumble.

"Stabbed by that dipshit," he points his gun at the first guy I'd shot. I should have made sure he was dead. "We need to get Jonathan to a medic and get home."

"You're going to need some serious work done, Gianni."

"I'm fine. You know I've been through tenfold. Now, help me carry him to the car. I called another driver, and someone will be here to clean this up soon," he gestures to the bodies left astray and I peer at the men before Gianni ushers me away, trying to figure out if I recognize any of them from rival gangs. Nobody I've worked with, or against for that matter, would be so brazen. And so fucking dim-witted to show up here and think they could kill me.

I try my hardest to get my injured subordinate into the back of the black car that's arrived right on time. I climb in after him, and we drive him to the private medical center before getting dropped off at home.

I don't notice until we pull through the front gates of the estate how faint I'm actually feeling. I look down to the wound I attempted to plug with the fabric of my shirt, and the blood is pooling rapidly.

"We need to get you inside, Matias. Does Sophie know first aid?" He strains, and I know he's in as much, if not more pain than I'm in, but I can't get myself to physically help him as he drags me from the car and up the front stairs. "Damn it, boy, you didn't get shot in your legs. Use them."

## Chapter Twelve

*Sophie*

Three movies later, two bags of popcorn, and an empty bowl of Skittles, Ella is asleep.

I tuck her hair behind her ear. She's so cute. If I didn't know she was adopted, I would think Matias was her real father. They look alike.

I tuck her under a blanket and clean up, deciding to do some cleaning of the entire house. Mopping the floors, doing laundry, and I'm in the middle of seeing what we have for me to make dinner when I hear the front door open.

I hear a groan, spinning around, I see Matias holding onto Gianni, blood dripping down his arm.

"Matias! What happened?" I screech, then remember not to wake Ella. "We have to go to your room, so we don't wake Ella. She's in the living room asleep."

He nods, groaning when Gianni adjusts his hold around his waist. "Damn it. That hurts," he grumbles.

I dip under his other arm to take some of his weight from Gianni. The righthand man groans in relief, and that's when I notice he is injured too.

"What's happened, Gianni?" We hobble to the bedroom the best we can, a trail of blood dripping onto the floor.

"We were at the docks, waiting for a shipment," he begins to explain.

*A shipment.* Of what? I'm not sure if I truly want to know. I think I prefer vague terminology.

"Only, it wasn't our boat that was waiting for us. It was another. We don't know who it was, but we managed to kill five men on our own, but not without Matias catching a bullet in his shoulder, and I got stabbed in my side."

“Oh my god, Gianni. I can’t believe you guys went there without backup.”

“We killed everybody. It’s fine,” Matias grunts when I push open the door.

I roll my eyes, losing my grip on him because, holy hell, the man is heavy. “I don’t know if I can hold you up much longer. I’m losing my grip.”

“We’re almost there. Don’t let go,” Gianni says, pushing the bedroom door open.

My knees buckle and Matias stumbles forward. Gianni manages to drag him to the red velvet bench at the bottom of the bed. Matias groans in pain, holding a hand to his shoulder, then lies down on his back, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

“We need to get this shirt off. I only know basic first aid; you need a damn doctor.” I unbutton his shirt, my heart racing at the site of all the blood.

He snags my wrist to stop me. “No doctor. You can do this. The first aid kit is under the sink, and it has everything you need. Do you know how to sew?”

“Yes. I know how to sew.” I try not to sound offended, but come on, I’m a nanny. I have to know how, just in case stuffed animals need an emergency repair.

“It’s just like that. Fuck!” he curses when I lift him to take his shirt off.

“It isn’t just like that. This is skin. Not fabric.”

“You’ll be fine. No hospitals, Sophie. No one can know about this.”

I nod, doing my best not to show how much I’m shaking. I don’t want him to see the doubt currently taking over my body.

A crash sounds from behind me and I spin, noticing Gianni doubled over and hanging onto the dresser to keep himself standing. He’s pale. He doesn’t look good. He falls to his knees and I run to him, gently holding the back of his head to lie him on the floor.

“Oh my god, Gianni. You look terrible.”

He attempts a chuckle, wincing from the pain. “I’ve had worse. It’s not a big deal.”

“Deal with him first, Sophie.”

I whip my head to Matias, stand, snag two pillows from the bed, and try to make the men more comfortable. “But you’re shot. You need the bullet removed from your shoulder,” I explain, my stomach turning the longer I look at the wound.

“My wound isn’t life-threatening. His might be. He was stabbed in the abdomen. Also, in my office, I have antibiotics for us. You don’t need to worry, Sophie. I wouldn’t lie to you.”

I scoff. “Yeah, you would,” I grumble, then sit down next to Gianni. I rip his shirt open, not wasting time unbuttoning the damn thing. It’s ruined anyway.

“If you wanted me naked—”

“—Don’t even finish that sentence, Gianni,” Matias seethes.

Gianni gives a weak smile, sweat beading across his forehead. “I’m just kidding. I wanted to joke... keeping me conscious.”

I frown, staring at the wound on his side. Blood is slowly trickling out and onto the floor. The wound itself isn’t too large, but it looks deep. “Gianni, I don’t know if I can fix this. You need a doctor, possibly a blood transfusion.”

“We have blood here.”

I try not to get annoyed with Matias. “If you have everything a hospital has, why won’t you call one? Or hire one? This is insane. I have no idea what I’m doing, Matias.”

“I don’t have too much time, Sophie. Listen to me.” He swallows. “Go to the fireplace, turn it on, and heat something metal. Come back, and press it against my wound.”

“What! No, no way! That won’t fix it. That will be... that will be disgusting.”

“Yes, it will be, but it will help. Go.”

I lick my dry lips, already feeling queasy. “Okay. Okay. Um —” I stand, running my fingers through my hair, looking back and forth to both bleeding men. “Okay, I’m going. I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere.”

They both laugh, then groan.

I wince from the thoughtless statement. “Sorry. You know what I mean.” I dash out of the room, stepping into the blood drops on the floor. I don’t have time to do anything about it. My heart won’t stop pounding, my palms are sweating, and all I can think about is how red the floor was under Gianni.

What if I kill him and Matias?

When I get to the kitchen, I snag a knife from the butcher block, open the cabinet full of alcohol, then douse the blade in scotch.

“Fuck it.” I bring the bottle to my lips, taking a long swig of the most disgusting alcohol I’ve ever tasted, but I need to buzz. I do it again for good measure, then turn on the stove instead of the fireplace, so I don’t wake Ella.

The gas ignites. I turn the knob to high to get the fire as hot as possible, then shove the blade in the flame. “This is going to be so bad. This is going to be terrible. Oh my god, what am I doing?” I mutter to myself, the silver heating until it’s black.

I flip the stove off, then sprint down the hall again, doing my best to not step in the blood trail. I stop short when I get to the room.

Gianni isn’t moving.

I fly to his side, shaking him. “Gianni? Gianni, open your eyes. Come on.” My eyes begin to burn, but finally he groans.

“This is going to suck. Here.” I open his mouth and pour—I don’t know how much—scotch into his mouth.

Then, I pour it over the wound and press the side of the knife onto his wound. The flesh sizzles and Gianni shouts in agony.

“Fuck!”

The smell of his skin burning has me nauseous. I turn my head away, flipping the blade to the other side.

“Son of a bitch! Fuck you, Matias.”

“Fuck you, Gianni!”

“Be nice to each other. You’re probably the only reason the other is alive to begin with.” I pull the knife away, holding in a gag when I see the burnt, puckered skin.

On the bright side, it isn’t bleeding.

“How are you feeling?” I whisper to him, pushing his hair out of his face.

“Like I got stabbed and then burnt,” he smirks, exhaustion riddled in his face. “Thank you.”

“I still think you need a doctor.”

“I’ll get one. Stitch me up first.”

Right. Matias needs stitches.

Opening the cabinets in the bathroom, I grab the first-aid kit, and drop it on the bed. “You’re going to be sorry you trusted me to do this.”

“Probably,” Matias smiles, looking so different and vulnerable than he did when he fucked me ruthlessly.

I smile. “Good. I’m glad you know that.” I pour the scotch over his bullet wound, then give him the bottle.

He grits his teeth together. “Warn a guy next time.”

“Sorry,” I mumble, flipping open the first aid kit.

I rummage through the kit, snagging some antibiotic ointment and gauze. “I’m going to put this on Gianni. I’ll be right back.” I don’t know what comes over me, but I bend down and kiss his forehead, tasting the warmth and sweat of his pain. Before I question my actions, I bandage Gianni, then go to Matias again.

“He’s passed out.”

“It isn’t his first time being stabbed. It won’t be his last.”

“That isn’t reassuring. Will I be doing this more than once? Warn a girl.” I clean the wound first, then grab the needle and sutures. This is nothing like a thread. It’s much thicker.

“I think I prefer to keep you on your toes.”

I can’t help but smile while I get the needle ready. “This is going to be some really shoddy work. You can’t be mad at me.”

“Never,” he scoffs. “I’m impressed you haven’t run out the door.”

“Yet,” I add on.

“Never.”

I lift my eyes to his, catching his serious gaze. “Well,” I change the subject. “I have to get the bullet out, right?”

He shakes his head. “No. It’s a through and through. Just stitch me up.”

I nod, looking away and pinching my eyes shut while I push the needle through his skin.

“I’d like it if you looked while you did this,” he groans.

“I don’t know if I can.”

“You have to.”

“Nope.”

“Yes.”

I swallow, knowing he is right. “Fine.” It takes me awhile to sew the front wound, then the back, but eventually, I make it happen.

“There. Like brand new-ish.”

He snorts, then sighs. “Thank you.”

“I’ll go get the pain medicine and everything else from your office.” I go to stand, and he snags my wrist, stopping me.

“Kiss me before you go.”

My cheeks heat. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. We crossed a line we shouldn’t cross. We shouldn’t do it again.”

A half tilt of his lips tells me he disagrees. “I plan on crossing that line with you again and again until you realize the place you belong is by my side.”

“Matias—”

“—Kiss. Me.”

“We can’t,” I argue.

“You’re going to deny a dying man his last wish?”

I click my tongue in disbelief, shaking my head at insistence. “Really? You’re going to guilt trip me? You aren’t dying.”

“I might. You don’t know.”

I bend down until I’m inches away from his face. “You’re insatiable.”

“For you?” His eyes fall to my lips. “That will always be the case.”

He grunts, pushing through the pain as he wraps his hand around my throat, tugging me to him so I can’t fight him anymore. Our lips meet, his tongue curling around mine, stealing my breath and my ability to think.

He survived a bullet, but I’m not sure if I can survive Matias Milazzo.



# Chapter Thirteen

*Matias*

It's been a few days since I caught a bullet in my shoulder and I'm about to go stir crazy. It isn't my first time being shot and it won't be my last, so I'm used to the pain and what it takes to heal. I have to get out of this house, though.

Sophie has been busy with Ella, using my daughter to stay away from me.

I can't stay away from Sophie any longer.

I sip on my coffee, watching Sophie make breakfast. She's so fucking beautiful when her hair is a mess, and she has no makeup on. First-thing-in-the-morning-Sophie is my favorite version.

"How are you feeling?" she asks, not looking up from the griddle as she flips a pancake.

"I'd be better if you came and sat next to me and gave me a good morning kiss."

My statement must surprise her because she's in the middle of flipping a pancake and doesn't catch it.

It lands on the floor in a pile of half-cooked goop.

I hide my smile behind my mug.

"Matias, you can't say things like that."

"Why not?"

"Because."

"Because why, Sweet Sophie?"

"It's distracting. You know exactly what you're doing." She points the spatula at me, giving it a good shake as if I'm a child being scolded.

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about."

“I bet you don’t,” she grumbles, picking up the pancake from the floor to throw it away.

I watch her, making it known I’m not going anywhere. My attention will always be on her when I have the chance.

“Stop staring at me.” She fumbles another pancake.

I clutch my hands in front of my mouth to stop myself from laughing. “I’m not doing anything. I’m sitting here. Enjoying the view of my nanny making breakfast.”

She blows a piece of stubborn hair out of her face. “You’re evil. You know that?”

“Maybe.” I tilt my head, letting my eyes roam down her body. “Does that make you a sinner, Sophie? For allowing evil inside your tight, hot—”

Before I can finish my sentence, she shoves pancake in my mouth, silencing me.

Her eyes widen, then slide to the right.

“Good morning, Daddy,” Ella announces as she skips into the kitchen, holding her barbie doll.

I chew the pancake, wash it down with coffee, and swing my daughter into my arms. “Hi, Ella Bella. How did you sleep?” I kiss her cheek like I do every morning.

“Good. I had a dream that I went swimming with a unicorn and there was a rainbow.”

I lift my brows, acting stunned. “What? No way. That’s cool. I wish I had dreams like that. Is that what you want? To go swimming?”

She nods and bounces on my leg, her head bumping against my wound, and I hold in a curse. She doesn’t know about my injury or Gianni’s. I don’t want her to know, either.

“Can we, can we? Please? Please, please, please, Daddy? I’ll eat my veggies today and everything.”

I press my finger to my chin, thinking long and hard about that offer. “Even broccoli?”

She sticks her tongue out, pretending to gag. “Even that.” She doesn’t sound impressed.

“How about we take the yacht out today?”

She squeals and jumps off my leg, and I know she’s about to run, so I snag her shirt to keep her in place before she darts off to get ready.

“Breakfast first. Then we will go.”

She climbs into her chair just as Sophie places her plate down in front of her. Pancakes and eggs. Ella drenches it all in syrup, eggs included, then starts shoveling it into her mouth.

Sophie sets my plate down next.

“What about everyone else?” she asks. “Do I need to save some for them?”

“No. Today is a family day. I’ve already informed everyone.”

“I’ll make a plate for Gianni and take it to him.”

“You won’t dare until you eat something, too. And you won’t be taking it to him. Ella would love to take her Uncle Gianni some breakfast. Wouldn’t you?”

She nods, her plate nearly gone.

Sophie unties her apron, makes herself a plate, sits down, and finally eats.

Ella hops down from the chair. “I’m ready! Can I go give it to him now?” she asks, with syrup all over her mouth.

“Go on. Make the plate for him, too.” I always love to see her pile on the food. She honestly thinks we eat so much because we are so much bigger than her.

Amused, I cut into my pancake and watch Ella put five large scoops of eggs and ten pancakes on the plate.

“Oh my god, that is—”

“—Perfect. Gianni will love that.” I place my hand on Sophie’s knee. “Don’t forget coffee. Get a tray too so it’s easier to carry.”

She sets it all up and very slowly makes her way to Gianni's room. She moves as if she's a sloth, afraid to spill anything.

"That's so much food, Matias."

"I know, but I think it's adorable and so does Gianni. We're giants in her eyes."

"It was adorable." Sophie sips on her own coffee, doing her best not to look at me.

"You won't have to prepare anything for the boat. It's always stocked, and I have a chef that will cook us lunch and dinner."

"That's... too much. I can't ask you to—"

"—You didn't ask. This is my life. It's how I live. We're going on a yacht today and you'll have a good time. Okay?"

"Okay, Mr. Milazzo," she whispers, and it makes my cock swell in my sweatpants.

I growl, taking her hand and placing it on my cock. "Be careful how you speak to me, Sophie. I'm hanging by a thread."

She gasps, her lips shining with syrup, and all I want more than anything is to steal them in a kiss. I just know the syrup would be even sweeter coming from her. Her fingers wrap around my shaft, giving it a tight squeeze.

"Sophie," I growl in warning. "Go get ready for the boat or I'm about to bend you over this counter and fuck you."

She strokes me.

"Sophie."

Much to my disappointment, she releases me, flying from her chair and into her room. The door slams behind her, echoing throughout the house.

I press the heel of my palm against my cock, inhaling to calm my lust. I'm too close to losing control and heading to her bedroom. Ella will be back any minute and there's no time to have Sophie without getting caught.

Having to tuck my erection into the waistband of my sweatpants has me feeling like a teenager walking the halls of high school when I had no control of my body.

And here I am again, tempted with no relief.

I toss the dishes in the sink and grab the edge of the counter, taking a deep breath, and hang my head. The twinge and constant burning in my shoulder help bring my libido to a halt. I roll my head over my shoulder, then crack my neck. The pops relieve some of the tension, but not all.

The only person who can do that is doing her best to stay away from me.

She'll be the cause of my downfall if I'm not careful.

Ella comes skipping into the kitchen from Gianni's room. "Uncle Gianni said he wants to go on the boat too."

"I don't know if that's a good idea. Gianni is healing from..." my thoughts end when I try to figure out something to say to her.

"From him being a superhero and one of the bad guys got him? I know. He says he feels better. The bad guys can't keep him down."

I can't help but chuckle. I'm jealous of such an innocent mind, even if she is spot on, but it's sweeter than what actually happened.

"You know, you're right. We need to come up with a superhero name for him, but let's keep it a surprise."

She gasps, nodding in excitement with her big, round eyes. "Oh, that's a good idea." She bounces on her feet. "Can I get ready for the yacht now, Daddy?"

"Absolutely. If you need any help, let me know, okay, Ella Bella?"

She twirls her hair around her finger and cocks her hips out. "I'm a big girl now. I don't need help."

I press my hand against my chest. "Apologies. You're right."

She is getting so big, but she'll need my help, she does every time. And I love it. I dread the day she truly won't need me anymore. She's...my everything. I don't know what I'll do.

Gianni's voice has me turning from staring at Ella skipping down the hallway. "Are you okay?"

I shake my head of worries that aren't needed just yet. "I will be. I should be asking you the same thing. Are you sure you want to go? Are you up for it?"

He holds a hand to his side. "I'm fine. I need to get out of the house. I'm going stir-crazy watching the camera feed. I'm bored."

"Me too. Water shouldn't be rough, you know the yacht is a smooth ride."

His eyes peer down the hall. "So."

I turn around and cross my arms. "So?"

There's a knowing twinkle in his eyes. "How are you and Sophie?"

I scratch my chin, unsure of what to tell him. "We're a work in progress."

"It's better than nothing."

"If she had it her way, we would be nothing."

"But you won't allow that to happen."

"Fuck no, I won't."

"Daddy! I'm ready!"

Something flaps, smacking hard against the floor. Gianni laughs, a smile blooming over his entire face. He covers his mouth to hide it, but his shoulders are shaking.

When Ella comes to view, I have to bite my tongue not to laugh. It would hurt her feelings.

She has her bright purple flippers on and is wearing her hot pink one-piece bathing suit that has a fluffy tutu around the waist. Ella has also managed to put on a scuba mask,

completely covering her eyes and nose while having her mouth on the breathing apparatus.

“Gummy Bear, we aren’t leaving right this moment,” Gianni informs her in a sweet, caring voice.

She spits the mouthpiece out. “I know. I’m just getting into character.”

“Character?” I echo in question.

“Duh. Ariel, Daddy. I’m a mermaid.”

“Of course. Well, let me go get ready so I can get you in the water, okay?”

“Yay!” she squeals, doing her best to run to the living room but the fins stop her.

God. I have a cute kid.

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An hour later, we are at the yacht. I have ten extra men with me, and they are carrying their guns, but under their shirts so Ella does not see.

In typical fashion, Sophie has covered as much of her body as she can. I don’t understand why. She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. She’s wearing a dark green one-piece. It hugs all her curves and cups her tits in a way that pushes them up. Then, in the middle of the neckline, there are laces that tie in a crisscross pattern. She’s wearing a long sleeve sheer black cover-up. I know it’s so others don’t see her scars.

I didn’t pay attention to them when we had sex. I know she wouldn’t like that, but she won’t be able to hide her scars from me forever.

She has big black sunglasses on that are heart-shaped and her blonde hair is in braided pigtails that I want to fucking pull on while I fuck her from behind.

Christ.

Maybe having a boat day was a bad idea.

“Wow,” Sophie awes as she takes in the yacht as we step onto it. “It’s beautiful. It’s huge.”

I never care about what women think about me or what I own, but I can’t help that my chest puffs out a little in pride when Sophie admits that. I love that she’s impressed. I want her to be. I want to show her that everything I have is hers, and anything she wants, she doesn’t even need to ask, and I will deliver it while kneeling at her feet. I’ll praise her like the goddess she is, hoping one day she sees her worth.

“Make yourself at home. Anything you want, Dani and Heath will be at your service,” I tell her.

“Mr. Milazzo. It’s good to see you again.” Heath shakes my hand and Dani gives a short, curt bow. She never liked to touch, even the simplest, like a handshake.

“You as well. What’s the plan for the day?”

“We’re just going to cruise until we get to the sandbar. Ella’s favorite.”

“Yay! There are always little fish there.” She runs into the cabin, and a second later, a splash follows.

“Is that a pool? On a boat?”

I nod. “Yes. I’m not always comfortable with Ella getting into the water depending on the day. So, we can get the sun and ocean all while being safe. She can still swim and have fun.”

“That’s sweet you thought of that for her.”

“Everything I do is for her.” And you, I want to add, but I decide not to. It will only scare her away.

“I can’t get over how big this boat is. I’ve never seen a yacht. I mean, I have on TV. That sounds bad, doesn’t it? Like I have no life.” She shakes her head, looking away from the high ceilings and granite countertops.

I slide my fingers under her chin and force her to look at me. “It sounds like you’ve never been given the riches you deserve, and I plan to change that.”



She parts her lips with a sharp exhale, her eyes drifting to my lips.

I'm about to lean in and claim her right here and now when Captain Gerald speaks over the intercom.

“Welcome aboard the Lady Fiorella. I'm your Captain. You can call me Gerald whenever you see me. We are about to start cruising, so if you could find somewhere comfortable to sit while we get out of the bay, that would be fantastic,” Gerald says casually since he is used to us being here. I pay him to be my Captain full-time even when I'm not using him. “If you need anything, please see Dani or Heath and they will help you. Bar is stocked. Food is being prepared. And the sun is shining. It's going to be a great day, Milazzo Crew.”

“Come on, let's go to the front for the view.” I place my hand on her lower back, guiding her through the main cabin.

“Is that... is that a fireplace?”

I clear my throat. “Yes, it is. Above are two bedrooms and bathrooms, below is the kitchen, and there are two bars, and a few other goodies you'll learn about over a period of time.”

“Oh my god. Is that even needed? Truly, do you use it?”

“I'm using it now, aren't I?” I tease just as we step out onto the bow.

“Holy f—fudge,” she's careful not to curse with Ella nearby. “That's a hot tub.”

“It is.”

“And a slide. A big slide. And a lazy river.”

“It wraps around the entire boat. I love it. It's one of my favorite things about Lady Fiorella.”

“Wow.” She walks ahead, stopping in between the white leather seats, standing next to a fire pit.

She looks like she belongs.

I lean against a railing, crossing my arms, watching as the sun beams into her hair. The blonde strands glitter in the bright

rays, and I know if I were to touch her skin right now, it would be warm.

“Daddy, come in the pool!” Ella shouts, splashing Gianni as he sits on the edge.

I shuck my shirt off and toss it on the chair. “I will in a second.”

“Are you flexing?” Gianni leans back to whisper so only I can hear.

“What? No. I don’t need to flex.” I might be flexing, but he doesn’t need to know that.

I rub my hand against my thighs, situating my swim shorts for no good reason other than being nervous. Taking a step, I freeze with fear when Sophie peers over the boat.

“Sophie! Don’t look over the edge too much.”

“But there are dolph—ins!” she screams, falling over the edge of the yacht.

“Sophie!” I sprint and don’t bother stopping to see where she is. I jump in after her. I dive into the water, the cool temperature drifting over my hot skin. I swim to the surface, gasping for air. “Sophie? Sophie!” I yell for her, then see her blonde hair a few yards away.

Kicking and moving my arms as quick as I can, I cut through the water.

And when I get to her, she’s laughing, treading water. “Oops.”

The yacht is turning around and will get to us in a minute.

“Oops? *Oops?* Are you fucking kidding me?” I curse, wrapping an arm around her waist.

She flinches. “Matias, it was an accident—”

“—Hey! Is everyone okay?” Gianni yells down at us, tossing over the ladder.

“We’re fine!” I reply, fucking furious. “Go on,” I tell her, doing my best to remain calm.

“Matias, I’m sorry.” She climbs the ladder, and I don’t follow until Gianni helps her to the main level and she’s safe.

I grip the ladder, still trying to calm myself but I only get angrier. When I get to the top, I grab Sophie by her arm, dragging her up another flight of steps so we can have privacy.

“Matias!” she tries to yank her arm from my grip.

“We will be back.”

“Ooooh, Nanny Sophie is in trouble,” Ella sings.

“It seems so,” Gianni agrees.

When we get to the next floor, I open the sliding glass doors, lock them behind me, then close the curtains.

“What the hell were you thinking!” I yell at her, something new consuming me, something I haven’t felt in so long, I have forgotten what it feels like. “Do you know what could have happened to you? You could have died.”

“Matias, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“Have you never been on a boat? Don’t you know not to get too close to the edge? You could have hit your head! You could have drowned. You could have died, Sophie. Died! What would I do, then?” I continue to raise my voice. “Do you know how fucking scared I was?”

“What?” she seems so surprised. “I was fine. I know how to swim, Matias.”

“I was fucking terrified.” I prowl forward and she steps back until she is against the wall. I cage her in with my arms, pinning them beside her head. “You could have hit your head. You could have been pulled under the boat. You could have died.” I lean in, my breaths leaving me in harsh bursts. “And what would I have done?” Water continues to drip from our bodies and onto the floor. “Tell me. What would I have told Ella? She adores you.” I mesh myself against her front, toying with the idea of ripping that shawl from her body. “I adore you.”

She licks her lips. “Matias—”

I can't take it anymore. I grab her head and smash my lips against hers.

"Matias," she gasps into my mouth, digging her fingers into my back as we finally give in.

I'm desperate.

I yank her soaked coverup down her arms and she doesn't stop me. It drops to the floor with a heavy plop, then I'm on her again, groaning as our lips glide against one another. I rock my hips, lifting one of her legs around my waist, and thrust, grinding myself against her.

She whimpers, clawing at my back, and raking her nails down until she has fistfuls of my ass. I've never had a woman grab me like she does. She's rough with her wants, and I love it.

I untie the laces keeping her breasts hidden, then tug the material down. I knead them instantly, groaning as her nipples roll under my thumbs.

"Fuck. I need you." I push my swim shorts down until my cock is free, then reach between her legs, and slip my fingers through her lips. "Already so wet." I gather her slick, rolling two fingers against her sensitive bundle of nerves. She whimpers, tilting her head back to expose her throat.

I need her *now*.

"This is going to be quick. I need you too much." Lifting her by the thick of her thighs, I thrust into her in one long, deep stroke. "Fuck yes, do you know how good you feel?" I whisper through a harsh breath. "Do you know how fucking good it feels sliding into this cunt knowing I'm the reason why there's no barrier?" I wrap my hand around her throat gently, kissing along her jaw, while I slide in and out in deep, unforgiving thrusts. "I took your innocence, Sophie. Me." I drive in to mark my words. "And it will be me every fucking time, no matter how much you fight it." I force her to look at me by gripping her chin. "This body is mine. This pussy is mine. And I'm the only man who will ever get to feel how heavenly you feel. Do you understand me?"

Her tits bounce with every thrust, but she nods just as her eyes roll back. “I understand. Oh god, Matias,” she says a little too loud.

I cover her mouth with my hand, muffling her cries of passion as she gets closer to orgasm.

“You have to be quiet, Sophie. We don’t want my daughter to hear how her daddy is making you scream, do we?”

She shakes her head, her whines trapped behind the palm of my hand.

“Good girl,” I praise, curling my hips in a way so her clit is stimulated.

Her nails dig into the back of my neck, giving me the pinch of pain I’m slightly starved for when it comes to her. My lips find her throat, nibbling the soft flesh right where her pulse pumps. I lick a small path with the tip of my tongue to her jawline, groaning again when she becomes wetter.

“Look at you, bouncing on my cock as if you can’t get enough.” I fist her drenched hair, pulling another whimper from her. “You can’t, can you? You hate to admit how much you love it, how much you need it.” I glance down, watching my cock disappear deep in her warmth.

She mumbles behind my palm, eyes widening when I feel her tighten around me.

“You’re going to come for me?” I growl, quickening my pace, thrusting in harder and faster. “I’m still so mad at you for risking your life like that. Don’t ever do that again. Understand?”

She nods, her fingernails scratching down my pec.

Sophie tightens, her muscles spasming around my cock as she screams behind my hand. I rip it away, catching her lips mid-cry so I can taste her pleasure.

“Sophie—” I whisper her name, grazing my thumb across her bottom lip. “Sophie. Oh, fuck, you’re going to make me come. You feel too good. Sophie—” My mouth drops open,

and I groan, burying myself as far as I can with every jet that fills her.

I want her to drink me in until she's drowning in me. Her body will have no choice but to get pregnant.

"You must be tired of holding me up," she says between gasps. "You can put me down."

I kiss her breasts, then the middle of her chest, remaining deep inside her and never wanting to leave. "You aren't too heavy. I can stay like this for days, Sophie." I kiss up her neck and stop right at her lips, my hand at the base of her neck to keep her pinned. "And any man who can't handle a fucking goddess like you doesn't deserve to be inside your body. You aren't heavy, Sophie."

To make my point, I grip her by her thighs and walk the longest way around the long sectional couch. I sit, making her straddle me and she sinks a little deeper, taking another inch or two. We both groan.

"You're just strong," she says, biting her lip as she begins to rock against me slowly. "You're still hard." She sounds so surprised.

"Weak men don't deserve to breathe the same air as you." I lean back, grabbing her succulent thighs, my fingers digging into her flesh, watching her skin change color from the pressure. "And of course, I'm still hard, fucking look at you." I rub my hands up her body, cupping her tits again.

"Matias, I want you again." Her hands grip my shoulders, her hips slowly rolling. "Do we have time?"

"I can make all the time in the world available for you. Fuck." I swallow, my eyes glued to her hips, how there is enough for me to grab and hold onto. She's going to make me come again. Easily. "God, yes. Don't stop, Sophie. You feel so good. You belong riding my cock. You look so beautiful."

"I've never—"

"—I know," I growl, loving that she has no fucking clue what's she doing. "And I love that. You're doing so well, though. There's nothing I would change. You're perfect." I

stare at where we are connected, watching her cunt pull me in and release me, my shaft covered in our orgasms.

All I can think about is how much is wasted and not locked inside her.

I'm a monster for wanting to nearly force that upon her. I haven't said anything about condoms, and I don't plan on it. All I can hope is she isn't on birth control.

A knock on the door makes her stop moving.

"Don't you dare stop." I grab her hips and her ass, and drag her against me. "Keep going."

"Matias!" Gianni shouts from the other side of the door.

I grumble in annoyance at being interrupted. Sophie finds her confidence in this moment, too. She rides me faster, sliding up and down on my cock like she's done it a thousand times.

"What!" I bark, then to silence a moan, I lean forward and suck her nipples into my mouth, shoving a hand over her lips just in time as another cry escapes her.

"Ella is asking for you."

I let go of her nipple with a soft pop. "So perfect. I'm going to fuck these one day," I whisper, just as I kiss the hardened peak. "Tell her we will be done in a few minutes," I reply, never taking my eyes off Sophie as her body rolls against mine. "We are drying off and catching our breaths."

"Yeah, okay," he says in disbelief, knowing we aren't catching our breaths at all.

Sophie's beautiful cunt is stretched wide, taking every inch she can. "Matias," she gasps, shaking her head. "I can't. I can't. Oh god, I'm already so close."

I wish we had more privacy. I'd have her come again and again until she passes out from the pleasure.

"Come for me. Use my cock, Sophie. Fuck me." I grip her hips and move her faster. "Come on," I grit through my teeth. She listens, riding me harder, those beautiful lips parting as her

eyes close. “That’s it. Ride that cock, Sophie. Oh fuck,” I gasp, tilting my head back to rest on the couch as I enjoy the best sex I’ve had in my life.

“I don’t want to come without you,” she admits, leaning down to kiss my throat.

That admission has my orgasm threatening me. Knowing she wants to share that with me, together, it turns me on more than any romantic or sexy gesture could.

I wrap my arms around her, tugging her close, pushing her down on me. We’re close. It’s intimate. I bury my face into her chest, digging my fingers into her back while she takes me. The sounds she pulls from me are sounds I’ve never heard. No woman has made me feel this good.

“God, Sophie. I’m going to come.” I look up, meeting her gaze. “Come with me, baby. Come with me.” I squeeze my eyes shut, pressing my forehead against her chest, holding out until I feel her tighten around me, a loud cry piercing the air.

And then I release, groaning with her.

She collapses against me, her breaths puffing against my neck. And then she tenses.

“What is it?”

“We haven’t been using a condom. I’m not on birth control.” She doesn’t sound angry, just talking between trying to catch her breath.

“I don’t ever plan on using a condom with you and I’m glad you’re not on birth control.”

She doesn’t say anything after that, but I take it as a good sign she isn’t going to fight me on this. It means she wants this, too, no matter how she tries to convince herself.

“We should go down there before Ella gets ideas about coming up here.”

I nod, kissing the middle of her chest.

But I don’t want to leave.



I want to stay right here, nine inches deep, and hope I can tie her to me forever.

## Chapter Fourteen

*Sophie*

The day spent in the sun yesterday was amazing. I had the best time. It felt good to take a break from life and enjoy the luxury of the yacht. The only downside? I'm burnt.

I hardly slept. I was feverish from the sunburn, but it wasn't the only thing keeping my body hot. Thoughts of Matias diving into the water to rescue me play over and over again in my mind. The way he took me effortlessly, holding me up against the wall as if I weighed nothing.

He makes me feel beautiful and confident.

But whatever is happening between us has to stop. We had sex again without a condom and I need to think about the consequences. Last night, I checked the app on my phone that tracks my cycle. I'm in the window where the chance of getting pregnant is very low, but I don't want to risk it. I need to consider taking Plan B. This job is everything I've ever wanted. Matias is everything I've ever wanted. Whatever is happening between us is explosive, but I'm not a fool.

It's temporary.

I can't lose this job over something that won't last.

That's a dream. Besides, I know what will happen. It happens with every guy I'm with.

They find someone better, prettier, and get tired of me. I'm a regular girl. I'm not a model or whoever you see on social media. I'm just... me.

And that's hardly ever enough for anyone.

I stare in the mirror, analyzing myself. Besides how red my entire body is from the sun, I don't think I'm so bad. This silk robe makes me feel elegant and sexy. It feels so good against

my skin. I lift the end of the robe, quietly hissing when my fingers brush against the red skin.

Well, I did feel sexy.

Now, I feel like a lobster.

“That looks painful.”

I startle, dropping the hem of the robe, and meet Matias’s gaze in the mirror. He has his arms crossed as he leans against the doorway.

“It’s not so bad,” I reply, my entire body aware of Matias’s presence. There’s always a shift in my nerves, in my blood, and in the way my heart beats when Matias is near me.

“Don’t lie to me, Sweet Sophie. I should have put more sunscreen on you. This is my fault.” He steps into the room, taking all the air in the room. Matias stops behind me, our eyes still locked in our reflections. His fingers drift over the back of my neck. “You’re burnt here.” Then he glides them up my throat and over my face until the rough callouses brush against my cheeks. “And here.”

I try not to lean into his touch, but it’s impossible.

His hand glides down the silken fabric of the robe, grabbing the hem to show my thigh.

“And here.”

“I’m okay. Nothing aloe and lotion can’t fix. I’ll peel it in a few days. I’m fine, Matias. I had a great time yesterday. It was worth it.”

“Mmm, nothing is worth ruining your beautiful skin and risking skin cancer. I won’t allow that.”

“You can’t stop skin cancer, Matias. If that happens, it happens.”

“It won’t happen. I won’t allow it,” he states firmly, guiding me to the edge of the bed. “I’ll be right back.” He leans down to kiss my cheek before going into the bathroom and rummaging around in the cabinet. “There it is.” He flips on the lamp next to the bed. “I knew I had aloe.”

He kneels on the ground at my feet, and even on his knees, he exudes power and control. There's still a part of me that fears him, but the notion is quickly being replaced by wanton need. He reaches up and tugs the belt holding my robe together. It parts, revealing the crop top shirt I'm wearing with blue cheeky panties.

I rush to close the robe so he can't see me wearing this outfit. He snags my hand to stop me.

"You don't ever have to hide yourself from me. You're fucking breathtaking." His eyes roam my body, and he sucks his bottom lip into his mouth before biting it. "And I love what you're wearing. You can't wear this out in public. This is for my eyes only, Sophie."

"Are you... embarrassed or something? If I wore a cropped top out?"

"Embarrassed?" I chuckle as he squirts the aloe into his palm. He eases his hands on my scorching thighs.

The aloe is cold and takes my breath away, but then I groan from how good it feels.

"You could never embarrass me. You look too fucking sexy in a crop top, showing your curves and your tits just begging to be let free. I'd be a jealous, angry bastard all day as men tried to take your attention away from me. I'm not the sharing type, Sophie. What's mine is mine; not even your beauty being admired by another is allowed. It's mine. It's all mine."

His hands work down my legs, coating them in aloe.

"Matias—"

"—Don't say anything. Let me take care of you. You can go back to denying whatever you want when I leave this room, even though you and I know the truth." He squirts more aloe in his hands. "Take off your robe."

I shake my head, anxiety twisting its ugly tendrils around my chest. "I don't think that's a good idea." I didn't want him to see my scars.

“Do as you are told, Sophie. There isn’t a part of you I wouldn’t love to see.” He kicks off his shoes and my eyes land on his cock. He’s hard and his erection is tenting his pants. “Eyes up here, Sweet Sophie. We won’t be doing any of that, even if the thought of exploring your body keeps me awake at night.” He crawls onto the bed until he is settled behind me.

My eyes flutter closed when the warmth of his body seeps into my back.

“I just—I want to explain.”

“You don’t need to explain yourself.” He starts rubbing my shoulders, rubbing in the aloe. “I just need to prove you’re worth the effort.”

My heart chips off a piece for him again. I’m falling in love with this man, and that’s not good. How can I get all my pieces back when this is over?

“It’s about you and this life. You’re used to different women. I’m new. I’m scratching an itch. You’ll be tired of me and then I can’t work here. That would be horrible. I like it here. I love Ella.”

“You aren’t going anywhere, Sophie. And you won’t ever have to be without Ella or me.”

I open my mouth to argue but he interrupts me.

“—Like I said. I’ll have to prove it to you. There are no other women.”

“Yet,” I whisper, knowing he’s wrong. He’ll go to his fancy fundraiser and see the models in skin-tight dresses. He’ll forget all about me.

He sighs heavily, kissing the back of my neck. “You’ll see, Sophie. Maybe not now or tomorrow, but you will.” He runs his hands down my arms, his palms touching my scars.

I try to pull my arms away from him, but he holds them tight, rubbing his thumb back and forth over the burns. “Please, let go,” I whisper, emotion clogging my throat. I hate being touched on my scars. I keep them covered for a reason.

“Tell me about them,” he says, placing his chin on the nook of my neck.

I swallow thickly, remembering the heat of the fire. “It’s nothing. My house caught fire when I was a little girl. My parents died. I was caught in the flames. I survived. They didn’t. There isn’t much else to it than that. I was lucky. I only have these scars.”

“You shouldn’t cover them up.” He brings my right arm up and kisses the ugly marks.

“They are atrocious. People see them and they get disgusted, or they look at me like I’m broken. I don’t want the attention.”

“Mmm,” he hums, kissing my arm again. “You deserve all the attention. You are beautiful. These scars are nothing to be ashamed of. You should wear them proudly.”

“Why would I do that when these scars are a reminder that my parents died, and I didn’t? Someone set my house on fire.”

“And I’m going to figure out who it was. I promise. I just need some time.”

*To hide the evidence that he did it?*

That is a horrible thought to think, but Milazzo is the most feared family in the city. They had to be behind it. Matias would have been old enough to set the house on fire, but even thinking that leaves a sour taste in my mouth.

There’s no way he would allow me in his home.

But still, there’s the inkling in the back of my mind, a wicked negative voice, that won’t relent.

“Hey, I swear. I meant what I said before. I’ll find the person that burnt down your home and changed your life forever.” He wraps his arms around me, leaning me into his chest.

God, he is so hard to deny, even if the voice in the back of my head has painted him a villain. My heart screams something else, screams to throw the questions and unknowns

out the window. He is too hard to fight. I don't know if I'm strong enough to deny him.

He turns my head by pressing his fingers against my cheek. "I vow to you, Sophie. I'll put your heart to rest, and I will carry all your burdens."

His eyes pierce into mine with a seriousness I've only ever seen when someone loves someone else, but that can't be. It's too soon.

His lips meet mine, taking them in a soft yet possessive and controlling way. He's kissing me as if he's never going to kiss me again—that's how he always takes me—as if he'll never have me again.

His hand on my jaw grabs me harder, deepening our kiss and connection until I can't breathe.

"I promise, Sophie. You'll see."

I turn around, straddling his waist, wrap my arms around his neck, and without saying a word, kiss him again.

He groans, gripping my hips and rolling me over his hard cock.

"This is a bad idea," I whisper, losing all sense of rationale I had told myself minutes ago.

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to lose myself in you and you're going to break my heart, Matias. I know you will. I won't be able to survive it. You have to let me go, now, please," I beg of him as he unzips his pants to free his cock.

His fingers gather the material of my panties, pushing them aside. "I can't do that. I can't. I won't. Fuck, I want you so bad."

I glide my pussy along his bare cock, moaning as his thick head presses against my clit. "We can't. This has to be the last time. I need to think."

"No, you don't." He picks me up and sinks me down on his cock.

We moan together, the desperate need to be closer possessing us.

“Does this feel wrong? Does this feel like something that could ever end?” He lies back, gripping my hips, letting me ride him. He watches where we are connected, the tendons in his neck tense as he holds himself back from taking control. “This is more than a few fucks, Sophie. This is more than just sex and you know it.” He sits up, wrapping his arms around me, pulling me harder against him. “You fucking know it, Sophie. You think this is the last time?” He yanks my head back by my hair and bites the middle of my throat. “There will never be a last time. You’ll see.”

“Matias.” I rock against him faster, holding onto his shoulders while I ride his cock. “Oh, god. I’m so close.”

He grunts, squeezing my right butt-cheek. “This little fucking outfit is too much. You’re going to make me come.” He shakes his head, gripping my ass harder. “Fuck. Come for me, Sophie. I can’t hold back. I can’t.”

“I’m so close. Just a little longer.” I roll my hips faster, grinding my clit against his pelvis.

He shuts his eyes, sweat beading on his forehead. “Fuck! Oh, fuck!” He jerks, slamming his hips up and driving his cock into me with every spurt of come that leaves him. “That’s it. Ride my cock, Sophie. Drink every fucking drop. Don’t you dare stop until you come.”

The space between us becomes wetter from his orgasm. He remains hard while I fuck him. Matias lifts my crop top and watches my tits bounce, a feral glint darkening his eyes.

“Matias,” I whisper his name as my orgasm explodes through my body.

He groans as he feels me come as I try to pull him deeper. My orgasm goes on and on. It seems never-ending. I cup my breasts, tweaking my nipples as I ride the euphoric wave only he seems to give me.

When I’m done, I collapse against him, pressing my cheek against his shoulder while he drifts his hand up and down my



spine. I won't say it out loud, but I'm kicking myself for not telling him to put on a condom. I'm still in the low pregnancy window, so I should be fine, but I have to start protecting myself for when he decides he is tired of me.

I lose all control when he is near me. I can't do this anymore, but I'm not sure if I have the strength to be the one to cut things off between us. It has to be him.

"This feels like the boat," he says, kissing my chest. "A quick and intense moment, but a life-altering one."

I close my eyes, doing my best not to get emotional.

"This isn't the last time." He kisses my forehead and lifts me from him, both of us making a sound of protest when his cock slides free. "But I can tell you need some space." He tucks himself back in his pants and zips them up. He grips my chin, kissing me senseless again. "Make no mistake, Sophie. You are mine until death pulls me under. I have all the time in the world to wait for you to see what this is." He stands, brushing his knuckles over my cheek.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. I understand, okay? I'm not one of those men who will walk away because you need a breather. I'm here. Regardless." He kisses my cheek. "You make it difficult to leave any room you're in. Don't forget, tomorrow we fly to the Gala in NYC. Be ready. Pack a formal dress and jewelry. I can't wait to show you off." He takes my hand and brings it to his mouth, kissing the top of my hand. "Okay. I'm going. I'm really leaving." He presses another kiss to my knuckles before tucking my hair behind my ear, then leaving, softly closing the door on his way out.

I'm left alone, my skin hot for other reasons besides being burnt, and his come begins to leak from me. I panic and run to the bathroom. I do my business, wiping away his come with tears in my eyes as if I'm doing a horrible thing.

I want everything he offers, but I have too many doubts.

And what if those doubts are the reason this doesn't work at all? What if I sabotage the best thing that's ever happened to

me?

It's a life of regret I don't want to think about.

## Chapter Fifteen

*Matias*

If I can't win Sophie over, I don't know what I'll do. The damned soul inside me wants to make sure she's tied to me, whether she likes it or not. A horrible thought crossed my mind to force her hand in marriage, to force her to carry my child, and then she couldn't leave.

But I can't do that to her.

I'm so fucking selfish for even having those kinds of thoughts, but who can blame me? She's perfect. She's every man's dream. She's the kind of woman you marry after the first date. I know that. It's why I'm coming on so strong.

She's skittish. She's ready to bolt. I know that in her head, last night was the last time between us, but if I have it my way, I'm going to finger-fuck her on this private jet right now, and there's nothing she can do about it.

She's sleeping, her head lying on my shoulder. I grin, feeling smug.

No matter how hard she tries, she can't escape the pull she feels toward me.

"Do you need anything, Mr. Milazzo?" Rebecca, the new flight attendant, asks.

I don't like new attendants but Darren was ill and couldn't make the flight, so we had to call in the backup.

"No. I'm fine. Thank you." I place my hand on Sophie's knee, showing Rebecca I'm not interested in her. "Is there something you need?"

"No, Mr. Milazzo." She straightens, puckering her fake lips. "If you need me, just press the button."

"I know. It's my jet, remember?"

“Habit,” she says through a fake smile, then huffs as she walks away.

“You didn’t need to be so mean,” Sophie mumbles, still sleepy.

“I wasn’t. She was unprofessional. She won’t be on this plane again.” I slip my hand under the blanket and slide my hand up her bare leg.

I’m so glad she’s wearing shorts.

“Matias. We can’t. Not here. Plus, you said you’d give me time, remember?”

Fuck.

I did say that.

I slide my hand back to her knee and rub my thumb against her skin. “I’m sorry. You make me irrational. I’m in constant need when I’m around you.”

Her eyes are still closed, but I hear her giggle. “Yeah, okay.”

I hear the disbelief in her tone, and I grab her hand, pressing it on my cock. “Do you feel that?” I wrap her fingers around the shaft. “Feel how fucking hard I am for you? Ever since you climbed out of bed and kissed my daughter on the cheek goodbye, I’ve wanted you.”

She inhales, giving me a soft stroke through my pants.

As much as I don’t want to, I remove her hand and place it beside my leg. “Time, remember? If you don’t come, I don’t come.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t ever apologize. It’s your body, your mind, your wants. I’m not mad about that, Sophie. I’m not mad at all. Okay?”

She nods, her lashes curling until they nearly touch her eyebrows. Her big blue eyes are a beacon, guiding me to moral righteousness.

I cup her jaw, my sights targeting her lips. “Can I kiss you? Is that allowed?”

She nods again, still not saying a word.

“Thank fuck,” I growl before crushing my mouth to hers. I can cope without sex, but her lips? Not being able to kiss and taste her when I want?

I don’t know if I could survive a day.

There’s no tongue; just a simple, at-ease, soft kiss.

“We are making the descent to New York City. Please fasten your seatbelts. We will be landing in twenty minutes,” the pilot announces.

The kiss comes to an end. I don’t want to go to this gala. I want us to be locked away in a hotel room and I want to learn everything about her. I’m obsessed.

“Are you excited about the gala tonight?” I ask her while running my fingers through her hair.

She remains quiet for a little too long before answering, “I’m only going for you.”

I lean back to see her face. “You aren’t excited? Most women love getting dressed up for a night out. I can’t wait to show you off. Hmm,” I hum, imagining her holding my arm as men look at me with envy.

Her cheeks turn red, and she glances down. “I guess.”

“Hey.” I slip my fingers under her chin, apply pressure, and force her to lift her head. Tears swim in her eyes and she tries to pull away from me, but I palm her cheek. “Hey, talk to me, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me, Sophie. It will only make me want to spank you. And since you need time, that’s something I can’t do. Be honest with me. What’s wrong?”

“I don’t think this night will go as planned. That’s all. I think you have this idea in your head about how tonight will look. It’s sweet. Like a fairytale, but I’ve learned fairytales

have a dark meaning, the original ones, and it isn't always a happily ever after. I just think you need to be more realistic."

I growl, not liking how she's diminishing herself. "If I want a fairytale for us, then I will have it, and I don't care who I need to kill or silence for that to happen. Do you understand me, Sophie? I will slip your shoe on at midnight while we stand in a puddle of blood belonging to anyone who dares to question us. The lengths I will go for you have no bounds."

"You won't actually kill anyone, will you?"

I meet her gaze, so serious and innocent. She has no idea just how much more dangerous I've become since meeting her.

"I'm the leader of the Milazzo mafia, Sophie." I lean in to graze her lips. "What do you think? Am I a man who kills to get what he wants?"

She blinks, licking her lips. "Yes, I think you are."

"Good, then you know the answer to your question." I rub my nose against hers, giving her a quick kiss just before the plane hits the runway.

When it finally comes to a stop, Sophie is in better spirits by how big her smile is. I take her purse and blanket, so she doesn't have to carry anything as we walk down the steps.

"You don't have to carry my purse, Matias. I can do it."

"I know you can do it. It isn't about that. You shouldn't have to do it. I'll carry everything for you. You'll not lift a finger again."

"It's a hot pink purse," she blushes. "Aren't you embarrassed?"

"It will take a lot more than a purse to embarrass me, Sophie. Why would I be ashamed to carry your purse when just last night I had you come on my cock? I made you come. No one else. That's the only power I'll ever need."

"Matias!" she giggles, covering her mouth with her hand.

“Thank you for trusting me with your flight, Mr. Milazzo. I look forward to flying for you again,” The Captain interrupts our moment.

“You’re the best, but Rebecca is not to return. She’s banned from any of my flights. Understood?”

He nods. “I will take care of that right away, Mr. Milazzo.”

“Thank you.” I give his hand a shake before making my way down the steps, where the limo is waiting for us.

The driver is already loading our luggage in the trunk. Sophie tries to open her own door, and I slam it shut with my hand.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

She gives me a dubious expression. “I’m getting into the car so we can go to the hotel.”

“Silly woman,” I tsk. “Don’t you know? Only I open your doors for you.” I do as I say, and she bites her lip all while shaking her head.

But she gets in.

I’m going to have this woman fall in love with me.

I toss her the blanket and hand the purse over to her.

“Mr. Milazzo, are we headed to the hotel, or would you like to stop somewhere first?”

I check the time. “Hotel.”

“Right away, Mr. Milazzo,” Andre states with a clean British accent.

He shuts the door and I wrap my arm around Sophie, curious as to why she would think tonight would go so badly. She’s the most real, most beautiful woman I’ve ever met. There’s nothing to be ashamed of when it comes to that. I can only say so many things to make her feel better, but at the end of the day, she has to believe it.

I’m lost in my thoughts, wondering how I can have her see herself how I do, when we pull into the front of the five-star

hotel.

As soon as the doors open, cameras flash from the paparazzi. I help Sophie out of the car and the flashes become quicker. She turns into me to hide her face, and I grab the closest camera and yank him to me.

“What the fuck? This is an expensive camera, man,” he says.

“I don’t give a fuck. If you care for your life—” I cast my eyes to all of them, waiting to take the next picture. “—You won’t take one more photo.” I drag him closer and whisper, “I’ve killed for so much less. Remember who the fuck you’re dealing with.” I shove him back, keeping one arm around Sophie while she hides her face in my chest.

I hurry us into the lobby, where security blocks anyone else from entering. I had forgotten all about the cameras. I’m not a celebrity at home. I’m feared. Here, they love to run any article faking a story to get on the front page, to have their fifteen minutes of fame.

“Are you okay?” I cup her face in my hands, cursing myself for not thinking this through. “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t even thinking, Sophie.”

“I’m fine. Matias—” she places her palm against my cheek and the simple touch has me realizing how heavy I’m breathing. “Matias, I’m okay. It’s fine. I was shocked, but I’m not upset or anything. It’s okay.”

I press my forehead against hers, hating that I forgot. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. A man like you coming into town? There’s bound to be a story there, right?”

I wrap an arm around her waist and guide us to the front desk where a brunette woman with a tight bun pulled to the base of her skull greets us with a smile, but then instantly it vanishes when recognition hits her.

“Mr. Milazzo. You’re here.”

I lift one brow at her erratic behavior. “Obviously.”



“I’m so sorry. Someone was meant to call you.” She types furiously, her eyes falling from me to the screen in front of her every other second. “I’m so sorry.”

“For?” I don’t like it when people do this. Just say what you want to say instead of having me guess.

“Your penthouse suite was accidentally given to another.”

I give her a stern stare, taking a deep breath. It doesn’t matter how it happened or why. It can’t be fixed now. “Then I’ll take one of the other suites you have available.”

“They are booked as well.” Her voice breaks, redness tints her cheeks, and if I’m not mistaken, tears swim in her eyes. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Milazzo. I—I don’t know how this happened. I can try to—oh god, please don’t kill me.”

I raise my brows and can’t help but laugh at her ridiculous thought. “Why would I kill you over this? It clearly isn’t your fault. You just work here and have to deal with someone else’s mistakes. That’s not what I waste my bullets on.”

“Bullets. Right,” she whispers, swallowing.

“What do you have available?” I ask, checking the time to realize we need to hurry to get ready for the gala.

“A double bed would be great if it’s available,” Sophie whispers.

I cut a hard glare to the girl behind the desk, telling her silently she better not put us in a room like that.

“I’m sorry. We only have a king-size bed available.”

“That’s perfect,” I tell her. “You have my card on file, I assume. Use that.”

“Yes, Mr. Milazzo.” She gives us two keys. “I’ve had two bottles of champagne sent to your room as an apology for the mix-up.”

“Is it—”

“—Your favorite. Yes, Mr. Milazzo.”

I give a slow tilt of my chin, impressed. “Thank you—” I glance down at her nametag. “Wendy. You’re officially off my kill list.”

Her face pales and her eyes widen.

I chuckle. “I’m kidding. It was a joke. Breathe, Wendy.” I take Sophie’s hand and lead her to the elevators, while my driver pushes the cart holding our luggage behind us.

“That was mean,” Sophie says, but I see her hiding her amusement.

“I have to get my kicks somewhere.” The elevator dings and we step inside.

My driver chuckles as well, but doesn’t say a word while we fall into an awkward silence as the elevator ascends. I can’t do what I really want to do. I can’t push her against the wall and slip my fingers under her panties to play with her clit.

Not with my driver here and not with her wanting time or space.

When the elevator comes to a stop, I sigh, not liking that I have to be in a regular room. This hotel is nice but regular rooms are for regular people.

I am not regular.

The marble slab of the floor is polished and clean, so there’s that.

I stop abruptly when we get to our room and swipe the card across the scanner. I hold the door open and Sophie steps inside the room, staring at the bed.

“Um,” she tucks her hair behind her ear. “I’ll take the couch.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Sophie. We are adults. We can share a bed.”

And when we do, I have every intention of being inside her.

## Chapter Sixteen

*Sophie*

Getting ready for the gala wasn't easy in this room. Matias left to give me space with the hairdresser and makeup artist he hired.

"You're a very lucky woman." The French accent is heavy from the man who is applying blush to my cheeks. "Mr. Milazzo—or his family—have a reputation. They do not keep just any woman around."

I was going to downplay it and just say I was the nanny, but I didn't want to embarrass Matias. What if they thought it was sad the famous mafia leader had to bring the nanny because he couldn't find a date? Well, he could have found a date, but that's what the journalists would run with if they caught wind of it.

I eye the bed again, my body flushing with a fever when I remember the last bed I was in with Matias. Any flat surface near Matias is in danger of being completely wrecked.

"All done. Do you need help putting on your dress?" he asks, looking at me up and down. "You are beautiful. Perfection. You look beautiful. Okay, I need to go. Have fun tonight. Do everything I would do. Bye!" He drawls out his farewell, kisses my cheek, and sways his hips as he leaves with his suitcase.

The hairdresser doesn't give me a second glance as she exits the room, leaving me alone at last.

I don't bother looking in the mirror. I go to the closet and unzip the garment bag, revealing a deep emerald green dress made to hug my curves. It's strapless with a neckline that flares, similar to seashells. The material is tight as I tug it on, forgoing panties because there is no freaking room in this damn thing for underwear. I'd be freaking out about the

strapless dress showing my arms if I didn't have silky black elbow-length gloves to pair with it.

I slip on the long diamond earrings Matias got me, along with a big emerald cut ring that fits onto my middle finger.

“Wow,” I gasp when I see myself in the long mirror hanging on the wall. I rub my hands down my body.

I've never seen myself look like this. I've never had the opportunity to dress up like this. My hair is up in an elegant twist with deliberate pieces framing my face in a loose wave. My lips are stained a bright red and my makeup is classic, a simple black wing as eyeliner with a light shimmer on the lid. My cheeks are a dusty pink, with a golden highlight on the cheekbone.

I've never worn so much makeup. I feel...

I feel beautiful.

The door opens and by how the air charges, I know immediately it's Matias. I turn to him, looking stunning in his black-on-black tux. His hair is styled perfectly, a bit messy and combed back at the same time. He stops dead in his tracks when he sees me. His eyes roam my body, taking their time as he checks me out.

He says nothing, just leans against the wall, rubbing his fingers across his lips as he takes me in.

Matias goes so long without saying something, I'm starting to think I don't look as good as I thought.

“Is everything okay?” I whisper, taking a step closer.

“Is everything okay?” he repeats the question, straightening to full height.

My eyes land on his cock and I see it's hard, tenting his expensive slacks.

“You tell me, Sweet Sophie. Do you think everything is *okay*?” he adjusts himself, grabbing the thick length that somehow finds a way to fit inside me.

“Oh.” The blush on my cheeks turns a shade deeper.

“Oh.” He stands in front of me, a growl of appreciation rumbling his chest as he traces my collarbone with his finger. “You look fucking incredible. You’re the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever laid my eyes on. Jesus Christ, look at you.” He takes my hand and spins me. His free hand roams over my ass, then grabs my waist, tugging me to him until I feel his want for me pressing against my stomach.

“God, your curves in this dress.” His hands tighten on my hips as if she’s trying to control himself. “You are magnificent.” His lips come daringly close to mine.

“So are you. You look very handsome in your tux.” His hand slips up my leg when he finds the slit in the dress. I whimper when the light touch of his fingers teases my thigh. “So handsome.”

He smirks, bending down to give me a chaste kiss so he doesn’t mess up my makeup. “I love how you react to me, Sophie. I love how responsive you are.” He straightens, holding out his arm. “Can I show you off now?”

I slip my hand around his arm. “I’d like that,” I whisper.

We have to walk a little slower to the elevator since my heels are so high. “Where is this gala?” I ask.

“It’s here in the hotel, in their ballroom. We will have fun, wine and dine, donate money, and then we can escape into our room.”

“You don’t like these events, do you?”

“How could you tell?” he says, tucking his hands in his pockets. “I only come to these events because I wouldn’t hear the end of it from my brother. These are important events to show up to. Shows our wealth and power. Appearances are important.”

When we get to the main floor, it isn’t hard to figure out where we are going. We follow the crowd of people who look beyond wealthy and seem too good to be here.

“Everyone looks so...” I trail off, not sure how I want to phrase it.

“Boring? Like they have a stick up their ass? Tell me about it. I’d rather be at home, snuggling with my daughter and you, watch a movie, and go to bed.”

“How is Ella? I miss her,” I say, probably more than I should. I feel so connected with her. It will be a sad day if Matias ever tells me to leave.

He pulls out his phone and swipes his screen. “Gianni sent me a picture.”

I peer down and laugh so loud that I turn heads. “He looks like he’s having a blast.”

Ella is wearing her princess costume, pouring tea for Gianni. He is wearing a tiara, a feathered scarf, and if I’m not mistaken, there’s glitter on his cheeks.

“Don’t let the face fool you. He loves it. She always has a good time when I’m away. Gianni makes sure to keep her busy.” He frowns, tucking his phone in his pocket. “I miss her.”

I squeeze his arm. “I know. We will be home soon. Like you said, quick enter and exit, right?”

“Right.” He places his hand on mine as we enter the ballroom.

I school my features, so I don’t give away how stunned I am to see such an extravagant place. I don’t want anyone thinking I don’t belong here, but holy shit, the chandelier has to be more expensive than Matias’s house. It’s huge, with thousands of crystals, glittering as the light hits it.

Caterers move around effortlessly, proving they have done this a hundred times. Matias snags two glasses of champagne as we find our table.

I was hoping we would have a table to ourselves, but that is not the case. We are seated with two other couples.

“Mr. Milazzo,” greets a man, standing to welcome us to the table. “It’s good to see you old friend.”

“Dovnic.” Matias is curt as he shakes the man’s hand, and his jaw is tight, clearly unhappy. “You know I wouldn’t go as

far as to call us friends,” he puts bluntly.

Dovnic smiles, laughing boisterously, as if it’s the best joke he has ever heard. “Don’t you know,” his thick Russian accent is pronounced when he speaks, “It is best to keep you closer so I can keep my tabs, Matias.”

Matias manages to smirk. “I would expect nothing less.” He places his hand on my lower back and pulls out my chair. “Dovnic, this is my fiancé, Sophie.”

I trip over my left foot when I hear the word fiancé, then slam my hip into the table which shakes all the glassware together, nearly sloshing everyone’s champagne.

*He could have warned me I’d be playing his fiancé.*

“Are you okay?”

I turn my head to glare at Matias because he knows damn well why I lost my footing. He grins.

“I’m fine,” I grumble, giving my attention back to Dovnic. I plaster on a smile. “Hi, it’s so nice to meet you. So sorry to trip. These heels are a little too high.” I laugh it off, and Matias pushes my chair closer to the table.

Dovnic and Matias take a seat as well, but my *soon-to-be-husband’s* rival takes my hand and kisses my knuckles.

“You are beautiful, Sophie. If Matias ever bores you, I hope you keep me in mind,” he says, his date right next to me.

Matias grabs my hand away from his. “That will never happen, Dovnic.” The deep possession in his tone has the hair on my arms standing up. He laces his fingers with me. “I can promise you; I keep Sophie satisfied in *every* way.”

I blush at his crass words, not knowing what else to say.

Dovnic’s expression says it all. He loves goading Matias. “I don’t think you’ve met my son, Dominick. The person you’ll have to deal with in our,” he ponders his words carefully, “exchanges.”

“One can only hope.”

I grip Matias’s knee. “Be nice.”

“Never,” he mutters, so no one else can hear. “Dominick. Good to meet you.”

Dovnic’s son gives a small, nervous grin, wrapping his arm around the woman next to him. He seems very young, maybe younger than me, with big brown doe eyes and blonde hair. He seems innocent, and far from someone who wants to be involved in his father’s business.

The lights dim, but I don’t miss the evil eye Dovnic’s date gives me before the entire room is confided in darkness.

Okay, but I didn’t even ask for her date’s attention. She needs to be mad at *him*.

Sometimes, women confuse me.

The spotlight illuminates an older man at the podium. He’s wearing a black suit with a red tie and his silver hair is slicked back with a clean-shaven face. “Thank you all for coming to the Hope Gala, where we raise money in hopes of feeding the hungry in our community.”

Everyone claps; well, everyone but Matias. He sips on his champagne as if he doesn’t believe what this man is saying at all.

“I’ll keep this short and sweet. Tonight is all about having a good time. Eat, drink, dance, and soon we will begin the art auction.” He gives a wave, exiting the stage where a large water fountain pours down behind him.

Fancy.

“He’ll give enough to feed the hungry and pocket the rest,” Matias whispers in my ear. “He is a notorious drug dealer.”

I gasp in horror. “Why are we here?”

His eyes slide to Dovnic. “Because connections are important to make in my line of work, Sweet Sophie.” His knuckles run down my chin.

His touch causes my nerves to become extra sensitive and my mouth parts, trying to remember to inhale much-needed oxygen. God, I hate how I react to him.



I hate it because I've come to need it, to crave it, to want it. I don't want to go a day without it, and where will that leave me when he ends this? The fear of him leaving me is becoming stronger than the fear of him being in the mafia, which is concerning.

"You could have warned me you were going to say we were apparently getting married." I snag my champagne and sip it.

"Where would the fun in that be? I like keeping you on your toes."

I know he does, but then my heart hammers in my chest at the thought of being married to him. My mind runs away in a daydream of us spending our entire lives together. It makes me wish for things I have no business wishing for. I know what this is between us.

It's temporary, like everything else in my life.

The caterers deliver an amazing meal and Matias writes a check, but I don't see how much for. I'm chewing on my chicken when he stands to drop it in the donation box. As he walks over to me again, he looks every bit intimidating. His dark hair, sharp features, olive skin, and that black suit he is wearing, he screams danger.

But damn it, that danger is so fucking handsome.

A slow song begins to play, and he holds out his hand. "May I have this dance?"

I glance out to the dance floor, noticing one is there. "But no one is dancing, Matias."

"So? We can be the first." He bends down and takes my hand. "You know how much I love being your first."

My entire body heats, remembering just how much he proclaims his love for my body. I stand, following him to the middle of the dance floor. I'll do anything for him, even if it means dancing and most likely stepping on his feet.

"I'm not a good dancer, Matias. I don't dance. I haven't had many opportunities to learn." I keep my voice down, so I don't embarrass him.

He takes my hand, then wraps an arm around my waist.  
“That’s okay.” He tugs me closer until our bodies meet.  
“There’s no need to be nervous. Just follow me.”

I nod, swallowing, in hopes of coating the dryness in my throat.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” I answer too quickly.

“Then let me show you how to dance, Sweet Sophie.” He steps forward, and I automatically step back, then we begin to circle the floor, spinning and twisting as if we have done this a hundred times. “Why aren’t I surprised?” he pulls me close again. “Of course, you’d be a natural. Your perfections never end, do they?”

“I’m far from perfect. Like you said, I only need to follow you, right?”

“I’ll always lead you, Sophie. You’ll never have to worry about that with me.”

I know we aren’t talking about dancing anymore. I don’t know what to say, so I choose not to say anything at all. I enjoy the moment, being whisked around this beautiful ballroom, and being treated like a princess, like I matter. He twirls me out, then spins me into his chest, my back settled against the strong width of his frame.

“You are exquisite,” he whispers before twirling me out again.

I smile and laugh, loving that spin a little too much.

When the song comes to an end, he dips me, bending me over his knee. His eyes pierce mine, lust heavy and making itself known between us. I’m well aware of his presence and every part of his body against mine. His large palm is in the middle of my back, warm and comforting.

Applause surrounds us, breaking the moment, and when he lifts me up, I see we are still the only ones on the dance floor.

“That’s all for you,” he says.

I shake my head, following him as he leads us back to the table. I have a huge smile on my face that I can't seem to shake. I'm actually having fun.

"I doubt it was for me. I bet I looked like I had no idea what I was doing."

"Nonsense," Dovnic states. "You look like a cloud, floating."

His date stands abruptly and tosses her champagne on him. "Then why don't you just spend the rest of your night with her, you arrogant bastard," she huffs, stomping away and out the door.

I hold my hand over my mouth, keeping a laugh inside as the champagne drops from Dovnic's chin.

He whips a napkin from the table and dabs his face. "Women, am I right?"

"No," Matias clips. "At least, not my woman."

I drop my eyes to the table, doing my best not to look so smitten.

"Da. We aren't all as lucky to have a Sophie."

"If you'll excuse me. I need to use the restroom to freshen up."

Dominick watches his father leave and when he does, he leans forward. "Mr. Milazzo."

Wow. He even sounds young.

"Dominick," Matias says in a much nicer greeting. "How can I help you, young man?"

"You have to stay in the area for a few days. Please," he begs, his youth shining through his eyes. "My father is in trouble. He will never admit it, but another family is encroaching on our territory. They have made threats. They have... They have already killed my mother. Please, I beg of you. Please, stay."

I take Matias's hand in sadness when I hear the broken emotion coming from Dominick.

Matias leans forward, placing his elbows on the table, then presses his fingers together in a steeple position. “I’m going to assume your father doesn’t know you’re talking to me, or he’d be furious to know he made himself appear weak.”

“My father is anything but weak. He is one of the strongest men I know, but this family is something else. Don’t follow rules or ethics. They do not care. My mother is dead. My father is a stubborn man, but he loved my mother and would burn the world down for her. The women he keeps company with mean nothing to him. He is trying to ease an ache, that is all, but his love for her will get him killed. He will not be careful. Please, think about it. I know you aren’t friends. I know we are enemies, but perhaps we do not need to be.”

Matias leans back in his chair, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. “I’ll think about it, but if your father asks, I will say yes. If I answer now, he will know you said something, and you’ll have to deal with his wrath.”

Dominick’s face pales. “Thank you, Mr. Milazzo.”

“We do anything for family, am I right?”

“Da, Mr. Milazzo. Da.”

And me being smitten with Matias falls a little bit more towards being in love with him because he always finds room to care.

## Chapter Seventeen

*Matias*

We stayed longer at the gala than I liked. Dovnic never asked me for my help, and I never offered it, but I won't throw his son under the bus. I won't be held responsible for a kid being harmed for telling a family secret. If I know one thing about this life, it's that families in this line of work are very prideful.

Myself included.

Walking out of the gala doors to the elevator is something I have been looking forward to since I saw Sophie in that dress. Jesus Christ, she looks so fucking good.

She hides her body but all I want to do is show it off. She's gorgeous, and she has no idea how much attention she brings to every room she steps into. I saw the way the men looked at her at the gala. They wanted what I had, and it pleased me to know they would never have it.

"I need to use the ladies' room before we go upstairs. I'll meet you at the elevator?" she tells me, a sweet smile stretching across her face that leaves no room for doubt about what I want.

Forever.

I want forever with Sophie Matthews. I just have to convince her that she's worth an eternity. I hate that she thinks she is temporary, and I'll work my entire life to prove her wrong.

"I'll be waiting." I kiss her on the forehead and head to the elevator.

"It was good seeing you, Matias."

I turn to see Dovnic behind me with his son who is giving me scattered, nervous looks. At this rate, I won't need to say anything. He's going to out himself if he keeps it up.

“You too, Dovnic.” I lean against the wall, watching as they walk towards the exit, then sigh, knowing I can’t let the kid down. “Dovnic.”

He stops in his tracks, glancing over his shoulder. “Da?”

“If you ever need anything, I’m happy to be there.”

His brows raise in surprise. “Da, you too.” A bewildered expression twinkles in his eyes before strolling to the door again. His son gives me a curt nod in thanks before wrapping his arm around his date and following his father.

I check the time on my Rolex. Sophie has been gone longer than I expected. Right as I take a step into the direction of the restrooms, I see her come around the corner, holding her clutch to her chest. She briefly scans the room for me and when Sophie finds me, another bright smile lights up her face.

That’s for me.

She’s happy to see me. No other man. No one else.

Me.

When she’s closer, my lust gets the best of me and I tuck my hands in my pockets, letting my eyes travel the elegant curves of her body.

“Matias, you’re looking at me as if you want to maul me right here,” she giggles, stopping right in front of me.

I glance down, getting a good view of her cleavage, and my cock twitches when I think about sliding between her breasts.

“Matias,” she whispers, looking to the left, then right. “You’re breathing hard.”

“I can’t help it. You make me want to lose control.” I spin around and give her my back, slamming my hand against the elevator button. “You have no idea how much I’ve held myself back all night. You tempt me,” I growl, waiting for this damn door to open.

I’ve never wanted us to have separate beds or rooms as much as I do right now. Desire is coiling in my veins, heating

me from the inside out. My fingers drag against the wall as I try not to snap.

When the elevator dings and the door opens, I sidestep so others can exit. I give a nod to an older gentleman who must be in his eighties, but he isn't looking at me. He's staring at Sophie, not that I blame him.

If he was fifty years younger, I might have a problem.

"Lucky man," his old voice breaks with old age as he speaks to me.

"Don't I know it." I snag her arm and pull her inside the elevator, pressing the button to close the door so no one else enters.

"Hold the door!" someone shouts.

I keep pressing the button, over and over again, even though I know it won't make a difference. The doors close just as he slaps the elevator, cursing that he missed it.

I might hear him call me an asshole too, but if he had Sophie next to him, there's no way he would allow anyone else on this elevator.

"That wasn't nice."

I growl into the empty space and grab her by the throat, pinning her against the wall. "I don't feel like being nice when I want you so fucking bad. You've been tempting me in this dress all fucking night." I nip at her lip, wanting to push her over the edge.

I want her to break her rule.

No more time.

No more space.

The day was long enough. I can't take anymore.

She wraps her arms around my neck, and I reach behind me, pressing the emergency stop button. We come to a quick halt, the elevator grinding to a stop. The lights flicker as we kiss and grab one another, letting loose the passion that's been building all fucking day.

We groan into each other's mouths. Her fingers dig into my shoulders while my hands grip her ass. I rock against her, my cock hard and aching to be inside her.

"Fuck. I need you right now." I kneel, grabbing the hem of her dress and ripping it up the side so I have access.

She gasps, pupils blown with need. "I liked this dress."

I wrap my hand around the back of her neck. "I'll buy you a hundred more." I fumble with my belt, and she unzips my pants. My cock bobs when its free, pre-come beading at the slit.

My fingers tug at her panties and right as she thinks I'm going to dive them into her cunt, I pull them from her body, the material tearing in two. I toss them on the ground, lift her legs around my hips, my palms settled on each cheek as I hold her, then drive inside as hard as I can.

"Oh god!" she cries out loud. "We shouldn't be doing this. Not here."

"I don't give a fuck where we are. If I want you, I'm taking you." The elevator shakes with every hard thrust she takes from me. I clutch her shoulder with one hand, keeping a tight grip on her ass with the other, forcing her down on my cock. "Fuck, fuck! Goddamn it, it's been too long since I've been inside you. So fucking tight. So fucking wet. Do you hear it? Do you hear how soaked you are for me, Sophie? Me. No one else." It's erotic and it adds to my unhinged lust, boiling my blood. It's as if I can't fuck her hard enough or deep enough. I need to be closer. "I can't get enough of you."

A sound of static comes from the speaker. "Hello? Is everyone okay in there?" a voice asks.

Fuck.

I pressed the emergency stop button.

I cover Sophie's mouth, so she doesn't give away what we are up to. Her cries are beautiful. I love making her feel so good. I grunt quietly, continuing my pace.



She screams behind my hand, becoming wetter as her orgasm gets closer.

“Do we want to let them know you’re about to come on my cock?” I whisper. “Do you want to let them know how fucking good I make you feel?”

She shakes her head, then nods, then shakes her head again.

“Oh, Sophie,” I moan into her ear. “I’m so close. You’re going to make me come.” I try to hold back. I try to keep my orgasm inside. She needs to come first.

But my cock burns with need. I can’t stop it.

I rip my hand from her lips and cover her mouth with my own, groaning so loud, there’s no way it can’t be heard in the speaker.

“Hello? Are you okay? Help is on the way,” they say.

She rips her lips from mine and tosses her head back. “Matias! Oh, god.” Her cunt squeezes me as her orgasm takes over, spasming against my sensitive cock.

I fill her, stream after stream drowning her, hoping tonight is the night she gets pregnant. I don’t want her to find out my secret plan to have her with my child.

But there’s no way after tonight, she won’t be.

I steal her lips again, grabbing her chin as I control the kiss. It’s rough with tongue and broken pants as we try to catch our breath.

The elevator groans and the doors are pried open by the sound of it.

“Oh my god.” She hides her face in my chest.

There’s no way they can’t tell what we were doing. My cock is still inside her, still hard, still throbbing.

“Oh. Damn. Um,” one of the men seems unsure of what to say. “Good to know you’re okay.”

“Never fucking better.” I turn my head to my shoulder. “Could you guys give us a moment of privacy? I don’t want

you seeing my fiancé.”

“Right. Yes.”

“Of course.”

“Whatever you need.”

“I want my wife to fuck me in an elevator.” The last of the men gripes as he turns around.

I slowly slide out of Sophie, both of us moaning, her from being empty, and me not being suffocated by her warmth. I tuck myself back into my pants, bend down to pick up her ripped panties and tuck them in my pocket.

“You’re dripping from me,” she hisses. “How am I going to get out of here without them seeing?”

“Let them see.”

“Matias!”

I chuckle. “I’m kidding.” I poke my head through the open doors. “Hey guys, we’re going up. Nothing is wrong with this elevator. She looked too good. I couldn’t stop myself.” I give the doors a knock and press the button again, the doors shutting.

“Lucky man,” I hear just before we begin to rise.

*Fuck yes, I am.*

# Chapter Eighteen

*Matias*

I wake up earlier than she does, which doesn't surprise me, since I kept her up most of the night needing to be inside her. The one bed really worked to my benefit and not once did she try to demand me to sleep on the floor, or her, for that matter.

Glancing down, I can't help but smile at her. Sleeping, she's so serene, so calm, but I know better. The woman is anything but relaxed. I brush my fingers over the scars on her arms, wishing I could show her they are beautiful just like her, but no matter what I say, it won't matter.

The scars on her soul are much deeper than those on her arms will ever be.

I'm still gathering information with Gianni about the fire that killed her parents. Surprisingly, there isn't much on it. I can hardly find news articles or photos, which makes me believe she's right.

It is mafia-related. Only we have the power to pay off the press and the cops to hide information.

I remember that fire, not that I'd tell her that, because a part of her believes I'm the one who set the fire. It makes sense. I'm the only one she knows in the business. Who else would she blame? That's okay. I'll gladly take the fall if it means Sophie can put her mind at ease.

But that fire—

"You're staring at me," she mumbles, rolling over to her other side, and giving me her back. "We don't have to leave yet, do we?"

"No, Sweet Sophie. Sleep. I'll order us breakfast soon. I'm going to shower though, and make a few business calls, okay?"

“Mmmkay,” she murmurs, going right back to sleep.

I chuckle, kissing her shoulder before rolling out of bed. Sitting on the edge, I stretch, lifting my arms above my head and my back cracks.

Groaning, I stand, my cock lying half-hard against my thigh, still wet from when I took Sophie last.

When we stumbled through the door in the middle of the night, nothing stopped me from ripping her dress from her body. Now, it lies in tatters on the floor. Her clutch is open, and a few things spilled out. I bend down to pick them up, stuffing her lipstick, eyeliner, and a few other things back in, when I happen to look inside.

My brows furrow as I dump everything I just put back inside and pull out a small box.

Plan B.

“What?” I whisper. I can’t be looking at what I think I’m looking at.

This is impossible.

Has she been taking this every time we’ve been together?

I clutch the box in my hand, taking a deep breath as anger builds in my chest. Why am I so fucking mad at her right now? She could have talked to me about this. We could have...we could have made a compromise.

Internally, a frustrated groan echoes in my head.

She wouldn’t have talked to me about it because she thinks whatever is between us is temporary. She doesn’t take it seriously—not like I do.

Without thinking, with all the strength and force I can muster, I throw the box against the wall and yank sweatpants from my luggage. I run my fingers through my hair, and panic snags in my chest at the thought of not having her bound to me.

I snatch the box from the floor and stare at it again, knowing this is her decision. She shouldn’t be forced into

anything, but she has to be mine. There isn't an option. I can't give her a reason not to be with me. If she's pregnant, it means she's mine.

"Matias? What's wrong? You're breathing hard again," she giggles but it's mixed with sleep. The sound only makes me love her more. "I can't go again. I'm sore. I need a break."

I turn around, waving the box in the air. "What the hell is this? What is this, Sophie?"

The smile fades from her face, the happiness shining from her eyes gone in an instant.

She doesn't say anything. Sitting up, she clutches the blanket to her chest. "I didn't know if I was going to take it or not. I just needed a sense of safety. For peace of mind."

"How many times have you taken this so far?"

"What? None!" she shouts, scooting to the edge of the bed but keeping herself covered. "I haven't ever taken it before. I was getting scared."

"Why?" I don't yell it, but it comes out broken with shock. "What have I done to scare you? Haven't I shown you I'm here for you? I want you. Damn it, Sophie. All I have done is show you how much I crave you. So, what is this? Do you not want me?" I lift the box in the air. "Just tell me now."

"Of course I do. I just... I just thought that I needed a plan. Another plan. I wasn't sure if getting pregnant with a man that would leave me in the end was something I wanted."

"Leave you?" I shout. "Leave you? I'm not the one thinking about leaving, Sophie. Obviously, you are. I don't want to leave you. I don't want you to take this fucking pill." I tear the box open, punching the small white pill from the foil container.

"We weren't safe. We haven't been safe. We don't really know each other—I don't know, okay? I want you. I want to be with you, but being pregnant scares me. I don't want to be alone with a baby. I needed a plan."

“Alone? You’ll never be alone again, Sophie. Not as long as I’m alive and I’m fucking breathing.” I march my way to the bathroom, toss the pill in the toilet, then flush it. “Now, you can’t take it.” I feel vindictive and a bit vengeful. I’ve never been so worked up in my entire life. I’m fuming.

But more importantly, I’m scared.

Not that I’ll admit that to anyone.

I’m scared because she believes she’ll be alone. She’s planning a life without me because she truly thinks I won’t be there.

That terrifies me.

How can she not know I’m obsessed with her? That anywhere she would go, I’d follow.

Whether she wanted me to or not.

“How did you even get this pill? When? You’ve been with me the entire time,” I ask, coming out of the bathroom.

“When you were talking to Dovic at one point, I disappeared to the front desk and asked the girl to get me it. After, when I went to the bathroom, I got it from her,” she admits, cheeks turning red with embarrassment. “I promise, I wasn’t set on taking it. I just...”

“I know, you felt like you need a plan.” I grab her shoulders and force her to stand, ripping the sheets from her body. My cock is hard, aching, needing to claim her and prove to her that she is mine. I push her down and spread her thighs apart, driving into her so hard she groans.

But she’s wet with my come still, making each thrust slick.

“Let me make something crystal fucking clear, Sophie.” I wrap a hand around her neck, pounding unforgivably into her sore cunt. “I want to get you pregnant. That’s my goal. Safe isn’t an option. Plan B?” I growl in distaste, looming over her until our noses touch. “We’re the fucking plan.” I ram into her, still so angry that she would do this. My foot hits the nightstand and the lamp falls onto the floor, the bulb breaking, but I don’t care.

I grip the edge of the mattress, needing leverage, and use it to drive into her.

The bed moves, another glass slips from the edge of the other nightstand and shatters.

“Tell me. Tell me we are the plan.”

She shatters under me, coming so hard I feel her trying to pull me in deeper. “We’re the plan,” she finally exclaims. “We are.”

My orgasm is close already from every fast thrust. “Good, then feel this. Accept what’s about to happen. I’m going to fill you with every goddamn drop and you’re going to soak it up, aren’t you?”

She whimpers, her mouth dropping open as another orgasm shakes her core.

“Aren’t you?”

“Yes! God, please, give it to me, Matias. I want it. I want to feel you.”

I roar my release. Her words are the tipping point, the extra stroke I needed. I pour into her, everything I have left to give.

I give it.

Still, something isn’t right. I can’t put my finger on it, but there’s something in our relationship that’s different and it will take more than this to make it right.

Regardless, she’s mine.

My phone rings, causing me to pull out of her. I fumble through last night’s clothes in search of it as the cell rings. When I finally find it, Dovnic’s name appears on the screen.

“Dovnic, I didn’t think I’d hear from you so soon or ever,” I tease him.

“I need your help, Matias. They took him. They took Dominick. They took my son. Please, I’m begging you, Matias. I’ll do anything to get him back. I’ll pay you for your help, for you to work with me this once, but I need power. You’re that power. Please.”

I've never heard the man beg.

"They already took my wife. Please, don't let them take my son."

"Send me your address. I'll be there soon. We will find him."

"Thank you. I'm forever in your debt."

I hang up and turn around. "You're going home," I tell Sophie. "I am going to be a few days. Dovnic needs my help. His son was taken, and this is going to get dangerous. I need you far away from here so I can help him. Okay? I'll call the jet, the pilot, and I'll have everything set up. The return will be easy. I'll be back in a few days."

"If you're staying, I'm staying. I can stay right here, Matias. I'll wait."

"No. I can't risk it. Too many people know we were here last night. This is the first place they will check to hold any leverage over me. You're safest at home with Ella and Gianni. Gianni will send men to me as well. I need firepower."

She swallows, but nods. I can see the water filling her eyes, noticing something is off, and I know that's on both of us. I shouldn't have reacted how I did, and she should have talked to me.

She acts as if this relationship is doomed but the more she acts like it is, the more it will be. Maybe a few days away from one another is all we need.

"Don't worry. I'll be home soon. I promise."

And I always keep my promises.



## Chapter Nineteen

*Sophie*

It's been two days since Matias put me on the private jet and sent me home. Not that I mind. I love being here, especially with Ella, but I do miss Matias. I don't like how we left things. Something feels different. There has been a shift in our dynamic. He hasn't called me. He hasn't texted. I don't know if he is dead or alive. I'm assuming he is alive, or Gianni would tell me.

I'm struggling with how to handle our fight. There's one side of me that is furious. How dare he tell me I can't take the Plan B pill when he just up and disappears off the face of the earth? What am I supposed to do with that? If I get pregnant, what will he do then? Will he vanish?

I can't be with a man who isn't there when I need him.

That's the anger.

The logical side of me knows he will always be there for me. I know whatever issue he is handling with Dovnic is important, especially since it has to do with the rival's son.

When I sit and think about how primal Matias got about wanting to get me pregnant, my heart flutters and my breath catches. A flush works its way up my neck and I can't help but bite my bottom lip as I think about him driving into me, making me tell him that we were the plan.

How could I not want that?

And I do. I do want it. More than anything, but the fear is so strong.

He's right. I can't let fear control me any longer.

But I can't let him control me either. I have to show him he can't tell me what to do.

I sigh, stopping in front of Ella's preschool. Ella opens the door and waves at her teacher.

"Hey, you. How was your day at school?"

"Boring. Joey kept trying to put his peanut butter-covered fingers on me." She shivers. "Gross. I don't understand boys."

"Yuck. Why was he trying to do that?" I ask, pulling out of the parking lot.

"I don't know, but he is gross. I finally got the teacher to stop him. He's soooo annoying." She rolls her eyes dramatically and emphasizes the o's so I know just how annoying Joey is.

"Well, don't ever let any boy put his fingers on you. It leads to trouble."

"You mean how Daddy puts his fingers on you?"

My cheeks heat as I turn right toward the grocery store. I have no idea what to say to her. "Your dad doesn't touch me."

"He doesn't?" Her voice is high-pitched in disbelief. "Well, I can tell by how he looks at you that he does."

"You shouldn't even know what it means for someone to put their fingers on someone else."

Ella scoffs, rolling her eyes. "I'm six now, Sophie. I'm a big girl. I know things."

"Apparently," I mumble. "Well, your dad and I are just friends." The words are a lie, but I'm not too sure how Ella would feel about Matias and me being together. It's something he and I haven't talked about, so I won't confirm anything with Ella until I have talked to Matias.

If he will talk to me at all.

I pulled into the parking lot of the grocery store and Ella peeks out the window.

"Why are we here?"

"I need to get a few things for lunch and dinner. We will be quick. I promise."

“Okay. Can I get candy?”

Like I could ever say no. “Yes, but don’t tell your dad. It will be our secret.”

She grins and opens the door to get out.

“Wait for me. I’ll come get you.” I don’t want her to be alone for a second. I make my way around the car, open her door, and help her out of the booster seat. I take her hand and the size difference has me catching my breath. My hand completely wraps around her little fingers. She’s so small and delicate. The thought of anything happening to her scares the life out of me.

The air conditioning hits us as soon as we step inside the automatic doors. Grabbing a basket, I immediately head toward the deli. I get a few pounds of chicken and turkey with different cheeses, then head to the veggies. The basket gets slightly heavier and when I look down, a box full of fruit gummies is there.

“And where did that come from?”

Ella shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“Mhmm,” I say with disbelief, snagging lettuce and cucumbers.

“Sophie?”

I hold my breath and freeze as I lean in to pick up an onion. That can’t be who I think it is. I straighten, wrapping my arm around Ella, and I spin, pushing her behind me as I face Michael.

What are the chances of me seeing him here?

“Michael,” I greet him.

Ella tugs on my hand. “Who is this?” she whispers.

“I’m one of Sophie’s friends.” Michael bends down to talk to Ella and I step in his way.

“That’s very generous of you to say when both of us know it isn’t true. Don’t speak to her,” I warn him in the best, menacing voice I can.

He quirks a brow at me, amused by my threat. “So she means something to you, huh? I used to mean something to you. We were good together, Sophie. We can be good together again.” He reaches to touch my cheek and I dodge his touch.

“No, we weren’t, and no, we won’t. We’re leaving.”

“Aw, don’t be like that, Sophie. I want you back.” He grabs my arm as I walk by him.

I yank myself free, keeping a tight hold on Ella. “I don’t want you. I’ve moved on. I want nothing to do with you, Michael. Leave me alone.” I pick Ella up and rush out the doors, leaving the basket on the ground. I’ll go somewhere else, or I’ll order groceries. We need to get as far away from him as possible.

“I don’t like him. He looks at you funny,” Ella whispers in my ear as we run out of the grocery store.

“I don’t like him either.”

“Who is he?”

“Just someone I used to know. I’ll have to tell Gianni about it. How about we go home, and we convince Gianni to get groceries? I bet he’d love that.”

She snickers. “He hates shopping.”

“I know.” I boop her nose as I set her into her booster seat. “You remember I won’t be home tonight, right? I have plans. Gianni will be with you.”

“I know. I’ll miss you though,” she pouts, kicking her legs.

“You know you love hanging out with Gianni.” I poke her nose once more. “You love that he lets you put glitter on his face and clips in his hair.”

She giggles hysterically. “I do. He’s fun.”

“What friend are you meeting?” she asks. “Do I know them?”

I shake my head. “You don’t.” I’m not meeting anyone, but I feel the need to rebel.

She doesn't say anything, but she's curious. I can tell.

After I buckle her in the booster seat and start the car, it takes us all of fifteen minutes to get home, and an angry Gianni is standing outside with his arms crossed.

"Uncle G looks maaaaad," she sings. "What did you do?"

"I have no idea." I had a small idea. I went to the grocery store instead of going straight home. He agreed to not follow me but to watch the GPS on my car, so I didn't feel smothered.

But I deviated from the agreement.

We climb out of the car and Gianni uncrosses his arm, the sun catching the distinguished silver in his hair. "Gummy Bear, go inside."

Ella doesn't say a word. She runs by him with her small backpack on, leaving me alone with Gianni.

He stomps down the stairs, the muscles in his jaw ticking. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"Gianni, it's only the grocery store—"

"The store Michael was at. I'm assuming that's why you didn't come home with groceries."

I rear back, shocked. "How did you know he was there?"

"As if Matias would ever let him go anywhere without tracking him."

I sneer. "As if Matias actually cares." I bump by him, rage building in my chest at the thought of my lover or boss or whatever the hell he is.

"You have no idea the extremes he'd go for you. He asks about you—"

"—Asks about me?" I take a few steps to stand in front of him. "So, you talk to him but he won't reply to me." I chuckle, but I'm not amused. "Unbelievable."

"You don't understand—"

"—I understand perfectly. He's upset about what happened at the gala, but you know what? He doesn't control me, and at

the end of the day, I'll do what is best for me. Also, I'm getting ready to go out with a friend. Did you see the schedule?"

"Yes, but—"

"—Nothing else needs to be said." I turn around as soon as my eyes begin to water because my heart is breaking from Matias's avoidance. I did something stupid.

I went and fell in love with a mafia boss. Now, he wants nothing to do with me.

Well, I'll show him that I don't need him. I've always been fine on my own. I don't need anyone.

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A few hours later, when the sun has set and the stars are out, I'm slipping my foot into a black high heel, paired with a gorgeous slinky red dress that's way too short and shows too much cleavage. My hair is done in long waves and my makeup is light, besides a small touch of smokey-colored eyeshadow.

I've come to the conclusion that I do not belong to Matias. If I did, he'd be talking to me. This isn't how relationships work. He isn't communicating and I'm not either, but I don't know how. It seems it's his way or no way at all. I don't know how to work with that. Perhaps the only feelings between us were lust and passion. Maybe these feelings were temporary. Maybe whatever this was has run its course.

My heels click against the floor as I head down the hall, snagging my keys off the counter. Gianni sees me and his brows nearly hit his hairline as he looks me up and down.

"Matias won't be happy about that dress."

"Well," I hook my purse over my shoulder. "Matias isn't here, is he?" I need out of this house, where I'm starting to feel a little suffocated and controlled. I'm only the nanny. No one runs my life. Matias only runs my employment.

Closing the door behind me, I take a deep breath, staring out into the beautiful gardens. I'm lucky to be here but I won't sacrifice who I am for a beautiful home.

I hold onto the rail as I walk down the steps, heading to my car, parked to the left—another thing Matias is trying to win me over with. He got rid of my other car and I haven't forgotten. I appreciate what he was trying to do, but it's as if my own abilities and decisions are being taken from my hands. I need to regain some control.

Getting into the brand-new car, the ride to downtown doesn't take long. The streets are busy with people. Even over the music I have playing, I hear the crowd's roar of laughter and drunken foolishness.

I park on the side of the road, lock the doors, and toss my keys in my purse.

Walking to the nearest line to a club, I hold my head high with confidence, and the bouncer snags my wrist to stop me.

"Hey Beautiful. You don't have to go to the back of the line." He grins, unclipping the rope. "There's always room for you."

I blush, grinning at him while tossing my hair over my shoulder. "Thank you so much."

"Save a dance for me, gorgeous. I have a break in fifteen minutes."

"Only if you can find me," I flirt back, my stomach twisting with guilt, but I'm reminded of the silence on my phone from Matias.

"Oh, I'll find you." He bites his lip and looks me up and down. "That won't be a problem."

I step into the club and the music pulses, the bass so loud, I can feel it vibrate my entire body. The lights flash in the darkness and bodies move together like waves in the ocean. The first place I go to is the bar, needing a drink to calm my nerves and guilt.

If it feels wrong, then it is wrong.

But why do I feel that way? We aren't in a relationship. He fucks me when he wants and leaves me when he wants, then

has me guessing. I knew from the beginning that this would be a disastrous ending, and I still let myself get swept off my feet.

“What can I get you?” the bartender shouts over the bar.

“Two tequila shots and a margarita with extra pour, if you know what I mean.”

“Rough day?” he begins to prepare my drinks.

“The roughest,” I say, but I know he can’t hear me. When he sets down the drinks in front of me, I toss them back immediately. The tequila burns and causes my eyes to water. My stomach warms and I have to focus on not puking, because that was *disgusting*.

I chase the alcohol down with more alcohol but decide to sip my margarita.

I’m not sure how long I sit there, watching people dance, but I’m two margaritas in and I’m feeling buzzed.

My purse vibrates, and I check my phone to see Matias’s name flash with a text message.

*Matias: “Where the fuck are you?”*

*Me: “Why do you care?”*

*Matias: “Sophie, do not fuck with me. Where are you?”*

*Me: “I’m out having a great time. I’m allowed to do that.”*

*Matias: “Not without me.”*

*Me: “Well, you aren’t here, are you? You’ve made sure to leave me out of the picture. I need to go.”*

*Matias: “Don’t even think about dancing with another man. I’ll find them and I’ll kill them, Sophie. Your body is mine.”*

*Me: “Is it? Then why aren’t you here?”*

I turn my phone off, feeling a bit brazen and cocky because of the alcohol. I might be out at a club, but I won’t dance with anyone. I won’t feel right doing that, but I am here to make him jealous. It’s more of a statement, really.

I’m my own woman. I run my own life. I control what I do.



And no one can tell me I can't.

With a buzz of alcohol fogging my mind, the bartender slides me another shot just as I stand from the barstool.

"On the house," he shouts, giving me the once over.

Grinning, I shoot it back, knowing I probably shouldn't.

I sway a bit, the tequila getting to me sooner than anticipated. The song changes to a slow and erotic track, but the beat is still too fast to slow dance. I shut my eyes, losing myself in the music. I sway my hips, my entire body numbing from the alcohol. I run my fingers through my hair, lifting it from my back. A sheen of sweat heats my skin from the dancing. The people around exude a feverish warmth as well.

While I'm dancing, no one touches me.

I'm happy about that and it makes tonight easier, but at the same time, how are no guys touching me? Do they know I'm with Matias?

When the song ends, I decide to break and use the bathroom. Pushing through the crowd, I squeeze my eyes shut, stumbling. It's been too long since I drank. It is hitting me too hard. I'm going to feel so sick tomorrow.

I push open the bathroom door, keep my head down, and dip into a stall.

"Did you see her tonight?" A girl's voice echoes in the bathroom.

"Yes. I can't believe Matias is with her. She isn't his type. He must be desperate."

My heart sinks as I hear them talk about me. That answers that question. Everyone must know we are together because of the gala.

"She's pretty, but she isn't me."

They both laugh at that. My eyes burn with tears as I hear them speak the fears I think of every day.

"He must feel sorry for her. I mean, she is here by herself. How pathetic is that?"

I cross my arms over my chest and sag against the stall door.

“Who comes to a club by themselves? Poor thing probably doesn’t have any friends,” she says, her nasal voice ringing too many truths.

I don’t have any friends. My one friend fucked my boyfriend. I don’t even have her now.

“We should befriend her and use her to get close to Matias. There is no way he’d turn us down,” the second girl states just as they open the door. Their laughs get lost in the loud music, slipping inside the restroom.

The music fades, telling me the door is shut, and I bite my lip to hold in my emotions. I won’t cry. I won’t.

But the more I try, the more I fail.

Tears spill down my cheeks. I see the outfit I’m wearing, feeling like a damn fool.

What am I doing here?

Wiping my face, I run out of the bathroom, pushing through people.

When I get outside, the bouncer is there, and he smiles at me.

“Where are you going? You just got here. I’m about to head inside. I’d love to buy you a drink.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t. I need to go,” I say, walking away as fast as I can.

My heels are loud, scratching against the sidewalk. My stomach rolls and I hold myself up against the nearest building to take a break. I hold my hand against my head as it swims.

I shouldn’t have gone out.

“Sophie?”

I have to be imagining that.

“Hey, Sophie. Are you okay?” his haunting voice sounds far away, but as I turn around and survey the people passing me, I

don't see Michael.

I feel him though, like a chill or a ghost slithering down my spine.

He's here.

Somewhere.

I begin walking again. Everyone is a blur. My eyes can't focus. I run into someone, hitting their shoulder.

"Fucking watch it, whore."

"Sorry," I slur, wishing I had the ability to be sassy back, but apologizing was hard enough.

"Sophie?" A hand grabs my wrist and tugs me against him. "I'm about sick and fucking tired of you ignoring me." The chill turns to a frost, my limbs frozen in place. "Playing hard to get was always what you were good at. I miss the challenge, Soph. Who would have thought 'easy' would get boring?" he shoves me, and I stumble, my hands scraping against the sidewalk. "I'll show you what happens when you deny me."

He waves something in the air, something small and black, pressing a button before he slips it back into his pocket.

The car on the other side of the street explodes, flames licking the air, and screams blend in with the roar of the blaze. The heat teases my skin and I'm taken back to the fire that took my parents' life.

He squats. "I won't stop until you're in the corner. I want you." Then, he falls back, screaming at the top of his lungs, pointing at me. "It was her! I saw her mess with the car! Officers, it was her!" he continues to shout, putting on an award-winning show.

I'm pushed onto my stomach and my arms are pulled behind my back. "You have the right to remain silent—"

"I didn't do it! He is lying to you!" I slur my defense but it doesn't make my case very strong.

"Save it for the judge, lady."

I'm yanked to my feet, wondering how the hell I got into this mess and how the hell I'm going to get out of it.

## Chapter Twenty

*Matias*

Dovnic's son is in bad shape. When we finally find him, he's tied to a chair, rope burns along his wrists from fighting, and lashes across his entire body from a whip they used to torture him. He has red welts everywhere that are open, blood dripping out. His eyes are black and blue, swollen shut, and his nose looks broken.

But damn, the young man is still alive. He's fighting for his life, and I respect him for holding onto the will to live. It can't be easy, feeling this amount of pain and not giving in to it.

Dovnic runs to his son, leaving the last few of the men who were guarding Dominick for me to finish off. Normally, this would piss me off, but these guys are imbeciles. It's light work.

I use the last bullet in my semi-automatic for the biggest guy, who is charging at me, almost double my size. He slumps to the ground, tripping the man following him, and I walk over, throwing my knife into his neck. I don't see the man who comes up from behind me, grabbing my shoulders, but I quickly elbow him in the stomach, stabbing into him and shoving the blade up to his heart. He gurgles, blood dripping from his lips.

"You'll be okay, Dom. You'll be fine. Look at me. Look at me, son." Dovnic grabs his son's face, his eyes hooding with exhaustion. Dovnic smiles in relief when he hears a groan, a sign of life. "Thank God," he hangs his head. "You did good. You did good." He holds Dominick, letting his son rest his head on his shoulder. "We'll get you home. Doc will look at you. They are all dead, you hear me? They are dead." Dovnic cuts the ties binding Dominick, and the kid falls forward.

Dovnic catches him, then swings him up in his arms. His eyes meet mine, anger and tears filling them, but the tears

don't fall. He has better control of himself. It's almost funny seeing a big man like Dovnic carrying his grown man of a child, but it shows it doesn't matter how old our children are.

We will always carry them.

Through fire, blood, glass, and bullets, we will use every bit of strength we have if it means our children walk free and we are left behind.

"Thank you," he rasps to me just as I wipe off my knife.

"Don't mention it."

"I know these men you killed had business with you—"

"—Business is business. I won't let a kid die because of our jobs. Consider it a peace offering."

"Da," he nods, lifting his son's head and holding it to his shoulder so it is secure. "Consider us friends, Matias. I'm forever in your debt. Anything you need, it is yours."

My phone rings, interrupting this awkward, emotion-fueled moment. "Milazzo," I answer without looking at the screen.

"Matias. You need to come home. Now."

"Why? What's going on, Gianni? Is it Ella? Is she safe?"

"Ella is fine. It's Sophie." He sighs, silence following next.

I tuck my long blade in its sheath attached to my hip. "What about her?" I haven't been the best at staying in communication with her. I didn't want Dovnic's rivals to trace anything to her.

Or, maybe that's just an excuse because I'm still upset about the pill. I shouldn't be, but I am.

"She's in jail."

"What?" I roar. "How the fuck did that happen? Why weren't you with her?"

"She's been rebellious, Matias. She isn't happy that you haven't spoken to her since you stayed behind in NYC. She went out."

My blood boils. “She. Went. Out?” I bite through tight teeth, following Dovnic out of the warehouse. “What the fuck do you mean she went out? Without you? Without protection?”

“In her contract, it does state on her days off, she can deny protection.”

“Fix the damn thing,” I growl. “I’ll be there soon. Bail her out.”

“I can’t. Not without you. They won’t release her to me. I don’t pay them, Matias.”

I roll my head over my shoulders, irritated. “I’m on my way.” I hang up the phone and slam the door as we get into the car. “I need a favor.”

“Anything,” Dovnic says, holding his son like an overgrown baby.

“I need to get home. It’s an emergency.”

“You can borrow my jet. We have a strip at the house. I’ll get it all ready for you so when we are home, you can go.”

I give a firm nod. “Thank you.” I bring up the location on Sophie’s phone to see where she is at, grinding my teeth when I see the red dot is indeed at the police station. I look at the history of where she has been, jealousy grabbing a tight hold on me.

Did other men touch her? Did they dare to feel her silky skin that slid against mine, while I drove into her and made her come on my cock? I squeeze my phone so tight, it creaks from the force.

“Trouble in paradise?” Dovnic asks, running his fingers through his son’s hair.

“You could say that.”

“You are a foolish man for not marrying her as soon as possible. She isn’t the kind of woman to be dragged around, even I can see that. If you aren’t willing to make that commitment, I am,” he smirks.

“Do not push your limits. She is mine. She can’t be hurried into something. She’ll scare, just like she is doing now.”

“Sometimes people need to be forced to realize it is what they truly want. Depending on the situation, of course.”

We pull into his massive estate, the iron gates opening to reveal a large stone castle. It’s beautiful and out of place in the modern world, but hauntingly memorable.

“Of course,” I echo his words.

In the middle of the field, there’s a small plane waiting for me, and I’m out of the car before it can stop.

“Thank you, again!” He shouts over the loud engine of the plane.

I lift my hand and wave, running up the steps to get inside of the plane. The sooner I get to Sophie, the sooner I can get her out of jail and make her my wife.

Or, maybe I’ll leave her in jail for a day or two.

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“Take me to the police station,” I tell the taxi driver, not liking that Gianni isn’t here to pick me up, but I don’t want anyone else to see Sophie in his state. She will already be ashamed. The less people who see her, the better.

“No problem.” He stares at me in the rearview mirror, and I feel his questioning gaze.

Signing, I meet his eyes with my cold stare. “Is there something you need?”

“No, sir. I was wondering if you’re Matias Milazzo? Head of the Milazzo crime family?”

I nod. “I am, so I would respect your discretion with anything you see today.” I pull out a few hundred dollars from my wallet and toss it at him for the forty-dollar cab fare.

“Yes, sir. Anything you need, sir,” the driver states with glee. “You can count on me. I am most loyal. If you ever need a driver, I’m your guy, sir. My name is Tony.”



“Nice to meet you, Tony. When we get to the station, you are to wait for me. If I find you told anyone about this, I’ll kill you. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” he says with a smile as if my threat doesn’t scare him.

Odd man.

“I promise, sir. You are safe with me.”

I do need a loyal driver. I only like it when Gianni drives, but he needs to be at my side, not driving me around. The other men are too cocky when they drive, too, so I can’t ask them. Maybe I’ll keep Tony in mind.

“Do you have a family, Tony?”

“I do. My lovely wife of twenty years and four kids. All are in college.”

“What a wonderful life.”

“It is. It’s hard as a taxi driver, but I like what I do.”

Having a family is very difficult in my life. Ella was a big chance for me to take, but now that I have her, I can’t stop the urge to want more.

I want Sophie. I want children with her. I want Ella to have a mother. She deserves that. She deserves everything. And she and Sophie get along so well. This family has to happen. There isn’t another option.

“And you? Do you have a family?”

I nod. “I do.”

“I did not expect you to be a family man,” Tony admits. “No offense.”

I manage a smile, surprised at how at ease I am around this man. It’s almost off-putting. “None taken, but in my line of work, family is everything. It’s how we build our name, power, and fortune. Nothing is more important than family.”

“That is true. I like that.”

We pull into the parking lot at the police station, the low ache in the back of my skull becoming more intense. I have blood on my shirt sleeves and a cut on my face, but the cops won't question me since I'm the one who pays their bills. I hate getting this close to them. I prefer to keep the law out of my business as much as possible.

"I'll be back, Tony. Do not leave."

"No, sir, Mr. Milazzo. I'm right here. I'm your guy. You can count on me."

His eagerness is endearing but slightly annoying, but somehow, I can't help but like him. I tap the car and a heavy, dreaded sigh escapes me as I open the door of the police station. Putting my game face back on and hiding the exhaustion, I tense my jaw.

"Where the fuck is she?" I shout into the room. There is one man on the bench and he reeks of alcohol. When he sees me, he keeps his eyes cast downward. His hair is dirty and falls over his face. As I walk by him, I get a whiff of piss.

"Mr. Milazzo, she's safe. She's in her cell."

I chuckle at the fucking audacity of keeping my woman in a fucking jail cell. I grip one deputy by the throat and pull my gun out at the same time, aiming it at the other deputy, on the right. I lift him by his throat, causing him to choke. I cock the gun, turning my head to the officer on the right. "Move and I'll fucking shoot you."

He nods, the color draining from his face.

"Now, someone tell me why my woman is in a cell. With how much I pay this fucking dump, I expect you to at least call me. I didn't get a call. I had Gianni call me instead. Why?"

"She's a suspect in a car bombing," the one I have by the throat says, coughing. "We have a witness."

I growl, sneering. "Does she look like the fucking type who would bomb a car? Who was the witness? A man? Was his name Michael?"

"Ye-Yes, how did you know?"

“It’s her crazy ex-boyfriend. You guys are really bad at your job.” I release him, and he inhales much-needed air. “Take me to Sophie, now. Or I will pull this trigger, and step over your dead body without remorse.” The deputy in front of me crosses his eyes to stare down the barrel of the gun. He nods, sweat dripping down his temples. “Good.” I put the hammer in place and tuck the gun into its holster. “Lead the way, Officer,” I state nonchalantly, acting as if everything is forgotten.

“Yeah, okay. Yeah,” he stutters, his hands shaking as he pulls out his keys to unlock the door that takes us to the cells.

I follow him, the soles of my shoes tapping against the cheap linoleum floor. The bright fluorescent lights have me squinting my eyes, and the ache in the back of my head becomes slightly stronger.

Moaning and groaning surround me. I look left, and I see a drunk guy passed out on his cot. To the right, there’s a man talking to himself in harsh whispers, running his fingers through his hair, as if he is paranoid about something.

My Sophie doesn’t belong in a place like this.

“Looks like it’s your lucky day, Ms. Matthews,” the cop grumbles, sliding the key in to unlock her cell.

“Don’t fucking speak to her as if she’s a criminal. We will be getting a restraining order and the best lawyer in the city. If you really want to go down that road, I’ll fuck over this department so fast, you’ll be without a damn job. You know I am way more powerful than you,” I whisper, invading his space. “I am above the law here, and you are nothing but a fucking puppet. You will do as I say if you still want to get my money that your wife, I bet, seems to like. Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal, Mr. Milazzo. Consider the case lost, or dropped, or—”

“It isn’t dropped. Michael did it. I want a restraining order put in place.” I yank the cell door open, and Sophie looks up, tears in her eyes, mascara running down her face, and yet, she looks fucking beautiful in that dress.

That too many men have seen her in.

Her eyes widen in surprise, as if she's shocked to see me. She wipes her cheeks, only smearing the mascara more.

"What are you doing here? I called Gianni."

"And who do you think called me? What the hell were you thinking? You could have gotten hurt, or worse. Let's go, Sophie. We are leaving." I want to scream how fucking enraged I am from the rooftops, but she looks so fragile, so meek in this moment, I can't find the heart to be upset with her. I pick her up gently and I get a whiff of alcohol. "You weren't driving, were you?"

"I drove to the club, but I wasn't going to drive home. I promise. I wouldn't do that."

"I'll have Gianni get your car." I wrap an arm around her waist when she stumbles in her heels, still a bit tipsy, even though it's been hours since Gianni called me. "How much did you have to drink?"

"Enough to try and not be mad at you anymore," she slurs just as I lift her into my arms.

I hold back my smile. "Did it work?"

"No." She lies her head on my shoulder. "Well, maybe. Yes." She licks her lips next. "No. Yes."

"We will table that for later, then," I grumble, pushing a piece of hair out of her face.

I'm worried that our inability to communicate with one another will be our downfall. I don't want it to be. I love her more than I ever thought possible, but she is insistent she doesn't need me like I need her.

It hurts more than I care to admit.

"I want that restraining order in place as soon as possible," I grit through annoyed teeth at the deputies. "Michael better be taken care of soon, or I'll do it myself. We both know you'd rather have it your way than mine." I push out the door, leaving the police behind.

Tony is still there, right where I left him, and he grins, waving at me through the window. When he sees a woman in my arms, his smile fades. He gets out of the car and pokes his head above the roof. “Oh no, she doesn’t look too good. Is she okay?” He runs around the back, opening the car door for me.

“She will be fine. She’s had a rough night is all.” I cup her head, so it doesn’t hit the top, as I get in. I cradle her to my chest, hating that I wasn’t with her last night.

I have so many questions, so many concerns, but I suppose they don’t matter right now. Or maybe, they don’t matter at all. Perhaps, I need to put aside my jealousy.

“Where to, sir?” Tony asks.

“I assume you know where I live.”

“Oh, yeah. I take my kids by there all the time. Beautiful home.” He suddenly cackles, meeting my eyes in the rearview mirror. “It didn’t sound as weird in my head, but you have the prettiest home in the city. The kids really look up to you. They want to work for you one day.”

I snort, shaking my head. “I’m sure that doesn’t please you.”

“Why wouldn’t it? Life is hard, and you have to play the game to make it. I want my kids to make it.”

His words surprise me. “Well, you can tell them you officially work for me now. I’ll get you a new car. This will not do.” I glance around, not wanting to think about all the people that have been inside here.

“Seriously? Are you serious? No way. Oh, man. Mr. Milazzo. You won’t be sorry. I swear it.”

“You’ll have an NDA and contract. Your entire family will have to sign one. I’ll start you with a signing bonus, health insurance, and good pay. We will hash out the details soon. My focus is on Sophie right now.”

“Yes, sir. Not a problem.”

“You’ll have to move to the estate with your wife. I have plenty of room, but I’d need you to be available at all times. If

that is an issue, please let me know now.”

“It isn’t. My wife will be thrilled. Thank you, Mr. Milazzo. You have changed my life for the better.”

I glance down at Sophie, running my finger down her warm cheek. “Yeah, I don’t do that very often, so that’s good to know.”

“I’m sure you do it more than you think,” Tony says softly. “Every couple has fights and disagreements. You’ll get through it. I know it.”

“You’re a confident man, Tony.”

“I’ve been married awhile, sir. Nothing works better than honest communication. Keeping it bottled up inside isn’t good for the soul. It will create a bitterness that will spread like poison if you don’t get ahead of it. It isn’t worth it, sir. Whatever happened, talk about it.”

“Yeah, we aren’t good at that. It’s my fault.” Here I am, spilling my guts to a stranger. I find it easier than talking to Gianni. This man doesn’t know me. Tony can give me unbiased advice. “I try to protect her by doing things my way, but she’s been alone for a long time. She’s had to fight for what she has. She is independent and strong. She’s used to making her own choices and I need to respect that. I only want her as mine. At the end of the day, that’s all I really want.” Even if it means she doesn’t want to have my baby, maybe she and I can come to an agreement. Maybe not now, but soon? I want to be what she needs me to be.

“Don’t take all the blame. It takes two to tango.” His thick New York accent comes through, telling me where he is from.

“She’s stubborn and hardheaded.” I admire her beautiful face as she sleeps, even with alcohol pouring off her in waves, she still is everything my heart desires. “She loves fighting me.”

“She has spirit. It’s good. It means she won’t ever have you walk all over her. It’s good to have a woman like that.”

I nod in agreement, kissing Sophie’s forehead. “I’m so sorry,” I whisper. “Please, don’t be mad at me anymore.” I

look down, hoping she'd open her eyes, but they remain shut.

"We are here, sir."

"Roll down the window and tell them to let you through."

As soon as he rolls down the window, Gianni's voice comes through the speaker.

"Whatever you are selling, we don't want it."

"No, I'm Tony. I'm the new driver for Mr. Milazzo. He's in the backseat with his girl. He told me to tell you."

"Tony? Who the fuck is Tony?"

"Me. I'm Tony. The Taxi driver. You know, yellow cab kind of guy." He chews on his toothpick. "You want a ride in my cab? The fare is decent. I can help you around the city. I'm sure that's my job now. You know, I could take you to this really great place—"

"—Shut up. And come in. Stop talking." Gianni is moodier than usual but opens the gate.

"Nice talking to you. See you soon, yeah?" Tony must be the happiest guy I know. It's a nice change of pace. Someone with his attitude is needed around here.

When Tony parks, I dip into my blazer pocket and hand him my card. "Come by tomorrow, but message me first. Either way, I'll be seeing you soon, okay, Tony? And remember, do not tell a soul about tonight."

He zips his mouth shut. "Tighter than a chastity belt, Mr. Milazzo." He locks his mouth and throws away the key.

I chuckle under my breath at his choice of words. Gianni opens the door, and I step out, keeping a grip on Sophie.

"I'm going to clean her up and take her to bed. Her car is downtown. I'll give you the location to get it."

"You got it."

Tony honks as he drives away, waving out the window.

"Who is that guy?"

“That’s Tony. He’ll be our official driver. You won’t have to do it anymore.”

“I like the sound of that.”

Sophie groans just as I step inside the house. Her eyes open and she suddenly slaps my chest, rolls out of my arms, and runs to her bedroom, slamming the door.

I hear a lock, too, along with the horrible retching of her throwing up.

“What the hell happened, Gianni? How did I get here?”

“You’ll have to talk to her about that.” He pats my shoulder. “Why don’t you get cleaned up? I’ll check on her and I will update you. Get some rest. Tomorrow, you guys can tackle this issue, okay?”

“I want footage of the bombing. I want to know everything.”

“Will do,” he says.

I take one last look at her bedroom door and walk away. I need to shower and go see my daughter. I miss her.

I highly doubt I’ll be able to sleep, knowing that tomorrow holds so many answers.



## Chapter Twenty-One

*Sophie*

Matias has been traveling a lot over the last few weeks. Ever since my drunken night and getting arrested, we have avoided each other, or more accurately, I've avoided him. He came back home last night, after a five-day trip back to NYC to talk with Dovnic. He has messaged me every day, asking how I am, but the conversations are minimal and surface-level at best.

It's me. I'm holding back.

And a part of it is because I'm staring at a positive pregnancy test right now in my bathroom.

"Oh my god," I gasp, covering my mouth with my hand as I stare at the bright pink lines. There is no question or doubt. There is no faint line. There's no 'maybe.' I am pregnant. I knew I was when I missed the first day of my period. I'm always on time.

I pick up the test and stare at it, knowing I need to tell him. He deserves to know. He'll be happy. This is what he wanted, isn't it? He wanted to get me pregnant, and he got his wish. I place my hand against my stomach, wondering how this will change everything surrounding me.

I smile, letting the joy of something I thought I would never have settled inside me. I'm allowed to be happy. I'm allowed to panic too, but in the end, I do feel happiness.

Now, how do I tell him? The relationship hasn't been great since the gala, and it's been even worse since I was in jail. I know the charges were dropped against me, and the restraining order for Michael is active. He has a warrant out for his arrest after traffic cameras caught him in the act.

It's a relief, but also terrifying. They can't find him, and I know he'll be back for me. Being pregnant only heightens the

fear more. I can't let anything happen to Matias's child. It's time to have whatever this is between us truly bloom into something special.

It's my fault that it hasn't yet. I've been keeping him at a distance. I've been trying to convince myself I'm not good enough when Matias has done nothing but prove to me the complete opposite.

I'm going to go tell him. Right now.

I wrap the pregnancy test with toilet paper and hide it under the sink. Swinging open the door, I nearly run over Ella who has paint brushes in her hands.

"Daddy bought me a bunch of paint and brushes and canvases, and I want us to paint," she says quickly, a big goofy grin on her face.

My plan will have to wait.

"That sounds like so much fun. I'd love to paint with you."

She grabs my hand and pulls me toward the kitchen area, where all the supplies are laid out. Everything is set up and Matias is there, looking so damn handsome he takes my breath away, but I'm unable to speak. There's so much I want to say, so much I want to do, and my tongue is tied.

"Hi," he begins softly, his voice deep and charming, seeping its comfort into my bones.

I take a seat and smile. "Hi," I whisper.

"How are you?" he asks, biting into an apple.

My eyes wander over his tight shirt. The sleeves grip his biceps, and his sweatpants are slung low, leaving nothing to the imagination when it comes to his cock. I can see the outline, the crown of the head pushing against the material.

He smirks, clearing his throat. "Good, then? I assume."

My cheeks redden from being caught. "Very. I—um—wanted to ask how Dominick is doing."

He leans against the counter next to me. "He's good. Healing. He is in better spirits than I thought he would be..."

He's a tough kid. He'll be fine."

"Daddy, look! It's an elephant."

Matias and I give Ella our full attention.

"Wow, Ella Bella. That looks amazing!" Matias sounds like he is in pure awe of his little girl. "It's beautiful. I want to hang it on the fridge, okay?"

"I'm not done yet. Maybe after."

"I love it," I add, knowing that, to everyone else, it is going to look like a grey blob, but hey, she's just a kid. Being creative is all that is needed at that age.

"What are you going to paint?" Matias asks me.

"I don't know. I'll just see where the paint takes me, I guess." I draw a streak against the canvas, the black color thick and dark. "Maybe, I'll do a night sky." It is simple enough, and fun.

His eyes sear me. I feel his stare piercing the secret I'm holding in tight. He scoots closer, until his elbow touches mine, and the simple motion has me inhaling a sharp breath.

I've missed his touch, even if it is as simple as this.

"Can we talk later?" he whispers the question into my ear, his breath ghosting over the sensitive skin of my neck. "Please?" Matias leans in, his nose touching the side of my head as he inhales my scent. "I've missed you so much."

I close my eyes, getting lost in his nearness.

"There's so much to discuss. Everything that's happened... just—I really need to talk to you."

I nod fast because that's perfect. If we can talk, then I can tell him about the baby.

"I'd like that, Matias. And... I've missed you too."

He tilts his head to the side, his touch gaining courage as he drags his fingers up and down my arm. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, it hasn't been easy for me, Matias," I whisper in return, making sure my voice is as low as possible. "I was so

embarrassed and ashamed of what happened that night. You came and—”

“Let’s not talk about that here.” His eyes move to his daughter. “But there is nothing to be ashamed of.” His finger moves to my face, tracing my jaw. “I promise. I never want to make you feel caged. If you have the urge to go out, I want to go with you, or follow you, or watch you.”

I snicker. “That doesn’t sound creepy or anything.”

He grins. “That’s the point. I want you to feel me around, but I won’t crowd you.”

The sound of the plastic cup falling over and pouring dirty water across the counter interrupts us. I jump out of the way, barely missing the murky paint water splashing against the chair.

A second later, Ella begins to wail. Her eyes water, and her lower lip frowns as her face turns red. “I’m sorry!” she yells. “I didn’t mean to do it. I’m sorry. Mommy, I’m sorry.”

I gasp and Matias inhales too, shocked at her word of choice.

I don’t want to think too much of it because, while my heart swells with happiness, it could just be a reflex for her thinking she’s in trouble.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay, Ella, you’re okay. It’s just water.” I grab the dish towel from the oven, cleaning off my seat first. “See? Look how easy that is.”

“I just... I didn’t mean to. I reached and my brush hit it. I couldn’t stop it. I ruined your painting,” she wails again, big fat tears of guilt rolling down her face.

I stare at my canvas, which was barely coming together since I got sidetracked with Matias.

“I think you made it look better. I was painting a night sky and now you added dimension. Look at all the grey hues? I love it. We will let it dry and work on it later.”

She snuffles, lifting her hands in the air for me to pick her up. “Really?” she begins to calm, wiping her face.

I lift her and sit her on my hip. “Really. It was an accident, Ella. Accidents happen. It’s okay. We aren’t mad at you, baby.” I kiss her forehead, the urge to truly be her mom hitting me full force, and I have to blink away the tears. “I think it’s time for a nap, okay? Why don’t you go get cleaned up in the shower and then I’ll come tuck you in, okay?”

She nods. “Okay, Mommy,” she says for the second time, climbing down my body and bolting to the bathroom.

Silence falls between us and I panic because that’s Matias’s daughter. Having her call me mom might make him feel some type of way. I love it, but maybe he is jealous? What if I’ve overstepped? What if I crossed the line of being her nanny? This could be messy.

“Sophie?” Matias takes a tentative step forward, speaking my name delicately.

I’m frozen. I’m scared. What if he is mad? What if this is it? We never talked about this happening. I never even considered Ella calling me mom. I love it. I never want her to call me Nanny Sophie again. We could be a family. Isn’t that what he wanted? Was the idea, the fantasy, the dream better than reality now that it has hit us in the face?

Maybe we weren’t ready.

I am. I’m finally ready, but Matias is looking at me... I can’t tell how. His cheeks are red, and his eyes are watering.

“Don’t,” Matias warns with ease. “I can tell you’re about to \_\_\_”

I run.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

*Matias*

I stare outside the sliding glass door, watching her get lost in the maze of the gardens in the back. She is running because she is afraid of my reaction to what Ella said, but when I heard my daughter call her mom, my entire being stopped. My lungs froze. My heart stumbled. My tongue tied. I couldn't remember how to walk or move.

I was stunned.

And so fucking happy.

I've dreamed of this moment. I thought it would take longer. I thought Ella would need more time, and if I'm honest, I thought Sophie would too. Sophie is beautiful, smart, brave, and very independent. She's so used to being on her own that she gets scared any time we grow close.

She keeps herself far enough away from me, so she doesn't have to get too close. All of that is about to change. That is about to come to an end. Everything I want is at the tip of my fingers. It's right within reach. I won't let her run from me. I won't let her be afraid of the future. I won't let her distance herself from me any longer.

"I'll make sure Ella is okay. You go get Sophie," Gianni nudges me to go.

I run to the door, sliding it open quickly, and I don't bother shutting it behind me. I jump down the staircase, my feet landing on the soft grass of the lawn. The air is cool, and the sun is bright, still warm against my skin as I sprint down the path to the garden. The grass tickles the bottoms of my feet and the thick bushes of the garden come into view. Most of the flowers that bloomed over the summer are wilting, the petals drifting to the ground as fall creeps around the corner.

My arms lock in front of me, blocking the whipping of the thin branches that need to be trimmed. A sting is left behind, but I barely feel it as the adrenaline pumps through my heart. I'm hunting her, it seems; chasing a scared little doe until she's backed into a corner.

"Sophie?" I shout for her, looking into the nook on the left that's usually overrun with roses.

She isn't there.

"Sophie?" I growl. "I won't leave until I find you. You can hide, but I will find you. I'll search every inch of these gardens."

Yet, she doesn't make a sound.

I love her, I do, but damn it, she is infuriating when she's stubborn.

Now that I've introduced her as my fiancé to others, I want more. I've given Sophie too much space for her to accept that this thing between us is fake. It's very real. The moment she walked in the door, I knew she was meant to be mine.

I hear small sobs coming from up ahead, so I slow my pace. My heart aches when I hear her sadness. Lifting my hand, I pull down another wayward branch, reminding myself to tell the gardener to trim the dead weight.

This path leads to a circular dead end, surrounded by weeping willow trees. In the middle of the stone pathway is a weeping angel fountain, the water trickling from the angel's eyes. Such a perfect place to be when sadness overcomes the soul.

"Sophie?" I whisper her name, wanting to ease her out of the wreckage consuming her soul.

She sniffles. "Matias, I need a minute. I need... I need some space. Please, leave me alone."

"No." I state simply.

"No?" she whips around, stunning me to stillness with her bright blue eyes dripping with tears.

I nod, then shrug, tucking my hands in my pocket. “No,” I confirm with the same tone. “I won’t leave you alone. I’m done leaving you alone. I’m done giving you what you want. I’m done with you pushing me away. I’m done with you finding excuses to hide from us. I’m done with you not accepting the reality of what is right in front of you. I’m here.” I hit my chest with the palm of my hand. “I am not going anywhere. I am your family. You are mine. You are not alone anymore, so stop acting like you are. My daughter loves you. She called you mom—”

“—And I’m so sorry. I know we haven’t talked about what would happen if she said that. If you’re upset—”

“—Good god, Sophie. Have you heard anything I said? You’re driving me insane.” I step in front of her, cupping her face as I stare into her eyes. “Listen to me, you maddening woman.” I wipe her tears with my thumb, but she continues to cry. “I am not upset. Hearing Ella call you her mom was a dream come true. It is a fantasy I have longed for since the day you walked through my doors. I always want her to call you mom. I always want you as mine. You are my family too, Sophie. You and I both know you were never a nanny to Ella. You were always so much more.”

She leans into my touch, closing her eyes, and the sunlight gleams against the thick, wet lashes shadowing her cheeks.

“But what if it doesn’t last? What if we do not work? Ella will be devastated.”

“I would never bring you into my life as my own if I didn’t think this would work. You are mine, Sophie. When shit gets hard, you can’t run. You won’t be able to. I won’t allow it. You will be my wife. You’ll wear my ring. I’ll draw up a new contract, one that you won’t be able to refuse. I’ll make sure you’re protected because I know you,” I whisper. “You’ll need to feel safe, and you’ll need to be reassured that you could leave on your own pretenses, but I’ll make damn sure you won’t ever want to leave. I’ll give you everything, Sophie. Everything.” I press my forehead against hers, our hands locked and pressed to our chests. “I’ll protect you in all the



ways. I'll ease your mind and your pain. I'll always avenge you. I'll always kill for you. And I'll always love you."

She inhales, breaking the connection between us by leaning back. Her sharp blue eyes meet mine, and a happy smile graces her face. "You love me?"

"Is that not obvious? Have I not shown you how enthralled I am with you? If I haven't, I need to love you better."

She chuckles, wrapping a hand around the back of my neck. "I love you, too," she whispers, pulling me in to kiss, but then, just as quick, she stops and pulls away.

She loves me.

That's all that matters. I heard her say it. She can't take it back now.

My heart bumps against my chest with happiness. There's nothing she could say that would ruin it.

Silence passes. Seconds turn to minutes and curiosity gnaws at my stomach. "Did something happen between you and another man when you went out?" Asking the question has jumpstarted the urge to find the man who touched what was mine and kill him. Jealousy and possession take over, and I pull her closer. "Who was he?" I growl, my fingers gripping her shirt while I try to take calming breaths.

"What?" she rears back, looking at me incredulously. "No, Matias. Nothing like that. I would never," she shakes her head, brows dipping. "I would never do that to you. I went out to make you jealous, but I wouldn't have *ever* danced with another or went home with another man or slept with someone else—"

I press my finger against her lips to stop her rambling. I can't help but laugh in relief. "You just saved a man's life. I was ready to burn the city down."

"You'd do that over a little touch?" she quips, a teasing pinch to her lips.

I grip her chin and stare into her eyes. "I'd do it over a simple look. Don't underestimate how deep my feelings go for

you.”

Her throat bobs as she swallows with nerves. She glances away, not wanting to look at me.

“What is it, Sophie? You can tell me. I won’t be upset.” As long as no one else touched her, everything will be fine.

“I’m nervous. Just give a minute,” she chuckles, but it sounds slightly hysterical as well.

Now, she’s making me worry. I brush my thumb across her damp cheek, the fallen water from the fountain trickling behind her.

My weeping angel.

“You deserve to know something before you are all in,” her voice trembles with uncertainty. “I just found out this morning and I was going to tell you today, but now seems like a great time.” She presses the heel of her hand against her forehead before dropping it. “I’m pregnant, Matias. I don’t know how far along I am, but I’m pregnant.”

I let her words settle inside my mind. Did I hear her correctly? Is she really pregnant?

“You’re pregnant?” I ask to double-check. I want to hear her say it again.

“Yes. I’m pregnant. It’s yours. Obviously.”

With a growl, I smash my lips against hers, grabbing her face to control the kiss. Suddenly, I lose control, needing her to feel how happy I am about this news. It’s all I’ve wanted, since the first time I slid inside her. I’ve wanted nothing more than to claim her as mine, to bind her to me, to have her anchored in my life in some way so she would always be considered mine.

And I’ve succeeded.

I press us against the statue, letting her feel the hard ridge of my cock.

“Does that make you happy?” she whispers against my lips.

“Can’t you feel how happy it makes me?” I rumble, frantically pulling her shirt off and tossing it to the side. It lands on the bushes to the left. “I need to feel you.” I don’t bother taking her bra off. I tug the cups down, freeing her heavy tits, then palm them with a groan. “You’re so goddamn perfect. I can’t wait until you’re swollen with my child and your tits leak milk.” I kiss the middle of her chest, dragging my tongue across until I suck a nipple into my mouth.

She moans, arching her back to give me better access.

“I can’t wait to clean up the mess you’ll make. Your body is growing, my child. Do you know how fucking sexy that is, Sophie? It has me losing control.” I tug her leggings down and rip them off, throwing them in the direction of the shirt.

I flip her around, and she braces herself on the statue. Yanking her panties down her thighs, I spread her legs, then fumble with my belt. Gripping her by her hair, I snarl into her ear. “This will not be gentle, Sophie. This will be me taking what is mine.” I guide my cock to her entrance, and already, her heat warms the tip.

She’s soaked.

She whimpers when I slide in. I watch her cunt take every inch of me. Grabbing her hip with one hand, I thrust.

“Matias. Oh god, this position. It’s... It’s intense.”

Those words only cause me to pick up my speed and fuck her harder. I can’t be close enough to her. I push against her, lifting her leg so I can be buried even further. She groans, tilting her head back until it is on my shoulder.

“Never will I go another day without being inside you.” My hand flattens against her stomach. “I’m going to fuck you every day and remind you who you belong to. I am meant to be inside this tight cunt, Sophie. This pussy is mine. This body is mine. You’re mine. Your fucking womb is mine. I’ve claimed it,” I chuckle darkly into her ear. “And I’ll always claim it. The moment you’re not pregnant, the moment your body is free, I’m going to pour my come into you all over

again. You'll give me all the children I want, won't you? Your body will bend to me."

"Yes, yes! Whatever you want, I want. Matias. I'm already so close. Don't stop. Please, don't stop."

"I'm close, too. It's been too long since we've had each other, that's why. Never again."

"Never," she cries, her pussy clamping down on my cock.

With three more hard thrusts, I shout her name. Every jet that escapes me, I bury myself further, nearly climbing her body to push my come as deep as possible even though she's already pregnant. Something about the motion, something about claiming her depths with my seed has a primal urge unraveling inside me.

"Fuck. Fuck," I nearly whimper, pressing my forehead against the middle of her back. I tremble from how intense the orgasm was, even though it was so quick.

I don't move my hand from her stomach. We stay just like this, my cock lodged inside her, come dripping down her thighs, and the breeze causing us to shiver.

I'm not ready to let her go yet.

Not when I finally have everything I've always wanted.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

*Sophie*

You know that feeling where everything seems too good to be true, and you're just waiting for the other shoe to drop? I've been feeling like that ever since I've told Matias I'm pregnant and he said he wanted us to be a family.

Something that is this good can't possibly last, can it? Something has to go wrong. Matias waits on me, hand and foot. I'm not even showing yet, and he's been massaging my back and feet every night. He has my prenatal vitamins ready to take with breakfast every morning. The sex has been fucking immaculate. He is obsessed with the fact that I'm pregnant. He constantly whispers filthy things in my ear, growling that I'm his and carrying his child.

He has turned into a primal beast, and I have to say, I don't mind at all.

I groan, the roll of morning sickness rushing through me, and I dart to the bathroom, throwing up the fruit I had for breakfast.

"Sophie!" Matias shouts from the other side of the house, his voice distant. "Sophie!" Suddenly, his voice is closer as he rushes to me.

I don't know how he always knows that I'm sick. It's as if he has a sixth sense.

"Sweet Sophie, are you okay?" he presses a cold washcloth on the back of my neck, then rubs soothing circles between my shoulder blades. "I wish I could be sick for you," he says.

"Me too." I flush, moaning as my stomach twists again. My eyes water from agreeing with him. "I didn't mean that. I don't want you to be sick either. I'm sorry." My emotions hit me hard and fast these days.

“It’s okay. Hey.” He helps me up, grabs a toothbrush and squirts toothpaste on it. “Open.”

I do as he says, and he brushes my teeth for me.

“I meant it. I hate seeing you ill, but I also love that I get to experience all of this with you. I’ll be here for you through sickness, through pain, through doubts, and happiness. If you are ill, I will take care of you. If you are happy, I’ll be happy. I’m tethered to you, Sophie Matthews. Whatever you feel, I will feel. Now, spit. That will be the only time you will ever hear me say that.”

I giggle, spitting into the sink and washing my mouth with water, but all of his kind words hit me at once and I’m crying all over again.

He chuckles. “Aw, Sophie.” And he pulls me into a tight embrace, and just holds me until the wave passes.

We stand that way for a few minutes until the rush of emotions passes.

“There we go. It’s okay. You’re so beautiful and amazing. You’re doing so well. Everything will be okay, I promise.”

I let his scent wash over me, the calm aroma of sandalwood and citrus. I inhale him deeply, rubbing my nose against his chest. The scent has the nausea fading, and I finally feel up for conquering the day.

“You smell so good.” The relief suddenly turns to lust. My hands grip to his shoulders, my lips drag against the side of his throat, and I whimper when I slide one hand down and cup his semi-hard cock. “I want you. Please,” I beg him.

His cock is fully hard now. Long, thick, and aching against my palm as I stroke him on the outside of his pants. He groans, tilting his head back, and my pussy becomes wetter, my panties slick with need.

Matias grabs my hand to stop me. “Sweet Sophie, as much as I would love to bend you over this counter and fill you with every inch of my cock, we have a doctor’s appointment we have to go to, remember? Do you want to see the doctor with my come leaking out of you?” A rumble fills his chest.

“It seems like you would like that,” I flirt, walking my fingers down his chest.

“I would. I would love to see their faces knowing you’re dripping of me, but I know you don’t want that, Sweet Sophie. What we do should remain private. After the appointment, I’ll fuck you. How does that sound?”

“But I want you now. Please,” I beg him, feeling so sexually frustrated even though he fucked me yesterday.

He spins us around until I’m pressed against the sink. His hand trickles up my bare thigh. “Oh, my Sweet Sophie needs relief. I can do that for you without letting the doctor know, good girl.” He pushes my panties to the side, sliding his fingers through my wet lips. “You’ll come on my fingers, and then later, you’ll take care of me, won’t you?”

“Yes,” I gasp. “Yes, please. I’ll do anything.”

He wastes no time. With a smirk, he gets on his knees and tugs my panties down. Lifting my leg onto his expensive, suit-covered shoulder, he hums in delight.

“Look at that pretty pussy already glistening for me. Such a needy girl.” He pushes two fingers inside me, the delicious pressure causing me to whimper. His lips part as he slides the thick digits in and out. He gives me a quick smirk before disappearing between my thighs, his mouth wrapping around my clit.

He sucks, pulling the sensitive bud between his teeth, while pumping his fingers.

“Matias, yes. Holy fuck—god, so good.” I grip the edge of the vanity, rocking my hips to get more friction.

His free hand grabs a handful of my right butt cheek, his fingers digging in so hard I know they will leave bruises. He moans around my clit, toying it between his teeth which gives me a slight pinch of pain.

I’m already so close.

I run my fingers through his hair and grab the dark roots, fisting the silky strands while I ride his face. My orgasm hits

me hard and quick, rushing through my body in small waves with every pull on my clit he takes.

“Matias!” I cry when I become too sensitive.

He pulls away, his mouth shining with my slick. His tongue licks his lips and broken breaths leave me as he carefully slides his fingers free.

They are wet too, shining as if he has dipped them in honey.

He sucks them into his mouth, his eyes shutting as if he has just had the best dessert ever created.

“So sweet. The best way to start my day.” He stands, leaving me on shaking legs, and that’s when I notice his erection and the wet spot on his pants.

“Did you—”

He shuts me up with a kiss, sliding his tongue between my lips, and I can taste myself.

“I did,” he confirms. “Seeing you come sets me off, Sophie. I can’t help but lose control. Now, let’s change so we aren’t late for your appointment.”

I listen, feeling a bit smug knowing I made him come without even touching him. I’m happy as can be, humming as I tug on a pair of leggings and a loose, long-sleeve shirt that hangs off the shoulders.

I haven’t been as careful covering my scars lately; Matias makes me feel so beautiful, I haven’t felt the need to.

“Someone is feeling good after their morning orgasm,” he teases me.

“Can’t blame me when I have a man like you between my legs,” I quip.

He grabs my hand and tugs me to him. “I love hearing that you’re attracted to me.”

“Have you seen yourself? Everyone is,” I chuckle, but a second later, I become more somber. “But you’re all mine, right?”



“That’s right, Sophie. I’m all yours and I will always be yours.” He kisses my forehead and laces our hands together. “Come on. I’m excited to see what the doctor says. If we don’t leave now, we will be late.”

He practically pulls me down the hall and out the door.

An older gentleman is there with a new black SUV.

“Tony. It’s good to see you.”

Tony opens up the back door for us. “It’s better to see you two. To the doctor, we go! I’m so excited. I love babies.” He closes us in, and Matias must not miss the look on my face.

“Tony is the one who drove me to get you from jail. I hired him as my personal driver. He’s loyal, eager, and honestly, I like his energy.”

“So, he saw me at my worst,” I grumble.

“Nonsense.” He tugs me to his side. “You don’t even have a side that could be seen as bad.”

Tony lowers the partition between us. “So, are we excited? Is it too soon to know the gender? Do you care? Have you been feeling sick? I’ll tell you this,” his New York Accent is so thick, I’m having trouble understanding him. “When my Linda was pregnant, she loved ginger tea to sip on. I don’t know what it was about it, but she loved it. It really helped her feel better. Maybe you can give it a go if you want. No pressure. Just trying to help.”

I understand what Matias means. The guy is very endearing. “I think it’s too soon to tell the gender, but I am feeling sick. I’ll have to try the tea. Thank you for recommending it.”

“No problem at all. I’m happy to help in any way I can. She also really liked pickle juice. Like an actual drink, in a glass. Weirdest thing I had ever seen. I stocked up on those giant jars of pickles from the store just so she could have all the pickles and juice she wanted. It really calmed her stomach down and helped her get some much-needed rest. Now, she can’t stand pickles. The smell of them makes her sick. Weirdest thing, right?”

“She’s probably burnt out on pickles,” I chuckle. “Sounds like she had a lot of them.”

“She did. Poor woman. I hated it. I felt so helpless, you know. No good husband wants to see his wife in pain like that. Nothing I could do but be there, but I felt like it wasn’t enough.”

“It was,” I say in a hurry. “That’s all she needed.” I look at Matias and take his hand.

The conversation with Tony ended up making the drive to the doctor fast.

“I’ll be here when you get out. Good luck,” Tony tells us.

Matias helps me out of the car, wrapping an arm around my waist, and guides me to the pathway. I can’t see through the windows of the office; the tint is too dark. Matias opens the door and a bright room with light blue walls and leather couches comes to view.

It’s warm and inviting.

And we are the only ones here.

“I rented out the space. I didn’t want anyone to know we were here. I have to protect you and our children against my enemies.”

“Thank you.” I kiss the top of his hand.

“Mr. and Mrs. Milazzo?” an older woman with red hair and wrinkles around her eyes smiles at us.

I don’t bother correcting her. I know one day that will be my title.

“Doctor Griffin,” Matias greets her, before turning to me. “My brothers’ wives came to this office for their pregnancies.”

That makes me feel a little better.

“Follow me. Let’s see what’s going on, okay?”

I blow out a breath, and we follow her into the first room on the right. A table sits in the middle of the room, a large screen

to the left, and a picture of a baby in the womb is hanging on the wall to the right. It smells like a hospital, sterile and cold.

“I’ll be right back. Put this gown on. I’ll give you some privacy,” Doctor Griffin says.

She leaves, and I exhale. Matias helps me undress, then slides the itchy gown on. I lie down on the table, which is softer than I imagined it would be.

“Knock, knock.” Doctor Griffin pokes her head through the door. “Are we ready? I’m going to attempt an ultrasound, then a transvaginal ultrasound, to see how far along you are, get measurements, and make sure everything is on track, okay?”

I nod, gripping Matias’s hand. “Okay.”

He pushes my hair back. “Everything will be okay.”

First, she does the ultrasound, squirting cold jelly on my stomach, and I flinch.

“Sorry. I should have warned you.”

“It’s okay.” The wand slides around my stomach.

“Mmm, I can’t see much, which tells me you aren’t six weeks yet. You’re close. I see something here.” She clicks a few buttons, zooming in. “But I think we can get a better idea with the transvaginal ultrasound, okay?”

She wipes off my stomach, and prepares the other wand, slicking it up before easing it inside me. I wince from the discomfort.

“You’re doing so well,” Matias whispers. “I’m so proud of you.”

“There we go,” the doctor announces, and Matias whips his head up to see the screen. “Right here. Looks like you’re five weeks along.” She moves the wand and tilts her head. “Well, look at that. One,” she points. “And two. Looks like you’re having twins.”

“Twins?”

“My brother and I are twins. This is... this is amazing. We’re having twins!” Matias shouts, tears filling his eyes as he

kisses me. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“I’ll know more later on to make sure it’s twins. It’s very early, but I’m optimistic,” the doctor informs.

My chest fills with joy, then a dark cloud settles over me when I think of Michael. I’m so thankful that the restraining order is against him, but I know it won’t stop him from doing whatever he has planned.

“Marry me,” he whispers into my ear, sliding something heavy on my finger. “Marry me, Sophie.”

“Yes.” I kiss him, doing my best not to cry. “Yes, always yes.” I look down at the massive diamond, the doctor smiling at us as he drapes the gown over my exposed area.

It isn’t a romantic proposal, but the moment couldn’t be more perfect.

I’m going to marry Matias Milazzo.

And not even Michael can stop me.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### *Matias*

It's been twelve weeks exactly. Sophie has officially made it out of the first trimester which means she wants to start telling people.

During these last twelve weeks, I've been digging into the house fire that took her parents' life. I want to be able to marry her, knowing I did everything I could to bring her peace and ease her mind about me. There are times when she falls quiet and won't look at me because I know there is a small part of her that believes I did it. I don't blame her at all, but I will be finding out everything I need to know today.

"Matias?" Gianni knocks on the door before opening it.

"Is Ella okay? Did the school call?"

"No, no, nothing like that. The detective is here."

I stand so fast, the chair hits the wall. "Bring him in."

A middle-aged man, with salt and pepper hair brushed back, steps into my office. He has a stone-hard expression on his face, paired with a sharp jaw and cold eyes. He looks like a cop.

"I'm not happy to be here, Milazzo. You're the big fish I was never able to catch."

I grab a stack of cash from my desk drawer and throw it at him. "And now?"

He grins, tucking the money into his pocket. "Happy as a clam."

"Thought so," I roll my eyes. "Did you bring what I needed?"

He sighs, running his fingers through his hair. "Yeah, but you need to know, for me this was twenty years ago. I remember the fire, but I might not remember a lot of details."

“That’s fine. Do you have the file with you?”

“Are you kidding?” He steps out of the way and my men begin to bring in boxes upon boxes.

My brows raise.

“You didn’t think an arson case that was never solved would be just a folder, did you?”

“I suppose not. I didn’t know what to expect.”

Ten boxes later, Detective Casey sits down, the only detective still alive who was on the case. “What do you want to start with first?”

“I want to see pictures of the crime scene or any family photos. Sophie thinks it’s mafia-related, and I want to clear my name but bring her peace, too.”

“Smart woman. I think it is, too, but I don’t think it’s you. You have different... tactics. You aren’t loud and messy. You wouldn’t start a fire. You wouldn’t want the attention. You’d keep your intent quiet. You’d kill with silence. This isn’t your doing. I have proof of that.”

“I appreciate that, but I want to know who did this. I don’t only want to clear my name.”

“I don’t know what you’ll find. I’ve been over these boxes a hundred times. There’s nothing there.”

“Let’s see, shall we.”

Detective Casey nods, sliding over the first box. “This contains all crime scene photos.” He scoots over another. “These are any personal belongings we could find.”

I open the first box. “Fuck,” I curse with an ache when I see the first photo lying on top of the folders.

It’s a picture of the house. I remember this now. It’s all coming back.

I was there, but not in the way Sophie thinks.

“Oh my god,” I grumble, sagging against my desk. “I was so young when this happened. I barely remember it, but seeing

this house..." I trail off, the two-story family home staring at me in the face. Half of it is in ash, nothing but rubble, and the other half is blackened with soot. "It was me who pulled Sophie out of this fire. I was just a kid myself. I was young but I was driving by. I heard her screams. I placed her in the yard, and I ran because I knew if anyone saw me there, they would blame my family. I couldn't hardly see her face. It was covered in soot and ash. She was unconscious."

"Jesus Christ. You're a witness."

"I am not. You will not put me in the investigation when that would be all the press would need to blame me when I didn't do it. No."

"She needs to know you saved her."

"No, she doesn't. What are the chances of her coming into my home? Being my nanny, my fiancé?"

"It's odd how the universe works, doesn't it?" he questions, flipping through another folder. "Here are some family photos. Most are burnt."

He casually changes the subject while my head is still reeling. Memories come flooding back to me: the roar of the flames, the smell of smoke, the screams that pierced the air as she cried for help. We were always meant to find one another.

She was always meant to be mine.

"You with me?" Detective Casey nudges me with a question.

"Yeah, sorry." I shake out of my funk, or try to, but it's hard, knowing that our paths crossed so long ago. I flip through the stack of pictures he gave me, noticing nothing. I pass one picture, only for the image to click in my mind a second later. I stare at the photo of a photo, analyzing it. "Wait a minute." I narrow my eyes. The blaze burnt most of the picture. Her mom and Sophie are no longer in it, but a man, I'm assuming her father, is standing there like he has his arm wrapped around someone, probably Sophie's mom.

But it's the faint image of the man next to him that's sounding alarms. I can only see half of his face since the other

half of the picture is gone.

“I know this face,” I whisper, showing the picture to Casey. “I know it isn’t much, but I swear, I know him.”

“Who is it, then?” he asks. “I can’t get a decent recognition from this. I don’t think this would be enough to close the case.”

I swing open my door. “Gianni!” I call to him. I hear the quick taps of his shoes against the floor after he hears the urgency in my voice.

He stands in front of me, breathing hard and his eyes survey the room. “What’s the problem?”

“Do you know him?” I show Gianni the picture, knowing that if anyone would know anything, it would be him. He’s a little older than the Detective so he might know something we don’t.

He squints as he stares at the picture. I see it. The moment it dawns on him. “Where did you get this?”

I grab him by his blazer. “Who is it? It could be our only lead to find who burnt down Sophie’s house.”

“That’s your father’s old rival, Nolan O’Brien.”

“O’Brien? Head of the Irish mob?”

Gianni nods. “That’s him. He loves setting fires to anyone your father had business with. I didn’t know the details. I was too young then. You know how your father was.”

“A real asshole, until Carmine killed him,” I grumble, giving the picture to Casey. “But O’Brien hasn’t been relevant in years. Decades, even.”

“After the fire,” Casey says, as the obvious dawns on him. “He vanished. We couldn’t look into him because he was just gone. His entire organization seemed to vanish overnight.”

“Didn’t he have children?” I ask, just as Gianni punches a hole in the wall. “Gianni?”

“He did have children. One son.” He slides his eyes to me, guilt stretched across his face. “His name was Michael.”



My stomach drops. “Michael? As in Sophie’s ex, Michael?”

“It has to be. Why else would Michel be around? What if Michael planned to be with her all along? What if he planned to finish his father’s job? It makes sense, Matias. She is the one who survived and if Michael has the chance to breathe life back into the O’Brien name, bringing the mob back to the city, why wouldn’t he start with Sophie? The ultimate kill, the one that would give him so much power and respect because he finished what his father couldn’t.”

“Where is she? Where is Sophie? I need to see her now. Right now. This can’t wait.” I run out of the office, calling her name. “Sophie? Sophie!” I shout for her, but she doesn’t answer. “Where the fuck is my fiancé!” I roar, rushing into the bedroom. “Sophie? Sophie!”

“Matias, here. She left a note.”

I backtrack to the kitchen, where he is standing, holding a small piece of paper. I rip it from his hands and read.

*“Matias,*

*You were in the office and it seemed important so I didn’t want to bother you. I went to my mom’s to tell her about the baby. I’ll be back soon. I love you.*

*-Your Sophie.”*

I crumble the paper. “We need to find her. Now,” I snarl, knowing Michael will take the opportunity of her being out on her own.

When I find him, I’m going to kill him.

Death by flame.

It is only right to end this how it began.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

*Sophie*

“Mom, don’t cry. It’s okay.” I hold my mom, the only one I remember having while she cries. She is such a good parent and after all the shitty foster homes, her home was the only one that felt right.

“I’m just so happy,” she sniffles. “I just know how hard it was for you growing up and it took you a long time to trust us. I was so afraid you wouldn’t ever trust anyone enough to have this. You are so wonderful, and all I wanted was for you to be happy and loved like you deserve. Now, you’re pregnant with twins. My grandbabies. Oh! I’m going to be a grandma. I’m so excited,” she sobs as if she’s devastated, but it’s only because of how hard she’s crying.

“Good lord, Rachel. Let my baby girl breathe.” My dad pulls my mom away, and gives me a looser hug, one that allows me to breathe. His eyes are watering when he pulls away. “I’m so damn happy for you. There is no one else in this world who deserves happiness more than you.”

“Thanks, Dad,” my voice breaks and I place a hand on the small swell of my belly, a new habit I’ve formed.

“Who is this man? Do we know him? Oh, look at that rock. Do you see that, Dave?”

“How could I not,” my dad grumbles. “That man is making me look bad.”

“Oh, I love my ring, but I love you so much more,” my mom tells him, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

“I love you too,” he replies, then sets his sights on me. “So, who is the man that is marrying my daughter who I haven’t met yet?”

Oh, I know that tone.

“He is very successful,” I start carefully. “Very... well-known in the city. Well, you know that I’m a nanny for a wealthy man?”

“I do,” my mom inches closer, dying for the gossip.

“I’m marrying him. Matias Mil—az... zo,” I cough to try to cover up his last name but it doesn’t work.

My dad drops his cup of coffee on the floor. “No daughter of mine is going to be involved in the mafia. No way! Hell no. If Matias has a problem with it, he can come to me. My grandchildren will not be—”

“—Dad, Matias is a good man. He loves me. He loves the twins so much already, and respectfully, nothing you say will be able to change my mind. You’ll meet him and you’ll see why I love him so much.” I check the time. “I’m sorry, but I have to go. Can we make plans and have dinner together with Matias?” I eye my dad.

“I’ll have my gun out,” he says under his breath.

“Dave!”

“Well, I will.”

I sigh, kissing him on the cheek, then give my mom another hug. “I love you both. I’ll see you later.”

“Drive safe. Tell us when you get home.”

“I will.” I give them a final wave, before heading out the door.

Pressing the unlock button, I get into the car, buckle up, and begin my journey home. I feel better after seeing them. Life finally feels right. This is how it is supposed to be. This is what true happiness is.

I press a hand against my stomach, smiling at the fact that I’m already showing. I guess that’s what happens with twins.

“Where are you?” Matias’s voice comes through the speakers from the voicemail he left me. “You need to get home now. It was Michael’s father who burnt down the house. He is part of the Irish mob, Sophie. Please, get home. Michael is

going to complete what his father started. The plan was always you. He was going to kill you the moment you thought you had everything you ever wanted, but you do now. Please, answer your phone.” His voice breaks just as the message ends.

There are another six messages like that as I drive, listening to how panicked he is. Tears sting my eyes at his words, and fear replaces all the happiness I felt moments ago.

I press the audio message button. “I’m on the way home. I’m going the back way. I’m almost—” the car sputters. “What the hell?” The speed drops and the gas gauge is on E. “The car is slowing down. Matias, I have no gas. I had a full tank. I’ll need you to come get me. Please, hurry,” I cry. “I didn’t know. Oh my god, I didn’t know, but it makes so much sense. I love you, please—I’m sorry for ever doubting you.” I press send just in time because my phone dies a second later.

I get out of the car and immediately, I smell gas. A small puddle trickles out from underneath, proving I have a leak.

“Fuck,” I curse, just as a sharp pain strikes me over the head and darkness is all I see.

\*\*\*

### *Matias*

My heart is beating out of my chest as I rush to the car, not even bothering to change out of the jeans and t-shirt I’m wearing. Formal business attire is usually my go-to when I do things like this. When I kill people.

Fuck it. Michael doesn’t even deserve that.

“Speak to me, Gianni,” I say into the car, hearing him type away on a keyboard.

“Still searching,” he replies.

“Fucking hurry!” I snap, rage roaring in my ears. I feel panic rising too, but I can’t let that show. The panic in

Sophie's voice in the voicemail she sent me is echoing in my ears. I can't imagine the fear she's feeling right now, and I want nothing more than to bring her home. Safe.

"Matias," his calm tone doesn't mask the warning in his words. "I'm trying. Oh, it looks like her car is... in the middle of nowhere. I'm sending the coordinates now. I found out more about his father, as well. Apparently, after he was sent to prison by Sophie's father, he got out and went back to his dealings. He had planned to come back here, to Sophie, but he fell ill. I suppose he pawned off his failure of a son to finish his work."

"He won't," I manage to say quietly. He can't. He won't survive this.

The car inputs the location instantly, and I drive the fifteen minutes from my house. From our house. The fucking audacity to keep her so close to me. A mistake on his part.

The accelerator is revving anxiously as I whip the steering wheel to follow the barely noticeable, but fresh, tire tracks into the field. I drive down the unsteady path to find-

Not her car.

What the fuck?

I jump out, jogging over to the unfamiliar, rusty truck to see the tracker I'd placed in Sophie's car resting on the dashboard, along with a paper. I grab it, looking at the scribbles.

"Won't her parents love to see what should have happened to their Sweet Sophie?" I read aloud, my heart dropping. I scramble back into the car. "Gianni! Fuck! Send me her old address, now!"

I can't believe he fucking played me.

Is she already gone? Did I fail her like I promised I never would?

"She will be okay, Matias. Just drive. I already contacted the PD, and all deputies have been removed from your route."

My hands are shaking on the wheel as I follow the roads through the country into the suburban neighborhoods. I can't

help but think about how I'd give anything to Sophie, even this.

Any life you want, my love. Just give me the chance. Please, be here.

\*\*\*

### *Sophie*

When I come to, I'm tied to the driver's seat. My vision is blurry, and unconsciousness is still trying to take hold of me. I groan, squeezing my eyes shut to clear the fog. A splashing sound has me turning my head, and that's when I see him.

Michael.

He's smiling while pouring gasoline all over my car. The windshield blurs his face as he continues to pour. When he sees me, he grins, but the toothy smile he gives me has a slither of terror swimming down my spine.

"You're awake. Good. Don't bother trying to unlock the doors. You can't. I disabled the locking system and I have your keys. You're locked in." He dangles the keys in the air and tosses them into the woods.

"Why are you doing this?" My body is tied so tight against the chair, I can barely move my arms. "Please," I sob. "I'm pregnant. Don't do this, Michael. Please."

He slaps the driver's side window. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!" he yells, licking his lips, sounding like a complete madman. "Be quiet. I'm so fucking sick of you. Do you know how hard it was to pretend to want you? You're disgusting. All I thought about was avenging my father. Every day. But then you grew on me, and I wanted to have fun with you. I had hoped to at least fuck you before I killed you." He douses the window in gasoline again and I flinch, for a moment thinking it was going to hit me. "Maybe after," he grins, a psychopathic glee twisting his lips.

"Fuck you!"

He hits the window again. “No, fuck you! Fuck you and your family. Your father took everything from mine. He was a sorry excuse for a lawyer and ratted my dad out to the cops. When my father realized he didn’t kill you, he told me I could be the leader of the family if I finished what he started, to have people fear us once again. My dad couldn’t do the honors because he is sick, so I’m on a time constraint, Sophie. But don’t worry.” He lights a cigarette and inhales, blowing smoke against the window. “It won’t be quick. You’ll finally feel what your backstabbing father felt when he died. And to make it better, one of your boyfriend’s own runners betrayed him and kept me close. Isn’t that horrible for you? Unfortunately, he got most of my guys killed a few months back at the docks, but that’s neither here nor there. The real cherry on top is that I’m killing Milazzo’s heirs. How wonderful is that? The O’Brien name will be on top again.”

“He’ll never let you live,” I yell, fighting against the ropes. “He will kill you.” I spit.

“Not if I kill him first, during his heartbreak.” He flicks the cigarette onto the car and the entire vehicle goes up in flames. “Burn, you fucking bitch.” He steps away to the other side of the road, watching and waiting for the flames to burn me to death.

The heat paralyzes me. Smoke swirls its way through vents. It’s getting harder to breathe. The heat is getting stronger, the flames brighter. My head is pounding. The orange tendrils lick through the vents, creeping closer.

Flashes of the house fire flicker in my mind, the past and present colliding. I cough so hard, I taste blood in the back of my throat, and my head lulls to the side.

I can’t move.

I can’t think.

\*\*\*

*Matias*

The tires screech as I hurl the car around the corner, seeing a shadowy figure at the dead end of the dark road. It's Michael. He's backing away from her red beetle, but I can't see her.

Where the fuck did he put her?

I assume she's hidden somewhere, and maybe he's just playing with me by being out here with the empty vehicle. But before I have a moment to catch my breath, her car is on fire. The blindingly bright flames lick against the red-hot metal as I pull up, and then I finally see her. In the car.

Fuck.

I throw the car in park several paces away from them and I jump out, running over to see him grinning like a maniac. The light from the fire flickers across his features, causing shadows to dance across his eyes and morphing his face into something more monstrous than before.

It's disturbing, even for me.

He turns to me, and I watch the arrogance melt away as I unclip my gun from its holster on my hip and raise it to his knees. I won't kill him that easily. But I'll fuck him up a bit.

"Perfect timing! You're up next." He taunts me with that twisted grin as I keep walking toward him, cocking a bullet in the chamber and shooting twice, once in each kneecap, and he falls to the ground, wailing. "Shit! Fuck!"

I feel tears stinging my eyes as I look back to Sophie. She's not moving in there, and I don't have a lot of time. I can barely see her from the smoke that's building inside the cab of her car. I cock my gun again, and shoot into the car, away from her, shattering the glass as plumes of smoke billow out. I reach in, pleading for her to be okay.

\*\*\*

*Sophie*



A gunshot rings out, I think—or maybe it's just my imagination. I'm losing consciousness.

Glass shatters, a few pieces hitting against my skin.

“Sophie! I'm here, okay? I'm right here. I'm going to get you out. Hold on for me, baby. Hold on.” The rope tying me to the driver's seat is loosened and Matias pulls me out of the window, since the doors won't open. “I got you. Sophie, hey, look at me. Open those beautiful eyes. Come on.”

I do as he says, and another memory tickles my mind, taking me back to the day a stranger saved me. I smile when I realize Matias never had anything to do with the fire.

“It was you,” I rasp. “You saved me then, and you're saving me now. You were always meant to be my hero.”

Manic laughter has me turning my head. Micheal is crawling on the ground, trying to get to me and Matias, but Gianni is right next to him, following his crawl with small steps.

“Throw him in the car and let him burn. I want him to know what hell feels like.”

“You got it, Matias.” Gianni picks a bleeding Michael up, and throws him against the car. The flames ignite his clothes, and the screams I hear aren't from my parents.

They aren't mine.

They are his.

And I never thought screams would sound so damn good.

“I'll always save you, Sophie. Not even fire will keep me away from you.”

I notice his skin is red and raw from being burnt. “Your arms—”

“—Are fine. As long as I can still hold you, I'll gladly take all scars and endure every flame.”

I press my head against his chest. It's over. I can finally be free of my past and look forward to a future that burns bright.

# Epilogue

*Matias*

*Ten months later*

I have scars to match Sophie's now. My forearms got burnt the moment I pulled her out of the car, but I wasn't going to let fire stop me. I'm glad I didn't, because now, I have a beautiful family.

"They still look like potatoes to me," Ella says, staring at the twins in their crib.

Both boys.

Angelo and Andre.

"They do not look like potatoes," I scoff, tilting my head at my sons.

They do, but I won't admit that. They have the chubbiest cheeks.

"Did you check everything off your list for today?" I ask her.

Ella rolls her eyes. "What is this, my first rodeo?" she lifts her arms in annoyance.

"Where do you learn these sayings?"

"That isn't important. I called Grandma and Grandpa. They will be here soon for dinner. Gianni is watching security. Mommy is still sleeping."

"She deserves all the rest after dealing with these two." I lift Angelo into my arms, then Andre, taking a seat in the rocking chair. "It's important that a man doesn't see taking care of his children as a burden, but a gift. Sophie, or any woman for that matter, shouldn't have to do all the work. You remember that, Ella Bella."

“Boys are gross. I don’t want babies.” She sticks her tongue out. “Yucky.”

“That’s right. Keep that in mind.” I watch her as she goes back to ogling her little brothers when my phone rings. I pull it out of my pocket to read the exact name I’ve been waiting to see for months.

“Dovnic. How... are things?” I ask awkwardly. I’m working on my small talk, which Sophie claims is good for me.

“I know you asked about the O’Briens. Apologies for it taking so long. But, I wanted to personally announce the good news that they’ve been taken care of.”

I feel a grin grow on my face. “As in?”

“Don’t be disgusting, Milazzo. Just know that they’ll no longer be bothering your family.”

“Thank you, Dovnic. I hope your son is healing well,” I add, remembering the grim state that I last saw him in.

“He is.”

“Well, I guess this means we can go back to being enemies,” I smirk. He laughs and we say our goodbyes, on better terms than our families have been in ages. I look back to Ella, who is peering out the window at one of the younger sons of my staff running around in the yard, and I narrow my gaze. “What did we learn about boys, Ella Bella?”

The door opens a second later, and a sleepy Sophie is there, rubbing her eyes. “And what do you think you’re telling my daughter?”

Sophie has also adopted Ella, legally. She is officially Ella’s mom in the government’s eyes.

“That boys are gross.”

“Ugh, they are.”

Ella giggles. “But you love Daddy.”

“I do. Not all boys are gross, but those are hard to find. I got lucky.”

“I hope I get lucky one day, too,” Ella says, then crinkles her nose. “No, never mind. No, thanks.”

I chuckle at her indecision just as the doorbell rings.

“I got it!” she screams, running down the hall to let grandma and grandpa in.

Sophie’s mom likes me, but her dad is harder to win over. I don’t think he likes my profession very much, but he is a good father and grandparent. That’s all that matters to me.

“Are you ready to get married tonight, Sweet Sophie?”

She kisses the top of Andre’s head, then Angelo’s. “I’ve been ready. Finally make me yours, Matias.”

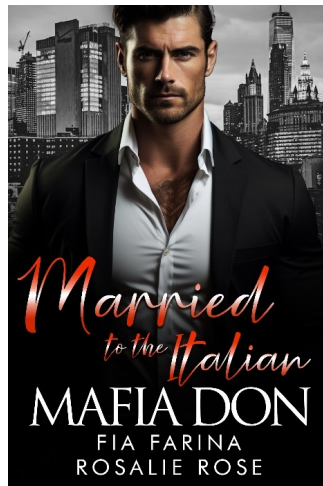
I look at her dead in the eyes while holding my sons.  
“Sophie, you’re already mine. You were made for me. Married or not, our souls are fated, and not even death could take that away, because in another life, the next life, you will be mine. For eternity. In all the lives.”

**THE END**

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## YOU MAY ALSO LIKE

### Married to the Italian Mafia Don



#### *Rose*

Even after all of these years, this may be the nicest ball I've ever attended.

*Ball, gala, charity event—whatever the hell it is.* They're really all the same, no matter which country you're in, no matter what name adorns the fancy letterhead addressed to the fancy guests. I've gone to events just like these the whole world over. But at least here in my home country of Italy, I have to admit they feel the most like I belong. Like I *could* belong.

*But you don't, Rose,* whispers a cool voice from somewhere in the deep recesses of my mind. *Look around—the only reason you fit in is because you've carefully made yourself to look just like them. The only reason you fit in is because it's your job to.* Because that's how I survive.

And I have made myself to look like them, that much is true. My couture may not be real, but it's certainly convincing, even to the trained eye. My jewels may not be real either, but they have the same sparkle, and they hold the same light. And my dyed-blond hair, bound up in an elegant knot, may not be in its natural color; but I wear it like I was born with it.

Because I have to. I have no choice.

I stand on the second floor mezzanine of the Milanese villa, gazing down at the partygoers as they mill about in their pretty gowns and pretty suits, the conversation buzzing in a dozen different languages. I understand snippets. German, Dutch, French, English. All of it equally as boring as the rest.

Outside the arched glass windows, beyond the lines of cypress trees and carefully-trained wild grape vines, lies the city, a bed of glitter enveloped in a balmy, humid summer night. The whole place smells like money, like French perfume and luxury cars, like the fresh flowers overspilling their five-foot vases and barrel-aged summer valley wines.

I try not to squirm, not to itch. But part of me wishes I were just here to be like them. Careless, and carefree. Speaking with friends, laughing over the Michelin-star hors d'oeuvres; part of me wishes I had an elegant man on my arm and a big glittering rock on my left ring finger. A Lamborghini parked on the long winding driveway; a mansion of my own waiting somewhere outside the city.

But I have none of this. And no matter how many galas like these I attend, it's astronomically unlikely that I ever will. But what I *do* have is a shitty studio flat in a bad part of town—and the kind of debt and enemies that bear down with the persistence of a rushing tide. Even if I might want to, I can't afford to slow down. I'm always hungry, always running. Always looking for the next mark. Always dodging the last one.

And as I bring the fresh, glittering Lambrusco to my lips, feel the first prickle of sweet, cold, dark red wine brush my tongue—I spot him. The mark. My heart halts hard in my chest.

There's an immediacy to my sense of him, like I've met him before. Or seen him, maybe, in a movie or in a dream...

I lean forward over the balcony, cocking my head for a better look. He's tall, dark-haired and eyed, clearly an Italian himself. He's speaking to a semi-circle of party goers, all of whom seem to be hanging on his every word.

Even without hearing him speak, I can tell he's the kind of man who spell-casts when he opens his mouth—a silver tongue, and a very handsome one at that. *No, not handsome. Beautiful.* Beautiful, and fierce. Even from here I can see the dark glitter of his eyes, the storminess held inside them. Usually I look for the duller sort of mark, the stupider or drunker man. This one, at once, feels as dangerous as they come.

And yet...I'd be lying if I said I wasn't drawn to him. His elegance is subtle, but clear for the trained eye. The watch he wears is handsome and understated, but I know at once how much it's worth. There's not even a brand marker for a watch that fine. Handmade and custom, I can tell it's Belgian and one of a kind.

I've fenced one on the black market before, to an underground jeweler in Nairobi. It paid my rent for two years.

I can feel myself practically drooling over it, over him, when a man bumps into my shoulder and sloshes my wine.

I gasp, more dramatically than I need to, and recoil from the man. Rather than let annoyance or anger cross my face by reflex, I make my eyes big and wide, and give my lower lip a tremble.

"Oh, God, what a fool I am," splutters the man in fragmented, halting Italian.

From his accent and my own mother, I know immediately that he's American. Blonde, much too tall, and a bit more muscular than most of the more relaxed guests, he's already looking around for the waitstaff.

"Look at me, I'm a bumbling moron." He mutters in English.

*What an odd man.* But my eyes and nose don't mistake what clings to him like cologne: *money*. He's dripping with it. His suit, his rings, his watch, his shoes; even that haircut screams wealth. And of course, he's here, of all places. He must be made of money. I'm already picturing some kind of lime-green sports car, out of place among the more shadowy, sleek, understated European luxury of all the others. *You really do have to love an American.*

The man has successfully waylaid a server, whom he's hassling for a linen napkin. I'm standing beside the banister, watching with more amusement than I should be, when he turns and dabs the spatter of red wine from my arm, muttering curses and apologies alike under his breath.

"Really, it's no trouble," I say, softening my voice to that helpless pitch that men so seem to love. "You missed my dress and my shoes, and that's really all that matters."

"Come on, you're too kind," he says. He's holding my hand in his as he sops up the last of the wine. Then his eyes jump to mine—his own are bright; sky-blue. "You speak English."

"Oh, yes," I say with a laugh. "Most of us learn it quite young over here."

"Right, right," he says, putting his palm to his forehead and blushing. "I'm an idiot. In the U.S., we don't do that. Teach the other languages, I mean. Not until we're a lot older, and by then we're usually too stupid and lazy to pick it up, anyway. Sorry. I'm Ben, by the way." He seems to realize he's still holding my hand and laughs as he shakes it. Finally, he releases me, but it's with hesitation. "Look, I'm really sorry about that. I was in a hurry..."

"Is that so? To whom? To where?" I ask with curiosity, smiling and averting my gaze—flirtatious but shy—as the man, Ben, snags a fresh glass of wine for me from a passing waiter. "Aren't you already at the event?"

"Oh, yes," Ben laughs, saluting me with his whiskey. "It's only that I, uh..." He blushes again, boyish this time, almost endearing. "Well, let's just say—I, uh—well, I made a stupid bet with a very smart man."



*Interesting.* “And lost, presumably?”

“Badly. I’m here to make apologies in person for not... well, this is embarrassing—but not paying out at the time of the loss. I had to move some assets around.” At this, he throws back his head and laughs. The sound is an unselfconscious boom that turns heads, but Ben doesn’t seem to notice. This man must have even more money than I’d originally thought—not because he’s not liquid in his assets, but because he has no shame at all in sharing that with me. A poorer man would never speak like this, much less with a stranger. “Anyway, I’ve got it all in order now and the money’s been sent, of course, but don’t you ever just want to save face in person?”

“I understand completely.” No other words in the English language loosen a man’s lips and inhibitions so quickly. Or so I’ve experienced. But now I’m more interested in the man at this party who has not only just acquired a fresh little tip from this American, but who inspires such fear and punctuality in him. “You’ll have to show me this man of yours, so I know not to make any ill-advised bets with him.”

Ben laughs, then looks over the banister. To my surprise, he raises his whiskey glass to discreetly implicate none other than the handsome mark I was watching before. “That’s him. His family is in European cars. Well, they’re in a bit of everything. The Rossi’s? But they’re best known for the cars.”

*Forget the cars,* I think, studying this Rossi man anew. *I have my eyes on that watch.* And whatever else he’s got up his sleeve. “What’s his name?”

“Dante. Dante Rossi.”

“Well, now I know not to argue with the man.” I manage to rip my eyes from him, from Dante, and return them to Ben. I flutter my lashes at him and give him a demure little smile. “Well, anyway. It was a pleasure meeting you, Ben. I think I need to go get some air. These things always get so stifling once the crowd arrives.”

“Oh, please—let me take you outside.” His face is filled with alarm the instant he realizes I’m going to leave him. *Easy. All too damn easy.* “It’s the least I can do after spilling your

wine all over you. Even if it wasn't on your dress or your shoes," he adds, with a more charming smile. "The gardens here are remarkable—I can show you around."

*Idiot*, I think amusedly. *Men are so easy to trap*. Another thing I've learned over the years: make a man think he came up with the idea, and he'll fight for it to the death. And *he knows the place?* That changes just about everything. I thought I'd make a few months' rent tonight—but I might be in the market for much, much more.

"Well," I say bashfully. "If you insist..."

"And I do." He offers his arm and I giggle softly, noticing the light in his eyes when I do. *God, he thinks he's got me, just like that*. "The garden, then?"

"Actually," I say, tilting my head at him coyly. "I think I'd like to see more of the house. These old places are always so full of secrets. I don't suppose you'd know where to find them?"

His eyes dance. "You," he tells me, "are in luck tonight." And for the first time this evening—well, I think he's right.

**END OF SAMPLE**

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