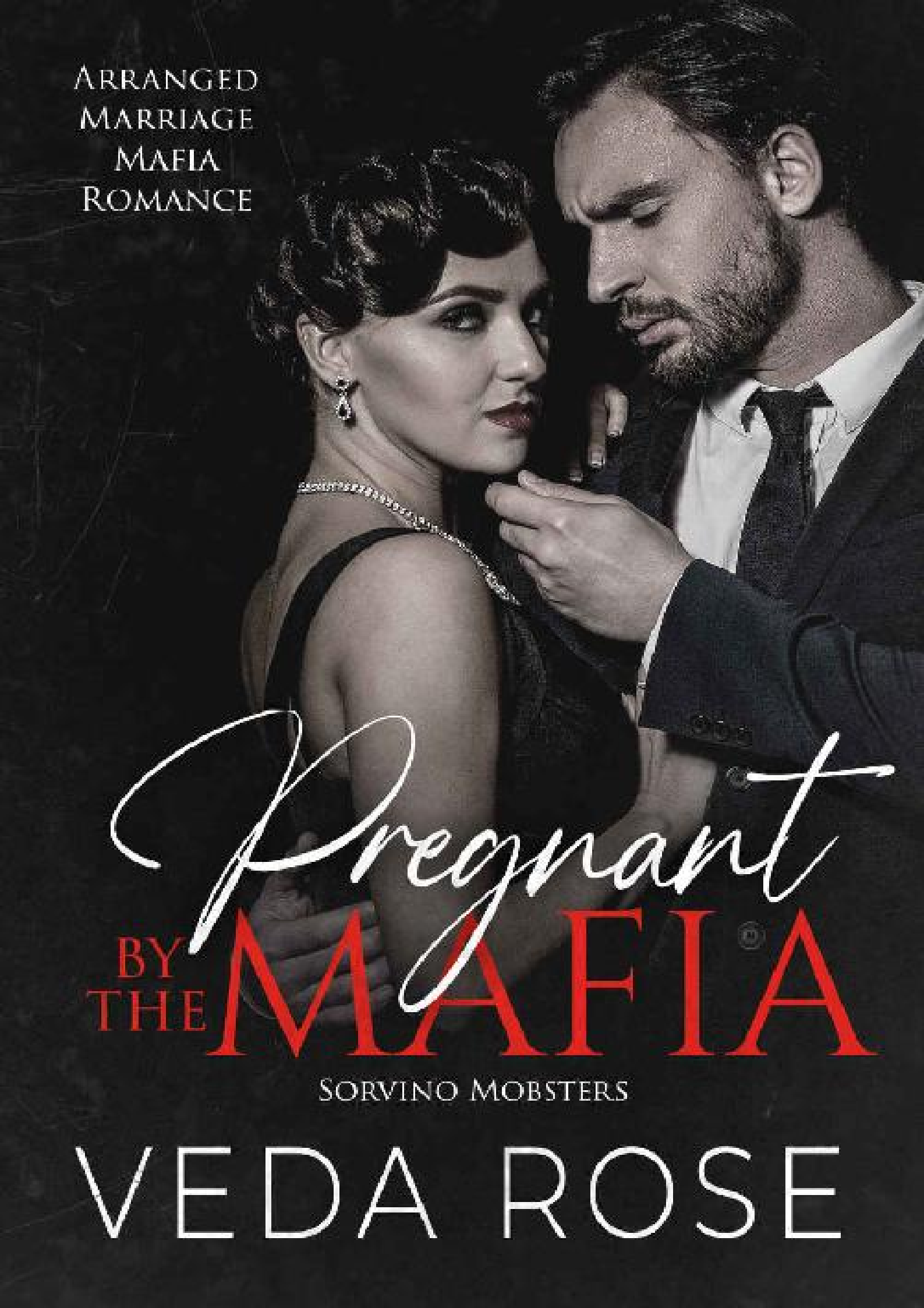


ARRANGED
MARRIAGE
MAFIA
ROMANCE



Pregnant

BY
THE **MAFIA**

SORVINO MOBSTERS

VEDAROSE

PREGNANT BY THE MAFIA

Arranged Marriage Mafia Romance

Sorvino Mobsters Book 6

Veda Rose

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Contents

[Chapter 1 - Vittoria](#)

[Chapter 2 - Ivan](#)

[Chapter 3 - Vittoria](#)

[Chapter 4 - Vittoria](#)

[Chapter 5 - Ivan](#)

[Chapter 6 - Vittoria](#)

[Chapter 7 - Ivan](#)

[Chapter 8 - Vittoria](#)

[Chapter 9 - Ivan](#)

[Chapter 10 - Vittoria](#)

[Chapter 11 - Ivan](#)

[Chapter 12 - Vittoria](#)

[Chapter 13 - Ivan](#)

[Chapter 14 - Vittoria](#)

[Chapter 15 - Ivan](#)

[Chapter 16 - Vittoria](#)

[Chapter 17 - Ivan](#)

[Chapter 18 - Vittoria](#)

[Chapter 19 - Vittoria](#)

[Chapter 20 - Ivan](#)

[Chapter 21 - Vittoria](#)

[Chapter 22 - Ivan](#)

[Chapter 23 - Vittoria](#)

[Chapter 24 - Ivan](#)

[Chapter 25 - Vittoria](#)

[Chapter 26 - Ivan](#)

[Chapter 27 - Vittoria](#)

[Chapter 28 - Ivan](#)

[Chapter 29 - Vittoria](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by Veda Rose](#)

Chapter 1 - Vittoria

I've been home for a week, and it's as though nothing has changed at all. My sister Kira got pregnant in college and shipped off to Sicily to learn to be a proper chef, only to be welcomed back recently as if nothing happened. Luigi is still the golden boy of our family that can do no wrong, just like when we were young. And then there's me, the self-sufficient one who's always just 'there.'

I was always told I was an easy child. Though because everyone acted like I wasn't there, I don't think what I said or did mattered anyway. I mean, I know my family loves me, but they don't consider my opinion to have any weight. So, I withdrew from them, immersed myself in books, and focused on getting good grades.

Okay, maybe some things have changed. For example, I've just graduated top of my class and have my law degree in hand. It has to bear some leverage when I approach Alessandro about helping with the family business. I want them to take me seriously, and what better way to prove it than by showing what a hard-working, intelligent person I am? I mean, I bet I can even run circles around Frankie now.

I'm going to ask him today at my graduation party that my father is hosting. I know he will arrive any minute, and I'm ready to bend his ear and get him to accept my help for the family business. I'm ready to make my mark.

I step out into the garden, and my family and a few guests are already milling around. The tables are set out in a giant U shape. Alessandro will, of course, sit at the head of the table with me and my father, Sonny. His parents will probably sit with us as well as Katya.

My father smiles as he sees me. "There's my superstar. Are you pleased with everything?"

I kiss both his cheeks. "It's perfect, Papa, thank you."

“Anything for my princess,” he gushes, stroking my hair out of my face. I pull away.

“Papa, leave my hair.”

“Show your face, honey. You’ve got such a beautiful face,” he says.

“Papa, please don’t embarrass me today. I want to show everyone how I’ve grown up and am ready to start working for the family.”

“This again,” he sighs. “I told you, you need to open up your own firm. Alessandro will fund it. You don’t need to be involved in the family business.”

I roll my eyes. “Enough, Papa. Let’s just get through today, okay?”

I lead him to the head of the table, and we sit side by side, standing only when guests come to greet us. I feel nervous, I’ve always blended into the background, but today, I’m the center of attention. Everyone is congratulating me and saying how proud they are of me. I see there’s a gift table that’s slowly piling up with boxes and envelopes.

When Alessandro arrives, my father hurries to greet him and escort him to where I’m standing. I’m seated next to him, which I deliberately arranged.

The food comes out, and soon, everyone is talking loudly while they eat. I eat quietly, waiting for Alessandro to turn his attention away from Katya. He glances at me and smiles. “What?”

“I want to discuss my future,” I say sternly.

My father instantly groans from my right. “Vittoria, this is not the place....”

“It’s the perfect place,” I say, turning back to Alessandro. “I want to become the family’s lawyer. I want to be part of the family business.”

Alessandro chuckles. “Tori, you’ve just worked so hard to get a legit degree all on your own. You don’t want to taint your name by getting involved with the kind of things we do.”

“On the contrary, that’s exactly what I want to do,” I say hurriedly before my father can shush me. “I think I can be a valuable asset to the family.”

Alessandro glances over my head at my father and then sighs. “Tori, after we lost your mom to the other family, what they did to her... I don’t want to put you in danger and cause your father that kind of heartache. It wouldn’t be right.”

“I can work behind the scenes, help work around legality issues. I graduated top of my class,” I insist.

“And I’m really proud of you, Tori, I really am. But you have a shot at a normal life, unlike the rest of us mixed up in this business.” Alessandro says, and before I can argue further, he puts a hand on my shoulder. “That’s my final word on the matter.”

Disappointed, I turn back to my food. I mostly pick at it, and my father nudges me when Alessandro is preoccupied. “Don’t be a brat, Tori. Enjoy the day. We’ll find you something to do soon enough.”

I nod and give him a sad smile.

As usual, it’s as though no one realizes I exist. They talk over each other, drink, eat, and are generally merry while I wallow in my self-pity with a sad smile.

When it’s time to leave, my father insists I walk Alessandro to his car because, apparently, he’s donated a generous gift to me. I walk next to Alessandro and Frankie, who are joking with each other. Dominic and Sofia are already in their car, and I don’t see Carmine and Arianna anywhere, so I assume they’ve left. I glance back at the gate where my father has paused to speak with my Uncle Romero.

When I look back, I see a tinted car driving slowly down the road. I glance at the plates before the window rolls down, and a gun is shoved out.

Alessandro has also seen it, and he pulls me down with Katya. The gun goes off, and bullets fly everywhere. I put my hands over my ears and wait until the squealing tires spin-off. We all stand up, and Alessandro calls, “Is anyone hurt?”

“Sonny! Sonny!” My Uncle Romero calls, and my blood runs cold. We all turn and see my father lying in a pool of his own blood with my uncle hovering over him. “Someone get an ambulance.”

Frankie hurries to him. “There’s no time. Alessandro, help me.”

“Get inside and stay inside,” Alessandro yells at me as he hurries to where my father is. I hesitate, but the glare I get from my uncle makes me rush inside and into the house. I pace up and down the entrance hall.

I can’t just stand here and do nothing. I take out my phone and search through my contacts before I dial Danny’s number. He’s the only cop I know who might help me.

“Danny, it’s Tori. I need you to run some plates for me, no questions asked,” I say. “Can you do that?”

“As long as it’s nothing illegal, sure,” Danny says. “Give it to me.”

I recite the plates to him, and he goes quiet for a moment. “Hmm, I’d stay away from this, Tori. These guys have ties to the mafia.”

“Which one? Which family?” I ask. “Please, Danny, I need to know.”

Danny sighs and says, “You didn’t hear it from me, but it’s the Volkov family. The head guy is Ivan Volkov, and that’s all I can tell you.”

“That’s all I need,” I say. “Thank you, Danny.”

I hang up and grab my brother’s car keys. I hurry to the garage and get in, heading straight to the hospital. When I walk into the waiting room, Alessandro gets up angrily. “Tori, I ordered you to stay at the house.”

“I found out whose behind the attacks,” I say quickly. “I got the plates and ran them through a friend.”

Alessandro’s frown remains, but he takes me aside. “Who was it?”

“Ivan Volkov’s family, that’s who the vehicle belongs to,” I say. “I want to help get revenge.”

“You’re to stay out of this, Tori,” Alessandro growls. “This is not yours to handle.”

“He’s my father,” I spit, and Alessandro is about to say something else when a doctor comes out. “Mr. Sorvino?”

Alessandro goes to him, and they talk in hushed tones. I go to stand by Luigi, who is glaring daggers at me. I ignore him as I watch Alessandro. The doctor leaves, and Alessandro comes over to us. We all huddle in as he speaks, “Sonny is being put in a medically induced coma. It isn’t looking good, and they don’t think he will make it. I’m sorry, guys.” Alessandro looks at me. “If your information is good, I’ll send my message to the Volkov family.”

My heart breaks, but I swallow my tears. I need to focus now to enact my revenge. My lips draw into a thin line as the men continue talking.

“Why would they attack us?” Luigi asks quietly.

“Probably because of how much we’ve expanded. We’ve united several families. They wanted an alliance with us at one point, but they might see us as a threat. But for me, this is an eye for an eye, and I will have men from Miguel’s family send a personal message to Ivan The Bear Volkov.”

“Why’s he called the bear?” I ask stupidly.

Everyone stares at me, and Alessandro shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter. What matters is you shouldn’t be involved in this.”

“He’s my father, and this is my family too. I am not backing out now.” I cross my arms.

Alessandro looks at Luigi. “Go home, both of you. I’ll send additional security to the house to keep you safe. When I hear something, I’ll call you both.” He looks at me pointedly. “But the decision of what to do is mine and mine alone, as head of this family. You will both respect that.”

I nod, and Luigi takes my arm, leading me out of the hospital.

Chapter 2 - Ivan

My favorite meal of the day might be dinner, but lunch at my mother's restaurant is always worthwhile. What I hate is being interrupted while I'm eating, so when my brother Leonid comes into the restaurant carrying a soggy box, I'm praying for his sake that it's not coming my way.

When he puts it on the table, I don't look up as I say, "I'm eating."

"It's Uncle Dimitri," he says quietly. "Or at least a piece of him."

I sigh and wipe my mouth on a napkin. I glance at my cousin Evgeni who is eating beside me. "Did I not just say I'm eating?"

"It's from the Sorvinos," Leonid says, and I look at him and push my plate to the side.

I pull the box towards me. The soggy bottom leaves a disgusting streak of wetness on the table. I open the box and see the hand of my Uncle, wedding ring and all, sitting neatly in the box. The blood has soaked the bottom, and there can be no doubt that he's dead. I take out the hand and examine it before I look at Leonid. "He was utterly useless anyway. All the man did was drink vodka and fuck painted whores."

I set the hand down on the table next to me, push the box away and pull my plate back to me. I continue to eat, mulling over the message from Alessandro Sorvino.

Leonid sits opposite me. "The messenger said Don Sorvino says to stay away from his family and those under his protection."

"Isn't that sweet," I say snidely.

"Should we tell our people that we're at war with them," Evgeni asks.

“Always so quick to make a rash judgment when it’s better to think things through first.”

I eat some more of my fish, enjoying the flavors. It reminds me of home.

Leonid shifts in his seat. “I have a shipment coming in a few months, maybe seven. I’m not entirely sure. I’m waiting for confirmation. It’s going to bring in a lot of money.” He signals to the waiter to bring a glass for him. Once it’s set down, he pours from the bottle of vodka on the table. “Money we’ll need if we go to war.”

“War is costly,” I say, wiping my mouth again and sipping my vodka.

“So we will declare war?” Evgeni asks, clearly confused.

“No, but I have a message for Don Sorvino. One that I will personally deliver to him.” I stand up, and both my cousin and adopted brother stand up. “I’ll do it alone.”

“Is that safe?” Leonid asks. He’s always been my right-hand man and second in charge. Originally he was my cousin, but his parents were killed in a bombing, and my parents took him in as my brother. I smile and place a hand on his shoulder. “It will be fine. You worry too much.”

I leave them behind at the table, pausing by the kitchen to bid my mother farewell with a kiss before I leave to go to my car. I glance at the time. I’ll be a little early, but I know the grocery store that Alessandro frequents. I’ll go there and wait for him to make an appearance so I can talk to him.

I once sought an alliance with his family, and I think about that as I start to drive. Once upon a time, I felt that if we united, we’d be unstoppable, but Alessandro married Katya, a rival family. Then his brother married the daughter of another family. His other brother married the daughter of an Argentinian Don, and then his cousin is getting married soon to another prominent Italian family. Their family is getting too big, and they need to be put back in their place, but perhaps

now is just as good a time to make an alliance. Avoid war with numerous families by uniting under one.

I park across the street from the grocery store and turn my engine off. I wait patiently. There are various ways to unite, and I'm sure Alessandro doesn't want a war any more than I do, although he may want revenge.

Alessandro and a woman walk into the grocery store, and I get out of the car, casually walking across the street and into the store.

It's a proper Italian grocer, not something I would frequent often, but I know Alessandro owns the building and the family here is good to him. I make it my business to know things about my enemies.

I stroll around the store pretending to browse. It's relatively large for a grocer, and I find Alessandro in the deli section with a woman I know is not his wife, Katya. I observe them for a moment. She's beautiful and definitely family. She has those eyes, and when she speaks to Alessandro, she has admiration and a smile to dazzle.

I walk over and stand next to him as though it's the most normal thing to do.

Alessandro doesn't look in my direction, but I feel the tension rise between us. I pick up a sausage and inspect it as I say, "I got your message, Don Sorvino."

The woman falls silent, and I can feel uncertainty roll off her. She knows this is business but isn't sure if she should stay or not.

"If my uncle dies, Pakhan Volkov, there will be a blood tribute to pay," Alessandro says, as though this is just everyday shop talk.

I smile. "I expected as much. You know these things happen between families from time to time. It's an unfortunate consequence of being in our line of business." I put the sausage back as a worker hurries to assist me. "I'll take some Mortadella and porchetta."

“How much?” the worker asks nervously.

“Half a pound each for my mother,” I say before looking at Alessandro, who is being helped by an older gentleman.

The woman he is with is staring at me with anger in her eyes. From the anger I see reflected there, I can only guess she’s closer to the man my guys shot than Alessandro is, perhaps his daughter.

“What do you want?” Alessandro asks, turning to me at last.

“Unity, wars are so expensive, especially the cost of lives lost. Perhaps a marriage between our families and an equal distribution of territories to ease over a transition,” I suggest, turning to watch the young man preparing my order.

“I would suggest trying the pancetta. Your mother would like it,” Alessandro says. “You can try every meat here, but you won’t be marrying anyone from my family, Ivan.”

“Alessandro,” I say, addressing him by his first name as well, “there must be unity, or more blood is going to be spilled.” I change the subject, hoping to jar him. “Who is your lovely companion? Surely Katya won’t be happy with you keeping company with such a beautiful woman in your spare time.”

Alessandro clicks his tongue. “Leave my cousin alone.”

“Ivan Volkov,” I hold my hand out to her. “What is your name?”

She glances at Alessandro, who gives a slight nod. She doesn’t take my hand, but she says coldly, “Vittoria Sorvino, you shot my father.”

I tilt my head to the side. “I do apologize for that. My men can be a little overzealous at times when I give orders. I had no intention of declaring war. This is not the first time I’ve asked to unite our families. Alessandro, we would be

indomitable if united. You seem to like marrying into other families to grow your power after all.”

Vittoria eyes me out, but I don't pay attention. My focus is on Don Sorvino and what his next move is.

“I won't be marrying any of my family members to you, Ivan, but we can talk of peace negotiations.”

Vittoria moves forward, and Alessandro puts a hand on her shoulder. “At my estate, you may bring guards if you wish but no more than three. I offer you this opportunity to discuss peace and assure you I won't take your life. Yet.”

I snort and take my packages from the young man. “Many people have tried Don Sorvino, but very few have gotten that close. I accept your offer to discuss peace negotiations. I will mull over what I want from these negotiations. Perhaps we can come to an agreement that suits us both.” I look at Vittoria. “I do hope your father pulls through, Miss Sorvino. Losing a father is a very difficult thing to deal with.”

Alessandro steps between us protectively. “Don't address her. You're here to deal with me.”

“Send me a date and time. You can leave a message for me at my family's restaurant in Brooklyn. I'm sure you know where it is.” I turn to the cash register to pay for my packages, but the owner shakes his head. “It's on the house.”

I smile. “Thank you for your kindness.” I leave through the doors, noting the guards that have appeared. I nod to them and cross the street to my car. I climb in and start the engine. I see Alessandro and Vittoria standing at the register, looking out where I am.

Some would call me foolish for approaching the Italian Don without security, but I know he's a traditional man who follows protocols. I'm sure I'll have a time and date for our meeting in the next few days. For now, I'm curious to know what my mother will make with the meats I got her. I pull away and join the traffic, thinking about Vittoria's angry eyes.

Chapter 3 - Vittoria

I don't care what Alessandro says, I'm going to be part of the family business. I've been preparing what I'm going to say the whole morning. The documents I have gathered are my academic records, reference letters, CV, and all my credentials. He can't deny that I will be good for the family. I run through what I'm going to say in my head once more.

I knock on his office door and hear his weary voice call, "Come in."

I open and step in. I'm dressed smartly and ready to mean business. His face instantly lights up. "Tori! What are you doing here?"

"I want to talk to you," I say as confidently as I can manage. "And I don't want you to say anything until I'm done."

He sits back and laces his fingers together. "Okay, go ahead."

I lay the documents on his desk. "Here I have my CV, credentials, reference letters, and academic records. I didn't go to school to become a goody-two-shoes lawyer who upholds the law, Alessandro. I want to run through these documents and explain how I will help the family."

He nods but doesn't say anything.

"Firstly, I have an excellent business mind, and while I might not be the most socially adept person, I'm able to find the loopholes that will allow our family to expand, loopholes that I don't think even Frankie can find..."

The door opens suddenly, and we both turn, and Alessandro holds a hand up. "I'm busy."

"It's Ivan Volkov," Carmine announces. "He wants to see you immediately."

Before we can say anything, Carmine steps back, and the man from the grocery store walks in. I'm struck again by how handsome he is. Tall, with a beard and with gorgeous eyes. He looks strong and mature, and I can't help but feel something very strange but strong draw me to him despite my obvious hatred toward him for shooting my father.

I stand behind Alessandro's desk and wait, irritated that I've been interrupted.

"Pakhan Volkov," Alessandro stands up, and they shake hands. "I wasn't expecting you."

"I prefer it that way," the Russian leader says. "Keeps us all honest, but my visit will be brief, Don Sorvino. I've come to deliver my request for the unity of our families."

"I haven't had time enough to work out which would be the best way forward," Alessandro says, motioning for Ivan to sit down, but he doesn't.

"I have my terms, and I'm afraid I'm not moved to negotiate on them."

"Oh?" Alessandro asks, cocking his head to the side. "That doesn't seem to be in the spirit of unity."

"I want to unite our families through an arranged marriage," he says, locking eyes with me.

I don't look away, his bright eyes seem to drink me in, and I almost feel lost in them.

"Who do you want to marry your daughter off to, then?" Alessandro asks. I'm sure it's more out of curiosity than anything else.

"I'm not marrying my daughter to anyone," Ivan says. "I want to marry Vittoria."

"Never," Alessandro doesn't even wait for him to finish his thought. "I will never agree to this."

"You don't have a choice, Don Sorvino. You have two weeks. I will plan the entire wedding. We'll have the reception

at a place of your choosing. If Vittoria doesn't show up to marry me, I will systematically kill off everyone in the Sorvino family and anyone affiliated with them. Do you understand my meaning?"

"I could declare war," Alessandro snarls, clenching his fists. "You don't just come into my home and make demands as though you own me."

"Let me be clear, Sorvino, you wouldn't even have time to declare war before each person you love would be dead. Besides, I don't want to own you, but your family is getting too big for its boots, and someone has to put you back in your place. We will evenly share the territories between our two families as payment for the wedding. Consider it a deal you shouldn't want to refuse." Ivan looks at me again. "Be there, Vittoria, or I will fulfill my promise."

Ivan turns and leaves, and I am not sure what's wrong with me when I admire his tight ass as he strides out of Alessandro's office even after hearing what's he willing to do to my family.

My desire to prove myself and to protect my family is stronger than fear though, so I turn to my cousin. "Alessandro..." I begin, but he cuts me off.

"Not now, Vittoria. We need to meet with the family," he says.

"I want to be in on that meeting," I say sternly. "It's my life."

Alessandro looks at me and then puts both hands on my shoulders. "I'm not marrying you off to that monster." He hits a button on the phone on his desk. "Carmine, summon everyone in the family to meet in half an hour at the bistro. Close it to other customers. This is urgent."

"Yes, sir," Carmine's voice comes through the speaker.

"Come," Alessandro gestures for me to walk ahead of him. "We need to get there as soon as possible."

I get in Alessandro's car, feeling nervous. I don't understand why Ivan insists on marrying me specifically. I mean, he must be like twenty-plus years older than me. I think of my father in his medically induced coma in the hospital, and my blood boils. How dare this Russian asshole assume he can own me on a whim?

We reach the bistro and don't have to wait long for the rest of the main family members to arrive. It's mostly immediate family from Alessandro and my side, as well as my cousins from my Aunt Louisa's side. Once everyone is settled, Alessandro stands to speak.

"The Volkov family insists that Vittoria marry Ivan Volkov in two weeks, or they will attack our family."

There is an uproar from everyone, some of the family members look at me, and I blush slightly, feeling once again like an outsider. Although I want my opinion to carry weight, I've always felt socially awkward, even with my family. As though I don't belong here.

Alessandro holds his hands up. "Obviously, we're not going to allow that to happen, so we must prepare for a war against the Volkov family."

"Alessandro," Luigi stands up, "it's going to be hard to fight a war against them. They're a powerful family."

"So are we," Alessandro says, "and I'll be dead before I let that man lay his hands on your sister."

"Yes, but maybe we should make them think they've won," Luigi says, glancing at me. "Tori is smart. She can handle herself. She could feed us information about their operations, affiliates, and territories, and we could break the Volkovs from the inside out."

"Are you mad?" Dominic roars. "You want to put Tori in danger in the hopes she can gather information from a dangerous man and feed it back to us."

Luigi holds his hands up. "I'm just saying that Tori could help us end this without bloodshed. On our side

anyway.”

I incline my head, and as everyone starts grumbling, Alessandro shakes his head. “I’m not placing your sister in the hands of this madman in the hope we can win that way.”

“I can do it,” I say, sounding more confident than I feel. “It’s just like a court case: taking what the opposition has and using it against them. It’s strategic, and Luigi is right. We could avoid so much bloodshed this way.”

Alessandro looks into my eyes. “Tori, I’m not arguing with you over this.”

“He is my father,” I say. “I want revenge more than even you do.”

Alessandro sighs and looks at Frankie. “Care to weigh in?”

“I agree with Luigi,” Frankie says with a sigh.

Luigi perks up. “She’s our best shot. She’s intelligent and knows how to get the information we need.”

“I can do this, Alessandro.” My voice is clear even though I feel timid.

Everyone falls quiet as Alessandro’s phone rings. He checks the number and holds his hand up before answering it. He steps away from everyone and has a quiet chat with whoever is on the phone. When he hangs up, he comes back to us and looks at all of us gravely.

“Tori. Luigi. Kira.” I know it’s bad news, and I try to brace myself. “Your father’s condition has taken a turn for the worse. They’re saying it could be weeks or even a few days, but they don’t think he’s going to make it.”

I clench my fists. “It’s all the more reason to take down Ivan. He did this.”

Alessandro watches me for a moment before he looks around at each of our family member’s determined faces. I know they’re all standing with me on this front.

“Fine,” he says at last. “You’ll marry Ivan, but you do know what that will entail, don’t you?”

“I’m prepared to do what it takes to save our family,” I say coldly. “I can do it.”

Alessandro sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “You need to promise me you’ll be careful, Tori. You need to understand that you grew up in an Italian family. Russians are different from us. They do things differently, and they’ll be suspicious of you from the beginning.”

“I understand,” I say quietly, “but it doesn’t matter if they’re Italian or Russian. All men are the same in the end, no matter where they come from.”

“I’ll send word to Ivan. I guess you’d best pick out your wedding dress, and I’ll have Bella and Aunt Louisa’s family prepare the reception at the estate. Remember, everyone, you need to be on your best behavior. It’s going to be tense and uncomfortable, but I want no fighting at the wedding or the estate afterward. Tori’s life very much depends on how we behave.”

Chapter 4 - Vittoria

The days leading up to the wedding are the most nerve-racking of my life. Under other circumstances, I'd consider myself lucky to be marrying someone as handsome and powerful as Ivan. As it is, all I do is go for gown fittings and sit through strategic planning meetings with my cousins and brother. I visit my father often, but I can do nothing for him except get my revenge.

Kira comes into my room on the day of the wedding to help me get dressed. Her belly bulges out in front of her, and she gives me a warm smile. "What you're doing is incredibly brave, Tori."

My siblings and I have never had an easy relationship, but I appreciate the sentiment.

"Today, I marry the man who essentially just made us orphans," I comment, looking in the full-length mirror.

"The makeup artist and hair stylists are here to get you ready," Kira says softly. "It would be best not to talk about these things in front of them."

I nod. "I know, Kira. I'm not a fool."

"Let's get you ready then," she waddles to the door and opens it. "You can come in."

Two women enter and immediately start fussing over me. They lead me over to a chair and begin unpacking tons of things. At least I was able to pick my own makeup artist and hairstylist. They speak in Italian, fast, and I listen to them gossip away about how lucky the groom is to have such a beautiful bride. I don't talk much, withdrawing inside of myself. I need to steel myself for what I'm about to do. I always wanted to help the family, but some things worried me. I don't think my family realizes I'm a virgin. It's less expected these days, and I didn't want to bring it up because I knew they'd then freak out, but what if Ivan is some sort of weirdo

in bed? What if he wants me to do weird things? I wouldn't even know where to start. Oh, God.

Kira seems to notice something is up and strokes my hand softly. "It's all going to be okay. If you need help, just call. It's not like you won't be able to see us once you're married."

I nod slightly then the makeup artist turns my head sharply with the tip of her finger, so I'm looking at her. "Hold still."

I sit still but keep my eyes downcast. It takes almost three hours to get the makeup and hair done. I'm wearing dark eyeliner, which makes my blue-gray Sorvino eyes really pop. My hair is gathered at the top of my head in a bun, and curls spill out of it and cascade down to my shoulders. I really should cut my hair shorter. I only ever keep it tied up anyway.

Kira helps me into my wedding gown. The bodice is figure-hugging, then the skirt balloons out like a proper princess dress. We get my heels on, clip my tiara into my hair, and add the veil.

Many people will wear a veil and wear white whether they are virgins or not. In my case, it's because I am. No one needs to know that, though.

There's a knock on the door, and it opens. Alessandro smiles at me. "You look absolutely gorgeous, Tori."

"Thank you, Alessandro," I say, smiling sadly at him. "I'm going to make you proud."

"I know you will," he kisses my cheek, but I can see the sadness in his eyes.

"Cheer up. We need to act like we're happy about this," I say, taking his arm. "Thanks for walking me down the aisle."

"It's my honor," he says as he escorts me out. "I hired a special limo just for the occasion."

I smile as we walk out together, a genuine smile because I know I am finally helping my family, even at this cost. The drive to the church is quiet, and my nerves are quickly setting in.

“Is everything set up at Kira’s villa for the reception?” I ask, fiddling with my bouquet.

“Yes, everything is perfect. We’ll show them how to throw a party,” Alessandro says as the limo stops outside the church. We get out, me with some difficulty, and then Alessandro takes my arm. Kira waddles up with Miguel on her arm and wishes me luck before she enters the church.

I wait nervously, and when the music starts, I walk slowly with Alessandro up the stairs and through the doors. Everyone is standing and watching as I walk. There are Russian family members to my right and my family to the left—a clear division.

I see Ivan standing at the front of the church, watching me. I can’t tell what he’s thinking, I’m not a mind reader, but I catch my breath. He looks exceptionally handsome in his three-piece suit. He has two groomsmen standing to his right, and there are two bridesmaids I don’t recognize to the right. One looks like him, perhaps a sister.

We reach the front, and Alessandro reluctantly holds my hand out for Ivan to take. Ivan nods and leads me to stand in front of the priest. It all happens so suddenly. We use generic vows, and I hardly listen to the priest lecture about marriage being an everlasting commitment. Suddenly Ivan is escorting me out of the church, and people are showering us with rice as we make our way to our limo.

We’re both silent as we drive toward Kira’s villa, it’s not far away, but I have nothing to say to him. As we get out, he turns to me. “At least pretend to smile for the photos. You’ll get used to the situation soon enough.”

A smile that probably looks like a grimace is all I can manage. We do wedding photos first, and I try to smile

naturally even though Ivan is quite serious. Then we're announced to the families and escorted into the garden, where again, the Russian and Italian families are sitting separately. Alessandro is seated at the head table with Katya, and Ivan and I sit so that Ivan and Alessandro are placed together, with me to Ivan's left and Katya to Alessandro's right.

The families talk, drink, and eat amongst themselves. There isn't a dance floor, and I almost feel as though that was done on purpose to avoid punches flying between drunk family members. What I do notice is that neither Ivan nor Alessandro drink alcohol. This is telling to me because it means they both don't want to let their guard down around each other.

While we are busy with dessert, Ivan asks me, "Do you like the wedding?"

"Not sure *like* is the adequate word here, but you've been very generous," I say politely, wiping my mouth on a napkin.

"Unfortunately, my daughter couldn't make it. She's only flying in later today so you will meet her at home." He completely ignores my jab.

"I didn't know you had a daughter," I comment, no one had mentioned me being a stepmother, and he catches me off guard.

"She's about your age, so maybe the two of you could become friends," he comments, sipping on his water. "You'll certainly be spending time together both at home and out of it. I'm sure once you take the time to get to know each other, you'll get along well."

"So she's about twenty-three?" I ask curiously.

"Yes, I had her when I was twenty. The best thing that has happened in my life." He doesn't seem to want to speak further. Maybe he feels he is revealing a weakness, which he certainly has. I couldn't stomach the idea of killing someone,

though, and a part of me hoped Alessandro doesn't think of killing the young girl either. That's not what I signed up for.

Once all the food dishes are out of the way, Ivan stands up and offers me his hand. "One dance, as husband and wife, before we take our leave and go home."

I know all my stuff was already packed and shipped to him this week, so nothing is left for me here. I take his hand and stand, holding my gown in my other hand. He whisks me onto the dance floor, and a slow ballad begins to play. I don't understand it, it's in Russian, but it almost sounds sad. He sweeps me around in a waltz, and to avoid getting dizzy, I keep my eyes trained on his. He looks down at me, and I see something inside his eyes, a softness mixed with desire. I swallow hard as the song ends, let go of him, and give a slight bow.

He bows back and smiles, then says something to his family in Russian before turning to Alessandro, "We will take our leave now. Thank you for inviting us to your family's home. Once Vittoria is settled, your family is welcome to visit her at my apartment. With prior arrangement, of course."

Alessandro stands and shakes Ivan's hand. "We look forward to being on better terms with the Volkov family. Long may our families be united under a common cause."

"We'll be in touch about dividing the territories. Come, Vittoria," he holds out his hand but first, I go to Alessandro and kiss his cheeks. "Goodbye."

Alessandro squeezes my shoulder and lets me go. I take Ivan's hand, and we file out with the rest of the Russian guests to our car.

Chapter 5 - Ivan

The elevator doors open, and I lead Vittoria into my apartment. I pause once we're over the threshold and signal to my guard Aleks to come over. "Search her for weapons."

Vittoria looks at me, surprised. "Excuse me? No one's putting their hands on me."

"I'd be a fool to trust my new bride to come in here unarmed, with an aim to kill me. These sorts of alliances can turn sour very quickly. So you get searched, and then I will take you to our bedroom." I stand there, and Vittoria looks at me disdainfully before she holds her arms out. Aleks begins to check her over, and while he does, I speak to her, "I know this isn't what you want, but no matter how beautiful you are or how I feel towards you, you are now part of my family, and your loyalty should be with me. Be loyal to me, Vittoria. You might even come to love me, and I will never hurt you."

Aleks stands up. "No weapons, Pakhan."

"This way, Vittoria," I say, but before I can move, she crosses her arms.

"Tori." She says simply.

I look at her. "Excuse me?"

"I hate being called Vittoria. Everyone calls me Tori. If we're going to be together, then I would prefer you call me Tori." Her blue-gray eyes bore into me, and I smirk at her resistance.

"Fine, Tori, come this way so you can unpack." I walk down the hallway. "Your things are already in our room. We've cleared some space for you to unpack your things, and if you need anything, I will give you my bank card so you can purchase what you want."

I walk into the bedroom. Her things are piled on one side of the king bed, and I look at her. "I'm sure you'll want to

change out of your wedding dress as well. There's a garment bag to hang it up in."

"Where will you sleep?" she asks quietly, almost shyly.

I cock an eyebrow. "Next to you. We are husband and wife. Normally, that means we share a bed. If you need time to settle, I won't consummate our marriage yet, but you should know it will happen sooner or later."

She looks stricken, but I have other things to deal with, so I leave the bedroom and head back to the main living area. I take out my phone and dial my cousin's number, waiting for him to answer.

"Evgeni, come in the morning so we can discuss our plans for the Sorvino territories. I want to go over every possibility," I say.

"Sure, no problem," Evgeni says, I hear giggling, and I know he's with a woman. I shake my head and hang up. The front door opens, and Leonid walks in.

I glance at him as I walk past, going to the tray where I keep my finest whiskey and vodka. I pour us each a drink and offer him a glass. He takes it and sips it slowly.

"We could have the Sorvinos now where we want them," Leonid says casually. "We should treat your bride as a bargaining chip, a hostage, and negotiate better terms if they don't want her to die."

The thought of Tori coming to harm doesn't sit well with me, which in itself is strange. Since my wife passed, I've been a pretty cold person. I don't believe in allowing myself to get emotionally attached to people, though I see the power of them getting emotionally attached to me. Loyalty gets you very far with people. I wave him off, annoyed. "I'm not going to do that. I'm a man of my word if nothing else, and now that I've married Tori, you will treat her with the level of respect she deserves in our family. As my wife, she holds more standing than even you, Leonid, as my second in charge."

Leonid looks sour, but I down my drink. “Anastasia will be back soon. Why don’t you go home and worry about your own affairs for once, my brother? We will meet tomorrow to discuss my plans for our family.”

Leonid also downs his drink and sighs. “Yes, Pakhan.”

I know he’s annoyed when he addresses me formally, but Leonid is always a bit touchy. It’s why I keep a close eye on him. He has a temper and is impulsive, so I have to ensure he doesn’t do something rash. I know it was he who ordered the hit on the Sorvinos, but I had to support him after the fact to avoid fracturing my own family. I don’t condone what he did. It almost sent us into total war. It did, however, land me with my beautiful bride.

I spend the rest of my evening reading. Tori doesn’t come out of the bedroom, so I assume she’s taking her time unpacking her things into the walk-in closet. I glance at my watch: almost ten at night. I sigh. My daughter’s flight must have been delayed, which happens occasionally.

I’m trying to concentrate on this new book by Celeste Riley, but my mind keeps drifting back to Tori. Her figure, her hair, and her eyes are all I can think about—how physically perfect she is. I haven’t felt this way about someone since Anastasia’s mother, and I never thought I’d feel this way again. This is physical attraction. That’s all it is, I mentally scold myself. It’s a physical attraction.

I hear the elevator ping, place my bookmark between the pages, and set the book down. I stride out of the library and see Anastasia coming in, my guards helping her with her luggage.

“Father!” she declares, throwing her arms around my neck. I hug her tightly and kiss her head. “Ana! Welcome back. How were your travels?”

“They were fine, delayed as usual, but I’m glad to be back.” She gives me a bright smile. “I’m sorry I wasn’t home in time for your wedding.”

“It’s okay. You’re home now, and that’s what matters the most.” I stroke the hair out of her eyes. “Talking of my new bride. Let the guards take your things to your room, and I’ll introduce you to her.”

“What’s her name?” Anastasia asks as we walk together.

“She wants to be called Tori, but her name is Vittoria,” I explain, opening the bedroom door to find Tori, changed and dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, hair tied up, sitting on the bed with her hands folded in her lap. She stands up as I walk in.

“Tori, this is my daughter, Anastasia. Ana, this is Tori,” I say, gesturing between them.

Anastasia gives Tori the once-over glance I know too well, and then she extends her hand. “Hi, Vittoria. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Tori seems awkward as she shakes my daughter’s hand, and yes, I can see how it would be a bit weird being my bride and the same age as my child.

“Thank you, Anastasia. It’s a pleasure to meet you, too.”

Anastasia lets go of Tori’s hand, turns around, and leaves the room. I chuckle. “My child is impatient and probably tired from her travels. Is there anything you want before we go to bed? Did you manage to unpack everything?”

“I managed to unpack everything, thank you,” Tori says awkwardly. “I’ll change in the bathroom for bed then. I don’t need anything else.”

“I’ll change here and freshen up once you’re done,” I say, waiting for her to grab her things and leave the room.

I strip down to my boxers and put my clothes in the hamper. My mother always ran an immaculate house, and I like to run the same. Everything is in its place, and everything is in order. An ordered mind is a clear mind.

Tori comes out dressed in long pajamas, and I smirk. “You might want to consider putting on something more light. The duvet is thick.”

“I’ll be fine,” she insists, looking around. I point to the hamper. “You can put your dirty clothes in there. We have a maid who will wash everything and pack it away.”

As she does that, I go to the bathroom to brush my teeth and trim my beard. I like to keep it short and neat.

After I finish washing up, I come into the bedroom to find her beside the bed. “Well, get in.”

She slides the duvet back and slips into bed. She pulls the duvet right up to her chin, turning her back to where I would be.

I turn the main lights off, slide into the bed, and turn the bedside lamp off.

We aren’t touching, but there’s a heat between us that I can sense, and it has nothing to do with the room temperature or the thickness of the duvet. She is a remarkably attractive woman. There’s no reason I shouldn’t be attracted to her after all.

Those blue-gray eyes are legendary in her family, and I can see why. They are a gateway into another world. A part of me wants to turn on my side and spoon her, feel her body against mine. I promised I’d wait to consummate the marriage, though, and I am a man of my word.

She needs to get settled, I don’t know what kind of experience she has, and quite frankly, I don’t trust her mouth near my dick just yet. However, the thought makes me turn my back to her as my dick gets semi-hard at the idea.

I try to think of other things before drifting off.

Chapter 6 - Vittoria

The days have passed slowly, and I have spent most of them trying to figure out a way to establish myself in a position to get information for my family on the Volkovs.

Ivan is like a brick wall regarding information, and it's clear he doesn't trust me. He gave me my own debit card and said I could move the apartment around to suit my own needs. Wanting to appear appreciative, I've done my best to invent a space where we all can cohabit together, although Anastasia is less than pleased about this.

The penthouse apartment is bigger than any apartment I've ever been to, and that's saying something. I've discovered many different rooms, from the gym to the home theater, but my favorite is the library. Ivan clearly is an avid reader, and I don't think I've found one untouched book in his library.

I spend most of my time there pouring over stories in-between napping on the sofa since there isn't much for me to do. I don't even see Anastasia that much because she's always going out, which I'm thankful for. I've never been really good at social interaction, and I wouldn't know what to say to her, even though she's my age.

Even if I wanted to get to know her, she's useless to me. My family trusts me to get the information they need to destroy Ivan and his family, and I need to focus on that.

The only problem is that I haven't found an in, and I feel the pressure to do it soon.

It's been five days, and after a particularly long nap on the sofa, I decide to order some pizza from my favorite pizzeria for lunch. As I walk through the apartment, I pause when I see Leonid and Ivan talking. They don't seem to notice me at first, so I just stand there.

"We need to negotiate decent territories with the Sorvinos, or this would have been for nothing," Leonid insists.

“I’m more than capable of choosing what is best for our family.”

“Contracts will be drawn up, and Evgeni’s father will look at them and confirm they’re the best possible thing for us,” Ivan says. He finally notices me and frowns. “What?”

“I can help,” I say suddenly, unsure where that came from. “I am a lawyer, top of my class. I could review the contracts and make notes before your uncle looks over them. He can have the final say. It would give me something to do.” I’m rather proud of my explanation, but I still wait with bated breath.

“That’s ridiculous. You would side in favor of your family,” Leonid snarls. “You have no loyalty to us. Ivan, tell her.”

Ivan’s eyes meet my own, and I try to keep my face neutral. He’s hesitating, which is a good sign, but I don’t want to seem overeager.

“Okay,” he says at long last.

“What?” Leonid roars.

Ivan turns and grabs Leonid’s throat in his hand, giving me a fright. He glares at him. “Remember who you are speaking to.” He doesn’t look at me, but he addresses me. “This is an opportunity to prove that you are loyal to your new family. Don’t screw us over, or you will regret it. The Volkovs are your family now. You must do what is in our best interests.”

I nod and turn to leave, but he speaks again, still holding Leonid’s face in his hands, his eyes glaring at his second-in-command. “Also, you need to go get dressed. There are a few events that we are going to soon, and I need you properly dressed. You are going to go shopping now for appropriate clothes.”

“Will you be coming with me to approve?” I ask curiously. It could be an opportunity to source more information.

Ivan snorts and finally releases Leonid who struggles getting back for air. “Not my area of expertise. My mother, Arina, will meet you there and help you pick out what you need. She’s familiar with what I like and the kinds of events that I attend.” He walks off, and I shiver slightly when I see Leonid looking at me as though he’d like to murder me.

I try to ignore him and get changed before I meet Aleks at the elevator to be escorted to the stores. I’m nervous about meeting Arina. She was at the wedding, but we didn’t say a word to each other. She’s a rather severe-looking woman who scared the shit out of me.

The car ride there is in absolute silence. I’m almost tempted to ask the driver to put the radio on, but it’ll probably be a Russian radio station or something. We arrive on Fifth Avenue, and I know we’re going boutique shopping. My family loves shopping on Fifth Avenue, and while I’ve found decent work clothes here, I’ve never branched out into formal wear for events.

Aleks escorts me into the store and leads me to the woman I recognize as Arina.

“Moy rebenok,” she says and gives me a warm smile, easing my nerves. I must look confused because she chuckles and explains, “It means, my child because that is what you are now. Ivan explained that you need some formal wear for some of the events he is attending. I hope you don’t mind if I help. I couldn’t resist getting to know my daughter. Ivan’s first wife was like a daughter to me for the longest time, and I miss having a woman to do things with.”

Although I am hesitant, I feel a slight warmth in my heart and quickly say, “Of course, I am looking forward to getting to know you as well.”

“Ivan told me your size, and I have selected a few modest but beautiful dresses with accessories for you to try, but if you don’t like them, you must say so because I want you to be comfortable. Nothing worse than attending these snotty events and feeling uncomfortable the entire evening.”

“What kind of events would we attend?” I ask.

“Premiers, theater, formal charity balls,” she explains, leading me to the dressing room. “Ivan donates a lot to charity. He’s a good child.”

I hesitate, and she laughs. “I know what man my son is, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t good in him.”

I feel so awkward, I hate social situations so I quickly nod. “Sorry, I meant no offense.”

“It was my husband’s wish for Ivan to take over the family,” she says as she pulls back the curtain and closes it behind us. “Not mine. I wanted him to be a big-shot accountant or investor.”

I smile because that is such a typical mother thing to want, and mothers are not typical in families like ours. She points to the pile of clothes she’s had laid out for me. “If they are uncomfortable, please don’t hesitate to say so. There’s nothing worse than going out for hours in something you’re not comfortable in.” She repeats.

“Thank you, you’re so kind,” I say, and I mean it. I like her a lot. If there’s going to be anyone in this family I like, it will be her.

We start to try on the clothes, and aside from adjusting a size up and down here and there, they are very comfortable, and I have to admit they make me look exceptional in a way I’ve never seen myself. It makes me feel a bit more confident. I know I look beautiful.

The accessories are just as stunning. She’d chosen white-gold jewelry with sapphire stones which brings out my eyes. I almost sparkle.

All in all, I had a ton of fun, and I don’t even know why I was nervous, to begin with, because she is the sweetest woman I’ve ever met. For a moment, I feel a pang of guilt because I know my plan is to overturn her family. I try to push the feeling away and not think about it because I know it won’t do me any good.

When we're done and ready to go, she pays for everything despite my protests. I blush and fumble over my words. "Ivan gave me a card."

"A mother should be able to spoil her daughter," Arina says kindly as she pays. "Besides, it's probably from the same account anyway."

I smile, and we walk out of the store. She hugs me around my packages. "You're going to do fine. I'll see you soon."

"Thank you for everything," I say genuinely. "I really appreciate what you've done for me."

She pats my face with her hand and walks away with her bodyguards. Mine load my packages into the car as I climb in, relaxing back as we drive to the apartment.

Without any warning, a car suddenly hits ours from the side, t-boning us. Our tires squeal as the driver tries to maintain control. There are suddenly bullets flying through the air and they shatter the window next to me. The guard yells at me to get down and I listen. There is fire from both sides and I keep my hands over my ears and wait for it to be over, annoyed at feeling so useless, but also scared the other side would win and kill me. When the bullets stop firing, I feel the car moving again, fast, and I glance up shakily, "Is it over?"

"For now," the guard comments, "They were clearly out for blood, though. We must report this to Pakhan."

When we arrive at the apartment I take my parcels upstairs, and the guard stands at the door, staying there while I walk in. I glance around, but I don't see Ivan anywhere. I feel shaky though and just want to wash the glass out of my hair. I see his brother is there, Leonid, and as he looks at me, I see a raged-fueled hate that makes me deeply uneasy.

"Wasting money on shit already?" he sneers, walking toward me. He grabs a dress from one of the bags, holds it up, and then tosses it at me. I put my packages down and put the dress back.

“Ivan arranged it,” I say quietly, unsure how safe I am, “We were attacked.”

Leonid steps toward me, and I back right into a corner. He takes my chin into his hand and presses it with much pressure, so I am forced to look at him. “I know you’re going to fuck over my family. I don’t trust you to handle anything for us. Your family probably arranged that attack to make you seem innocent.”

“Ivan trusts me.” I try to sound steady, but my voice trembles. The door opens, and Evgeni, Ivan’s cousin, walks in. Leonid quickly backs off from me. I don’t waste a moment as I grab my packages and flee to the bedroom, shutting the door behind me.

Chapter 7 - Ivan

When I walk into the apartment, the first thing I notice is Evgeni and Leonid talking in hushed voices in the corner of the dining room. The quiet conversation stops immediately when they notice me, and it raises my suspicions. They must be able to tell because Leonid steps forward. “Ivan, we want to talk to you.”

“Has something gone wrong?” I ask curiously, pouring myself a glass of vodka.

“We want to talk about the negotiations with the Sorvino family.” Leonid has always been straight to the point. I do like that about him.

I wave him off. “It’s being handled.”

“I think I would be in a better position to negotiate territories with the Sorvino family,” Leonid says bluntly, “I have the family’s best interests at heart, and I can secure the best possible deal for the family.”

I sip my vodka and unbutton my suit jacket. “Tori is already assigned to sort it out. She knows her family best and will secure a great deal for our family.”

“You would trust a traitorous Sorvino over your own brother?” Leonid snaps.

My eyes meet his, and he goes quiet. “I appreciate your willingness to always help our family, but in this case, you’re not the best person for the job. You are always on the attack, Leonid. You are too aggressive and rash to make these sorts of decisions. You’re playing football instead of chess. We need to think ahead of our opponents, and this gives Tori a chance to prove she has a place in this family. She is being double-checked, so it’s not like I’m giving her free reign. If she does double-cross me, she will regret it.”

Leonid glares at me. I know the comments sting, but that's not my problem. I also know he knows better than to start with me. I'm not one to easily bow down to someone who thinks they're an alpha male. Leonid isn't an alpha, although he likes to pretend he is.

Evgeni steps forward. "We, of course, support all your decisions as the head of our family, Ivan. We just have concerns."

"Do you both think I'm a blind fool? That I would just let her choose what we get and trust she'll do the best. No, this is one of many tests to ensure she comes into the fold and learns her place."

Evgeni nods and falls silent, but I can see Leonid isn't finished. "Was there something else?"

"The shipment might come in earlier than expected. I don't think you need to be there when it's opened, I can handle it."

"I'll make time for it, don't worry." I wave my hand and down my vodka. "Now leave. I have work to do, and so do you. Unless you've sorted all your problems before presenting me with what you think mine are?"

"Tori was attacked," Evgeni says, "That's the final news."

"How? By whom? Was she hurt?" I ask with a frown.

"No, she's fine. Our men contained the situation. We're already working on finding out who's behind the attack."

"Make sure you find it sooner rather than later. There's nothing else I need you for, you are free to leave." I comment, wondering who would attack Tori.

Leonid seems to want to say something, but Evgeni puts a hand on his arm. "We'll leave. Thank you for hearing us out."

I watch as they walk out of the apartment. I can see my brother isn't impressed, but he must remember his place. He is

only my brother because his parents, my aunt and uncle, were killed, and my parents took him in and raised him as their own.

I go to the kitchen, get a bottle of orange juice, and take it to my office. I sit down and enter my password, bringing up my work. Before I do anything else, I try not to focus too much on this mysterious event and whether it was planned by the Sorvinos. I start to answer a few emails, and I check our secret messages through reviews on online retailers and respond accordingly. Then I pull up the financials for the last quarter. Everything is cleverly disguised behind a 'legit' business. We have perfected this.

I open the bank account and see that my mother had paid for the clothes today. I'm sure she made Tori feel comfortable. It's why I asked my mother specifically.

An amount on the bank statement catches my eye. A hundred thousand dollars was transferred without any reference of who it was transferred by, to who, or to what account. My family doesn't generally access this account. This is the business account. They have cards to pay for things but can't log on and initiate transfers. Only the accountant and I can do that.

I email Will, the accountant, and ask him to look into it because I feel like something is going on, and if someone is doing something behind my back, they will pay dearly for it.

There's a light knock on my door, and I glance up from the email I'm drafting to see Tori standing in the doorway. I sit back and rub my beard. "Did you have fun? At least before you were attacked."

"Your mother is really sweet," she says, shifting from foot to foot, "She knows her way around a clothes store. The attack was frightening, but I wasn't hurt." She looks shaken but gives me a small smile.

I return the smile then it fades quickly. I can't give in to my emotions on a whim. What I feel for Tori might be

physical, but I can't let it get emotional. She is a business transaction, and that is all.

"I wanted to ask if there's anything that I can help with. I'm not doing anything at the moment, and I'm kind of bored," she explains.

I sit up straight. "The contracts will be coming soon, and you'll be spending a lot of hard hours working on those to secure us the *best* possible deal. For now, find something to do, relax and watch a movie or something."

"Well, if it's okay, I'd like to go see my sister Kira," she says quietly. "She's pregnant and planning a wedding, so I want to see if there's anything I can help with. I mean, I can still help my family like that, can't I?"

I look at her for what feels like the longest time, our eyes locked onto each other. Finally, I nod. "I don't like the idea of you going to your family on your own. It's a trust thing, but I understand how important family is. Take one of my men, and you can go. I won't have an issue if one of my men escorts you."

If Tori is annoyed by the accusation, she doesn't show it. Instead, she gives a small nod. "Thank you, Ivan. I appreciate that. I'll take Aleks. Is there a specific time you want me to be back?"

"Dinner is at six. Anastasia is eating with us tonight before she goes out," I explain. "You can then tell me how your day was."

She nods. "I will be home just before that so I can freshen up a little."

She turns and leaves, and my eyes glance at her rounded ass. Something twitches inside me as I imagine what it would be like to hold that ass as she rides me, but I shake it off. I am already looking forward to it. Now, I better focus and deal with work matters.

I finished the email to Will and sent it before returning to the financial reports. There's something not quite right here.

It's as though we're losing more money than we're making. This gets my heckles up because I know we're doing well. I visit sites to make sure of it myself, and I get reports from Evgeni and Leonid regularly. Someone is stealing money from me, and I want to know who it is.

I get up to stretch my legs. I open my bottle of orange juice and take a deep drink before I pace my office for a bit, trying to work out the pins and needles. I think of Tori, her wanting to visit her family so soon. Leonid might be right, she may be plotting to do me in, but at the same time, I know Sorvinos are about integrity. Also, I'm drawn to her like a moth to a flame. If I were an oyster, she would be the pearl I want to hide away from others. She's beautiful, in a different way from Russian girls. Firstly her olive skin is smooth and tan, and her hair, when down, is even more gorgeous.

I should tell her to wear it down more often. She seems to prefer to have it tied up constantly. I wonder why that is?

She's so quiet, but I see a confidence in her that I know can shine. She'll be drawing the attention of many people at the events we attend. Such a beautiful woman on my arm for the first time since...

I push the thoughts back and bury them deep down. I can't think of her now. It hurts too much. Anastasia used to often ask about her mother until I asked her to stop. I told her the past is in the past, and there's nothing we can do to change it. She stopped asking, but sometimes I question if that was the right thing to do. To deny my daughter the knowledge of her mother because it felt like my heart was ripped out whenever someone reminded me of her, mentioned her, or we went somewhere that meant something special to us.

I sit back at my desk and pull up the individual reports for each of my businesses to see how much money is going through them. I will figure out who the thief is, and God help them when I do because I won't let my men deal with this. This is a direct insult to me, and I will deal with whoever this is personally. My father always said you had to start at the

bottom and learn everything you could before being the head of the family, so I know many ways to draw out torture with those who cross me.

Chapter 8 - Vittoria

The drive to my sister's Villa is quiet. Aleks isn't a big talker, but that's fine. I prefer him to be silent. When we arrive, the guards come to check who's in the car, and upon seeing me, they open the gates, eying Aleks and the driver wearily.

Kira comes out to meet me at the front door. The guards must have radioed ahead to let her know I had arrived.

Her swollen belly seems more prominent than the last time I saw it, and it excites me. I love Raphael, but I didn't get to watch him grow up. I will get to fawn over this little one.

Aleks walks with me up to Kira, and she side-eyes him. I hug her tightly. "Ignore Aleks. He's just protection."

"Okay," Kira says softly before turning and leading us into her home. She shows us to the deck outside, which has a large umbrella for shade. We sit down, and a maid brings us iced tea. I offer Aleks some, but he shakes his head and stands to the side with his hands clasped in front of him.

"How's the wedding planning going?" I ask Kira, sipping on my tea. "Are you having it before or after the baby is born?"

"After, because I'm so far along, they might want to induce. We'll get married about three months after."

"Do you need help planning everything?" I hesitantly ask, my eyes imploring her.

Kira smiles sweetly. "Of course, you're my sister. You need to be involved every step of the way."

We're startled when Aleks' phone rings, and he steps away to answer it.

Kira quickly whispers, "How are you really? How is Ivan treating you? Do you need me to contact Alessandro?"

I shake my head. “Surprisingly, Ivan is not controlling or forceful toward me, and he’s also given me the go-ahead to negotiate the territories between our families. Obviously, he’ll have someone checking me, but I’ll be doing what’s best for our family.”

I know this was the plan all along, but I feel guilty about betraying Ivan. There’s nothing for it, though. This is what I agreed to do.

“Please just be careful,” Kira reaches for my hand, and I let her take it. “I worry so much about you.”

Aleks comes back toward us as my brother Luigi walks outside. “Hey Tori, what are you doing here?”

“Visiting Kira, I didn’t know you were here,” I comment.

“When can I come to visit you at your new place?” he sits down next to me. “I want to see how my baby sister is living it up.”

I know that’s not the truth, but I play along. “Why not come back with me now? I’m heading home now.”

“I’ll drive you. Your driver can follow us,” Luigi says, and Aleks steps forward. I hold a hand up. “Aleks will have to come in the car with us.”

Luigi sizes him up and then nods. “If that is what makes you happy, then we can do that.”

Aleks nods and looks at the time, and I pre-emptively say, “I know it’s a quick visit, but I’m actually quite tired.”

Kira struggles to stand as I do and then hugs me, her belly making it a bit awkward. “Take care, Tori, and call me if you need anything.”

“You call me and let me know what you need help with for the baby and the wedding.” I smile at her. I’ve never been close to her, but maybe we could be. After all, if the worst happens, Kira and Luigi are all I have.

Aleks explains to the driver to go home and gets in the backseat of Luigi's car. He seems alert and prepared for anything my brother might do, except my brother's actual driving. This secretly amuses me as my brother zips through traffic.

My phone rings, and I answer it, "Tori, hello?"

"It's Ivan. Tell the driver to bring you to my mother's restaurant for lunch. Anastasia is eating with us."

I bite my lip, "Um, Luigi, my brother is driving Aleks and me back to the apartment."

"He can join us for lunch. It's fine," Ivan says and then hangs up.

"Detour," I say to Luigi, then turn to Aleks. "Can you direct us to Ivan's mother's restaurant?"

Aleks nods. "It's not far."

While Aleks directs Luigi, I sit back and try not to let my nerves get the best of me. On the bright side, Luigi can chat everyone's ears off while I sit quietly.

Luigi finds parking, and we walk into the restaurant. I feel out of place here, like I don't belong, yet I know I will be expected to be here often. We join Ivan and Anastasia at the table. I introduce Luigi to Anastasia and then sit back. Ivan and Luigi discuss racehorses for a moment, something I didn't know either of them was into. Luigi soon turns his attention to Anastasia and starts quizzing her about her studies.

While they talk, Ivan looks at me, reaching for my hand and squeezing it. "Are you okay?"

"I am... Oh, look, the food is here."

"A stew my mother's restaurant is famous for," Ivan explains as the dishes are set in front of us.

"I quite like stews," I comment, taking some bread and dipping it into the gravy. I bite it and eat thoughtfully.

“It’s one of my favorites too. Nothing like a hearty beef stew to make you feel strong.” He smiles and starts to eat.

“How is your sister?” he asks, and I’m surprised by the question. I explain how she’s getting married after the baby is born and how I’d like to help her as much as possible.

“That is what family is for,” Ivan says after he swallows. “Of course, you should help her.”

I smile at him and squeeze his hand. He grins and says, “So you studied law. What made you do that?”

I don’t want to go into too much detail with Luigi here, but I explained how I wanted to help with the family business in the best way I could. We then talked about his studies, which made me realize how much older he is than me. Then we discuss our favorite restaurants, food, music, and the fact that we both like the theater.

Lunch ends too soon, and I don’t know how but I know Ivan feels the same way. We bid Luigi farewell, and he seems reluctant to leave Anastasia. I’ll have to put an end to that very quickly.

Anastasia brought her own car, so she says goodbye to Ivan, waves me off, and leaves. Ivan leads me to his car, and we get in with our guards. I’m content as we drive back to the apartment, as though this is the most natural thing in the world.

Once we’re back in the apartment, Ivan takes off his jacket, hangs it up, and stretches. I see his shirt pull up slightly, and I see a trail that sneaks down his belly. My heart beats a little too fast.

Ivan smiles at me. “I’m going to spend the remainder of my day reading in the library.”

“Can I j-join you?” I ask, blushing slightly.

“Of course, I would love the company,” he says, leading me down the hallway toward the library.

When he walks in, he picks up a book he's clearly been busy with and sits on the one armchair while I search the shelves for a paranormal romance to indulge in. Once I find one I haven't heard of before, I slide it off the shelf and sit in the armchair opposite him, kicking my shoes off and curling my legs under me.

"Paranormal romance? That's rather girly," he comments, although to me it's his way of saying he's amused.

"What are you reading?"

"Brandon Sanderson," he holds the cover up. "I do love fantasy a lot. My favorite would have to, of course, be the Lord of the Rings trilogy. Tolkien was an absolute genius. They just don't make authors like that anymore," he sighs and meets my eyes.

I look at the book I'm holding. "I chose this one because I've never read it before. I like paranormal romance, shifters, and fantasy, but I also enjoy psychological thrillers and true crime books."

"Thought you'd be sick of true crime with the families we have," Ivan comments.

I smile. "You learn so much from other people's mistakes."

"That's fair." He chuckles.

We fall into a comfortable conversation about the books we enjoy for hours until there's a knock at the door, and a maid announces, "Sir, dinner is ready."

He looks at his watch. "Lord, it's six thirty already."

I get up, setting my book down, and we head to the dining room.

"What about Anastasia?" I ask curiously as we sit down to steak, egg, and chips.

"She switched to lunch because she wanted to go out tonight," he explains.

Time passes quickly as we eat and talk, and finally, it's time to go to the bedroom. He lets me wash up and change first, and I climb into bed after rubbing cream into my skin. I curl up on my side sleepily and full, and I feel like today has been busy even though it wasn't *that* busy.

I feel Ivan get into bed next to me, and I shut my eyes. They shoot wide open again when I feel his arm slide around my waist, he traces a line along my thigh but decides to spoon me. Probably because I clenched my whole body even though the movement apparently had a direct connection with my libido. His body is warm against mine, and at first, I feel awkward, but we fit well together. I relax and close my eyes again. I wonder when he wants to... consummate our marriage. It would be my first time, and I wouldn't ever admit it to anyone, but I'm excited it's with him.

Chapter 9 - Ivan

My phone buzzes on the bedside table, where it's charging. I open my eyes slowly and immediately notice how Tori is curled up with her back against me. Whoever is phoning had better be nearly dead because to leave this comfortable position is going to be irritating. I turn over and grab my phone and look at the number. I don't recognize it, so I kill the call. I was hoping not to disturb Tori, but she is waking anyway.

I lean over and kiss her shoulder. "Good morning."

"Morning," she mumbles sleepily. She gives me a cute smile with bleary eyes before she slowly sits up and stretches. I admire the curve of her breasts under her top as she stretches out, tempted to take them in my hands and give them a solid squeeze.

Instead, I sit back and check the business messages on my phone while she gets up to use the bathroom. I get up and go to the guest bathroom to relieve myself, and when I come back in, I hear the shower going. A small smirk spreads across my lips as I imagine what she must look like under the spray of the water—her olive skin glistening and moisturizing. I could moisturize her.

I can't help myself.

I walk into the bathroom and undress. Tori has her back to me, so she doesn't notice me until I step into the shower and almost touch her. She shrieks, and I catch her as she almost slips.

"Come now, surely that wasn't enough to spook you," I tease her.

Her cheeks redden as she holds an arm across her breasts and turns slightly away from me.

“I need to shower, too. This way, we save water,” I comment.

I try not to stare at her naked form as I start to wash my body. She doesn't immediately get out, so that has to count for something. She just stands there, and although she's tense, I feel her eyes admire my body.

“Relax,” I murmur, turning to her. “Don't be so tense.”

“I...” She's blushing again, and I smile, coming closer to her. “We can take this slowly. Why don't we start small.”

“Small?” she asks. “You're nothing close to small.”

I laugh heartedly, then step away. “Do you ever pleasure yourself? I mean, it's completely natural.”

Tori slowly nods, and I smile. “Show me.”

Her eyes widen, and I stroke her arms gently. “Just show me. I want to see what makes you happy. I want to know how I can make you feel good when we're together.”

She stares at me for a moment before she takes a deep breath and slowly lowers her arm to reveal her young, perky breasts. It makes my dick twitch as I watch her. She backs up against the shower wall and lifts one leg, bending at the knee and planting her foot against the wall to spread her legs a little.

I don't say anything. I don't want to distract her from her thoughts. With women, I learned it's a mental game. Though I know I'm going to need a release after this. My dick is already getting hard.

She licks her lips and closes her eyes. She puts two fingers in her mouth and sucks on them gently. While she does that, her other hand starts to massage her breast, twisting the nipple. The fingers she's sucked on quickly go between her legs, and she starts running them between her lips. She's trimmed neat, so I have a full view.

I reach down and stroke my dick slowly, matching her fingers' up-and-down motion. Then she starts to circle her clit,

and watching her bite her lip drives me wild. This goes on for a while before I can't take it anymore.

I kneel before her, and her eyes shoot open. "Wha..."

"Shh," I say. Tori lowers her leg, and I move them apart. My tongue tastes her juices as I lick from her opening to her clit, letting it twirl around there for a moment. I slowly push one finger into her and curl it up, massaging her vagina wall—that spot. I know that spot well.

Suddenly her hands are in my hair and gripping tightly. Her knees are shaking as I move my finger and tongue-fuck her clit. She's getting wetter by the second, and it's only when she starts to move her hips that I leave her clit. I get to my feet and push two fingers into her, in and out, in and out, until she has her hands on my shoulder and is bucking against my hand. I use my thumb to play with her clit as I move.

It takes a few minutes, but then her nails dig into my shoulders, and she gets weak. I wrap my arm around her waist and continue to finger her nub while her orgasm rips through her. Once done, I wait until she's steady on her feet before I let her go and step away with a wry smile.

She can't look me in the eyes and mumbles what I think is a thank you before she hurriedly gets out of the shower. I turn back to wash down and finish jerking off my rock hard dick. Once my cum has washed down the drain, I rinse off and turn the shower off, getting out and getting dressed with Tori nowhere in sight.

Once dressed, I come out of the bedroom, calm and relaxed, and walk to the dining room, where Anastasia and Tori are waiting for me for breakfast.

The meal is quiet, and Anastasia eats quickly before saying she has plans. She kisses my head and leaves, and I wonder if she has an issue with Tori. Tori picks at her food for a moment before she seems to pluck up some courage to look me in the eyes. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure," I ask, wiping my mouth on a napkin.

“What happened to Anastasia’s mother?” she asks quietly. “I mean,” she adds, “if you don’t want to tell me, I understand.”

I never talk about Mila, I don’t even think about her, but for some reason, I feel like this needs to be explained no matter how cold my tone is or what Tori makes of it, “Mila was killed by a rival family when Anastasia was about eight. We were in negotiations with a family known as the Catalans, and someone was rising to power within them. Jose was his name. He put a hit on me when I wouldn’t pay tribute to him or bow to him as my leader. We were in the park, playing with Ana when the shots were fired. I didn’t even think. I just grabbed Ana and ducked. When it was over, I saw Mila on the floor, lifeless, her body riddled with bullets.”

I look away, but I feel her hand on top of mine. I’m pull away when she says something unexpected, “A rival gang killed my mother. Both my parents technically because they don’t think my father will survive.” I am surprised that I feel a small twinge of guilt. My men ordered that hit, but she continued, “My mother had just come home from a trip to Italy and had pulled into the driveway. They had taken my father’s car instead of hers because hers was in the shop, so they thought they were attacking my father. She died instantly too.”

I reach out for her hand, unsure of why I feel I need to justify myself to her. “I didn’t personally order the hit on your father’s life, Tori. I hope you believe that. But I allowed my men a bit of freedom, and they took the opportunity. I never wanted war.”

We look at each other for a moment before Tori lets go of my hand. “I think I’m going to read some more. When you’re done working, maybe you could join me.”

I stiffen slightly, realizing how soft I’m being with her. “I’ll think about it.”

We both leave, and I head to my office. I want to see how far back those strange withdrawals from the account go. I

feel like something isn't right.

I'm only at it for an hour when Evgeni comes in with a stack of paperwork. "The Sorvino contracts?"

"Yes," Evgeni says. "Their first proposal."

I stand. "I'll get Tori. Set it down at the spare table."

I get up and go to the library. "Tori?"

She looks up from a large book. "Yes?"

"Are you ready to work?" I ask. "Because it's time."

She shuts the book and sets it down, coming to me. "I'm ready."

She isn't looking directly at me, so I tilt her chin up with my finger, "Let me make this clear, if you don't get this right, you won't live to see your niece or nephew, whatever your sister is having." And then I kiss her wildly. I can see the fear in her eyes before I lead her to the spare table in my office. "Give Evgeni a list of what you'll need for stationary or if you need a laptop, and he'll arrange it."

"I can use my own laptop," she says. "If you'd prefer me not to, then get me a decent laptop with a solid-state drive, and I'll make a list of stationary."

She sits down, starts on her list, and I return to my financial reports. Evgeni stands close by until Tori finishes her list and hands it to him. I wave my hand. "She can use her laptop. Just install the security software. You understand that it's a necessary precaution."

"I understand," she says quietly. "I know I have to prove myself to you."

My heart beats fast in my chest, and I want to tell her I already believe her, but it would be foolish, especially in front of my cousin. I look at him. "Get the stuff as quickly as you can. I want this sorted out as soon as possible."

"Yes, boss," Evgeni says, hurrying out.

Chapter 10 - Vittoria

As I work through the contracts, my mind keeps returning to the shower and how he touched me. I'm not complaining. That was one of the most incredible sensations I have felt without a vibrator.

I hope he didn't figure out this was my first time being touched by a man. God, I would be mortified if he found out I'm a virgin. He'll probably laugh at the idea, and I don't think I can handle that.

When Ivan pops his head into the room, I get a slight fright and then smile shyly.

"It's dinner time. You can carry on tomorrow," he says to me, motioning for me to follow him.

I shut down my laptop and make sure everything is neat and tidy for tomorrow. I follow Ivan to the dining room, and as we're about to sit down, Anastasia pops out of her room and goes to him, kissing his cheek. "I'm going out partying with some friends. I'll try not to be in too early."

"Have fun, and please be careful," Ivan says, looking at her meaningfully.

"I always am," she sing-songs as she prances out of the apartment. I sit down at my seat and wait for Ivan to start eating before I start on my food. I'm pleasantly surprised at the everyday meals we eat, considering everyone who works here is Russian. Perhaps they're just trying to accommodate me, I don't know.

Ivan is quiet as we eat, and when he suddenly speaks, my head snaps to attention.

He chuckles, "you're very jumpy."

"Call it a character quirk. My brother would jump out at me a lot and scare the bejesus out of me," I explain.

“I just wanted to know if you don’t miss going out. Don’t you miss spending time with your friends or partying?” he asks, cutting up his food.

I pick at my food. “I’ve never really been one to party. I don’t have any people I can really call friends, so I guess I just skipped that part of my teens.”

“You sound too old for a twenty-three-year-old,” he comments to me, and I smile broadly.

“Hardly. I’ve just always been the responsible one. Luigi was a golden child to my parents, and my sister became pregnant in college and got shipped off. No one really paid attention to me because I’ve always been independent and able to take care of myself.”

Ivan sets his cutlery down and looks at me pensively. “Why don’t I take you out to the theater then? There’s a beautiful Russian play on nearby. We won’t be out late.”

I feel so shy when he’s nice like this to me. “I... Okay, why not? That could be fun, though you might have to tell me what’s happening.”

“I will,” he says. “Change into something a little more formal, and we’ll get going. I just have a few business calls to make before we leave.”

I nod, and as soon as I’m finished eating, I select one of the dresses Arina purchased for me. The left shoulder is covered, but the right is bare. It clings to my figure, and at my hips, it flows out just a little. I put on high heels and some of the new jewelry.

When Ivan walks in to change, he pauses for a moment and drinks me in. I feel shy, but at the same time, I feel beautiful. I wait in the entrance hall while he changes, and when he comes out in a tuxedo, I’m floored. This man, my husband, is so damn sexy in so many ways. His salt-and-pepper hair and beard don’t bother me at all. In fact, I think he’s so much more handsome than some of the younger guys.

We arrive at the theater, and everyone mingling outside seems to know Ivan, respectfully inclining their heads in his direction as he escorts me up the stairs. A few females whisper to themselves as they look at me, and I feel more than slightly awkward.

Ivan isn't bothered at all. He doesn't even present tickets. He just sweeps me through the crowd and up some more stairs until we're in a private box close to the stage. I look around and feel so out of place. There are other boxes with couples who I'm sure are more important than me.

Once everyone is settled, the play starts, and I'm immediately lost because it's all in Russian. Ivan chuckles next to me, to my right, and leans in, whispering the story to me. The two lovers have known each other since childhood and always knew they would be together. The evil antagonist is a third person from their childhood who has always wanted the girl.

The play goes on about how the evil antagonist tries to get rid of the hero so many times until finally, he rises to a position of power and sentences the hero to exile in Siberia. The woman is distraught, so she kills the antagonist in the hopes that she will be exiled as well. Instead, she is hung for the crime, and when the hero returns from Siberia, he finds she is dead and impales himself on a sword.

I can't help the tears that well up in my eyes as I listen to the detailed description of the story, and Ivan offers me a handkerchief to dab at my eyes. The final song of the play sounds so forlorn, and Ivan smiles. "It ends with two new lovers coming together and promising to love each other forever, even in death."

I see to the side a third actor and ask, "Let me guess, it suggests history may repeat itself."

Ivan shrugs nonchalantly. "Doesn't all history?"

"I hope not," I say quietly. "I hope they marry and are happy together."

“I hope so, too,” Ivan says quietly. The curtain falls, and we stand up and join the loud applause echoing in the room.

We leave, and Ivan takes us to a private section where we can have drinks. We sit down at a private booth. He has vodka, Russian imported, and I have a glass of white wine.

“You seem incredibly shy for an Italian,” he comments. “The ones I’ve dealt with are generally outgoing and rather boisterous.”

“I just... I’m not a people person,” I say, sipping my wine. “What about you? Do you like mingling with people?”

“Back in the day, I was quite the player when I was younger. I had many lovers, not something I’m proud of now, but I stopped once I met Mila. Russian girls all wanted to date the heir to the Volkov family, but none understood what they were getting into. Mila did. She was amazing in every way.”

“She sounds wonderful,” I say, and I mean it.

Ivan gives me a sad smile, then clears his throat. “What about you? Any memorable past lovers?”

That blush instantly takes over my face, and I try to hide it behind a sip of wine.

“Um... well...” I obviously hesitate too long because his eyes widen.

“You haven’t been with anyone, have you?” There’s no judgment in his voice, but I still feel ashamed. I set my wine down and look away.

I feel his hand on my hand. “It’s okay. There’s nothing to be ashamed of. Everyone has a first time, and I won’t lie; I’m turned on by being your first.”

I meet his eyes, and I can see he isn’t lying. There’s a lust in there that I’ve seen when he’s looked at me before. I swallow hard and fumble over my words, but he laces our fingers together. “I mean it. I’m glad.”

I give him a shy smile and finish my wine. “It’s been a long day of work. Would you mind if we go home now?”

He downs his vodka. “Yes, I need some rest myself now. It’s going to be another long day tomorrow.”

We walk out together, but Ivan lets go of my hand, hooking my arm through his instead. We get in the car, I sleepily rest my head against his shoulder.

All too soon, we’ve done our evening routine, and he’s once again holding me, spooning me, and I feel so safe in his arms that I doze off without complaint.

After breakfast, I’m back at the office working. I want to cram in as much as I can before church. There’s a knock at the door, and I glance up to see my brother there.

“Luigi! What are you doing here?” I ask, standing up.

“I brought some more paperwork from Frankie, and I thought it would be nice to drive us all to church today.” He grins at me.

I smile and take the paperwork, setting it down on the table. “Let me check if Ivan wants to come with us. Then we can all go. Wait in the entrance hall by Aleks.”

I hurry to the bedroom to find Ivan dressing for church. “Are you ready to go?” he asks.

“Actually, Luigi is here. He wants us all to go to church together. Are you keen?” I ask.

Ivan looks at me, puzzled, then shakes his head. “I should have been clearer. Now that you are my wife, you will attend church with me. That is how this works in our family.”

I pout slightly, disappointed, then ask, “Can we go to my family afterward for lunch?”

“We normally have lunch with my family at the restaurant after, but you can invite your brother, your sister, and her husband and child. That will be fine.” His tone is cold and final.

I nod, even more disappointed, but I try not to let it show as I hurry back to Luigi and explain the situation.

I see Anastasia walking past Luigi, and he greets her. She kind of waves him off, and he teases her. She leaves, and I walk up to him. “Don’t start with her. Listen, I have to go to Ivan’s church and have lunch with his family, but you, Kira, Miguel, and Raphael can come to the restaurant after church for lunch.”

Luigi glances around and asks, “Will his whole family be there?”

“Probably,” I say. “So I’ll see you guys there?”

“Yes, well, I’ll definitely be there. I’ll let you know about the others.”

He leaves, and I wait for Ivan so we can attend church. It’s different, but not different at the same time, although I definitely need to learn some Russian because I have no clue what is going on most of the time.

As we drive to the restaurant, I’m in the car with Ivan and Anastasia. We don’t speak in the car, and I must admit I always feel awkward around her.

Once we reach the restaurant, I see two cars I recognize and my family hovering outside. Ivan shakes Luigi and Miguel’s hands, and I hug Kira and Raphael.

Anastasia glances at Luigi when he greets her, but then she walks into the restaurant alone.

Ivan arranges everything in a way that I can sit with my family while still being beside him. He says they’re his honored guests.

The food is to die for. The meat is so tender it falls off the bone, the potatoes drip with rich gravy, and the vegetables are crisp and fresh. Everything is so good that most go for seconds.

I don’t talk much. Ivan talks to Miguel, and I can hear Luigi and Anastasia whispering to each other, almost

bickering like a couple. I need to keep him away from her.
This could be trouble.

Chapter 11 - Ivan

It was an enjoyable lunch, but I'm glad that Tori and I are alone at the apartment once everyone has left. In the library, I bring her a glass of wine and put my whiskey on a coaster on the table between us.

"Today was nice. Thank you for inviting my family," she says quietly.

I give her a slight smile and shake my head. "I won't deny you reasonable things, Tori."

"I'm starting to realize that," she says with her lips turned up.

"Listen," I sit forward, "my grandmother is turning ninety next week, and we've been planning a party for her. I was hoping you could go over everything and make sure it's done or being done. Can you do that for me?"

"Of course," she agrees quickly, "I may have questions, but I can absolutely oversee that."

We read while we finish our drinks and then freshen up in the bathroom. I rest back on the bed, waiting for her to get in so I can hold her, but when she gets in, she slings an arm over me and settles her head on my chest. I can smell her orchid shampoo, and it's divine to me. Fresh, down to earth but with a surprisingly sweet, lingering smell you don't expect.

I haven't held a woman like this in years. It stirs feelings inside of me that reminds me of Mila. I feel guilty, as though I'm betraying her, but still, my arm wraps around Tori. I'm so confused. I didn't want something emotional. This was meant to be a business transaction, after all.

I doze off thinking of Mila and Tori and what Mila would think about her.

When I wake up, Tori is already up and out of the room. I glance at my phone and then get up to shower and dress. I don't see Tori at the breakfast table, and I assume she's having breakfast in the office. I consider stopping in to say good morning, but my thoughts are still lingering on Mila from the night before, so I decide to go to the restaurant for breakfast and to see if my family members have any reports. I need to clear my head.

I know Evgeni and Leonid are there, and as I arrive, I find them eating fresh bread, jams, fruits, and coffee. They stand as I enter, and when I sit, they sit down.

“What's the news?”

“That shipment is coming in sooner than expected,” Leonid comments. “I'll be ready for it when it arrives.”

“I want to inspect it, so I'll handle it,” I say, starting to butter some bread.

“That isn't a good idea, Ivan. The point of having Evgeni and I is so that we can do these things for you.” Leonid is argumentative this morning, and I'm not in the mood.

I scowl at him. “Are you giving me orders now?”

“Not at all,” Leonid backtracks quickly. “But if I may say one thing....”

“It better not annoy me,” I comment, taking a bite of the bread.

“It's just that since that Sorvino woman came into our family, it's like you don't trust us anymore,” Leonid glances at Evgeni, but he's tactfully avoiding looking at both of us.

“Nothing has changed. As the head of the family, I can inspect my products whenever I like, is that understood?” I ask, to make my point I take one of the sharp knives and stab it into the table.

“Yes, boss.” It's said with contempt, but I let it slide as my mother brings out some meat for me. I hate fighting in front of her.

On the drive back to the apartment, I think about Tori. I haven't lost faith in my men, but perhaps they have lost faith in me for joining our families. The last thing I want is betrayal. I need Tori to prove herself to them so we can put this to bed. I mean, I'd like to put her to bed. The curve of that ass... I chuckle to myself; the distraction amuses me. It's been a long time since I've felt this way about someone.

I walk into the apartment and glance around. No one is around except the guards at the front. "Where is my wife?" I ask Aleks.

"In the office working on the reports," Aleks says. "She came out a little while ago to get something to eat and went back in."

I nod. "Keep... Keep everyone out of the office for now. I want no distractions."

Aleks nods, and if he's figured out what I want, I don't really care.

I walk softly into the office and watch Tori hunching over the papers, reading them carefully. I shut the door without a sound and walked up behind her, trailing my fingers down her back.

"Ah!" she screams, nearly jumping out of her skin. I grab the chair and her to stop them from falling.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you," I say, watching her breasts move up and down as she breathes hard.

"Sorry, I was just so focused," she says, putting a hand on her heart. She plops back down into the chair, and I kneel beside her. "I didn't see you this morning," she says.

"I had things to attend to, and I didn't want to bother you, but surely you need to take a break," I comment, gazing at her.

She smiles and reaches out hesitantly and then strokes my beard. "I think the beard makes you look so handsome."

“I’ll never shave it, I swear,” I say to her, grinning softly. Her eyes sparkle in the room’s bright light, and I softly stroke her back.

Our eyes are locked as she leans forward and gently kisses my lips. Such an innocent kiss. So sweet. I might be gentle at first, but she’s definitely going to learn to like it rough and dirty when I’m done with her.

“Come,” I say, getting up and holding out my hand. “Come with me.”

She stands and follows me to my table. I sit down in my chair and pat my leg. “Sit.”

“Will your chair hold us?” she asks.

“It will.” I pull gently on her hand, and she sits on my leg. I wrap one arm around the back of her to hold her in place and use my right hand to tilt her face down so I can kiss her again. We kiss for a few seconds before I open my mouth and lick at her lips. Hesitantly she slowly cracks open her mouth. When she doesn’t send her tongue out to meet mine, I send mine to find hers. She swallows, and I can feel her shaking as I explore her mouth, cupping her face with my hand.

She gets braver, and soon, our tongues are doing the salsa together, and the energy in the room has changed from a calm, professional one to an electrified one. I drop my hand to her breast, and through her shirt, I give it a good squeeze, eliciting a loud moan from her. I can feel her practically melting into me. I squeeze her breast again and then drop my hand to lift her shirt. She squirms a little, but I distract her with another kiss. I let her go to lift her shirt over her head and discard it to the side. She’s wearing a deep purple lacy bra, and I lick my lips. A quick inspection shows me it’s a front clip one, but I don’t want it off yet. I reach into her bra, squeeze her breasts, and tease her nipple. She squirms on my lap, and I won’t lie, It’s making my dick harder than the ice in Siberia. I take my hand out of her bra and tug it down, freeing the girls. The bounce is perfect, and with the bra tight underneath, they look even perkier. I take her hand and guide it to the front of

my pants. She hesitantly rubs the front of my pants, so I let her go again to undo my pants and open the fly. I pull my dick out and sit back. “Just stroke it gently,” I murmur before tilting her down for another kiss.

Her hand shakes as she slowly works up and down my shaft while I tweak her nipples. She loves nipples and clit. That much is clear.

I grunt as my balls tighten, and my hand is over hers, stopping the motion.

“Did I hurt you?” she asks worriedly.

“No, I just don’t want to come yet.” I smile. “Do you want to be on top your first time?”

She looks at me, and I can see she’s unsure, so I say, “It might hurt a little less.”

She nods and stands up. She slips out of her pants and panties and stands there awkwardly for a moment. I drink in her sun-kissed skin before I hold my hand up. “Sit on the desk. I’ve got this.”

She sits on the edge of my desk, and I scoot forward. “Spread your legs for me, Tori, as wide as you can.”

She blushes, but she obeys, which is a good sign. I kiss her soft mound. Again. Again. Soft kisses, and I know the anticipation I am building up. Then my tongue divides her lips and runs from hole to clit to hole again. She tips her head back and groans loudly. I continue to tease her with my tongue, which I’m rather good with if I say so myself.

I dip into her hole and taste her tart juice. It hits just right, like a good cigar.

My dick is dripping with pre-cum, so I gently rub it between her lips. She looks at me, her eyes wide but lustful. I make sure she’s lubed up and then line up the tip of my cock with the petite hole.

She sits up a bit straighter and whispers, “It’s not going to fit.”

“Don’t worry,” I assure her, “you’re going to enjoy this.”

She looks at me, clearly worried, but I slowly inch my cock into her, spreading her as I move. The thick veins in my cock are prominent as her tight hole squeezes my dick. I groan, and it takes me some time to push deeper into her. She cries out twice, but I keep going. Once I’m entirely in, I wrap an arm around her back and bring her forward. “I’ll be gentle... this time....”

She nods against my shoulder.

I move slowly, and she cries out again. The sound turns me on. No other cock has come in this pussy before. It belongs to me and me alone.

I start to move steadily, and she falls into a rhythm with me. I grunt as my balls tighten again. She’s so tight. It’s like her vagina is devouring my dick. I reach down and roll my thumb over her clit as I move, and she tips her head back, calling out, “Oh, God, yes.”

I smirk and move a little harder, keeping up my actions. She clenches her legs around me and starts to shake, and I know it’s time.

I bury myself deep inside of her and come. Then I pull out and slam back into her, releasing another shot. Out, in, and another stream, and I’m spent.

I hold her against me for a moment. Kissing her head, I slowly pull out. “Get dressed. We’re going to be late for dinner.”

She looks like she can’t even stand, and I smile as I do my pants up. “It won’t always hurt. The more we do this, the more pleasurable it will be for you.”

She nods, standing shakily and slipping back into her clothes. She runs her hands through her hair, and we leave the office.

She turns to the bedroom, but the thought of my cum trapped inside her turns me on even more. I take her hand, wag my finger in front of her and kiss her before pulling her toward the dining room, where Anastasia is waiting for us to eat.

Tori sits down on my left side and squirms slightly. I know my cum is dripping into her panties, and I try to hide my smirk.

“I’m glad you’re in a good mood,” Anastasia says, “because I was thinking of going out somewhere different tonight.”

“Oh,” I say as I start to eat, “where do you want to go?”

“Well, since we’re family with the Sorvinos now, I wanted to go check out La Club,” she says, batting her eyes innocently.

I frown and glance at Tori, then at Anastasia. “You would have to take security.”

“Can’t Vittoria arrange security there for me?” she asks. I knew there’d be an argument, but then it strikes me—a brilliant idea.

“Why don’t you go with Tori?” I ask, and I can see both she and Tori are trying to hide their disappointment from me, but it’s a good bonding experience. “You can both get to know each other better. It could be fun.” I look pointedly at Tori, who gives me a hesitant smile. “Sure, we could take Luigi with us as backup.”

“There, it’s settled. You two go out tonight and have fun. I won’t wait up,” I say, returning to my dinner. I can sense Anastasia rolling her eyes at me, but I think it will do the two of them some good.

Chapter 12 - Vittoria

I can't believe Ivan volunteered me to go with Anastasia to La Club! I hardly went there myself, even with my siblings. I was always considered too much of a goody-two-shoes.

It's done, though, so I dress in a smart pair of pants and a halter-neck top. I tie my hair up in a bun and walk out of the bedroom. Anastasia takes one look at me, and I know she isn't impressed.

"You are not going out with me looking like that. You look like you're going to a board meeting." She shakes her head. "Have you not got something stylish and pretty to wear? And is that the only way you know how to do your hair?"

Her remark stings, and I'm lost for words, blushing a dark crimson.

Anastasia must realize what her words are doing to me because her expression softens a little. "Maybe I can help you figure it out? You're about my size."

She moves forward and says, "Come on, I might have something in my cupboard for you, and I can fix your hair."

I follow obediently, not sure what else to do. I wish there were a way I could back out of this without disappointing Ivan. I have to keep in his good books, though, so I walk into Anastasia's room. It's a lovely room. It looks like a studio almost, with bright lights and large mirrors. She goes to her walk-in closet and rifles through some clothes. I wait patiently near the door, and she comes out with a pair of heels hooked on the fingers of one hand and a dress on a hanger on the other.

"This should do the trick. You can get changed in my bathroom, then we'll do your hair," she says, handing me everything.

I feel uncomfortable as I change into the skin-tight, rather short strapless dress. I'm not entirely convinced it covers all the essential parts. I slip on the heels, which are a bit tight but will fit for the night—nothing I'm not used to.

I come out, and Anastasia claps her hands together. "Already sixty percent better, now just let your hair down quick and sit at my vanity."

I do as I'm told and sit. She uses a curling iron to give me big, beautiful curls and then turns me around to apply some makeup. I feel weird as I'm not usually this kind of woman. I've never really worn much makeup, and I have never been in a dress this short.

Once we're done, I walk shyly out to where Ivan is waiting in the entrance hall. There's a look in his eyes, a primal hunger that kind of turns me on. His mouth is slightly open in surprise at how I look, and I smile. "We shouldn't be back too late."

"Ignore her," Anastasia says. "We'll be back late, don't wait up." She kisses his cheek, scoops up her small purse, and heads for the elevator. I'm taller in the heels, so I don't have to lean far up to give Ivan a sweet kiss before I follow her.

Luigi is downstairs waiting for us with security, and we're about to climb into the car when Aleks appears with two men. Anastasia groans, "I told dad no security."

Aleks shakes his head. "He says, no security, no clubbing."

Anastasia looks at Luigi and then at Aleks. "Fine, follow us."

We all clamber into the car, and Anastasia and Luigi chat as we drive toward La Club. I've only been there a handful of times, but they've really renovated the place. As we're about to enter, Anastasia holds a hand up to Aleks. "This club belongs to the Sorvinos. I don't want trouble. You guys stay out here while we party. We'll call if we need you."

Aleks doesn't look impressed, but a glance from the large bouncer seems to cement the deal.

We go inside, and Anastasia instantly goes to the bar where some of her Russian friends are waiting. She introduces me so fast that I don't even catch their names. I smile awkwardly before Anastasia orders us all vodka shots and some cocktails. We go to find a table to sit down at. Anastasia and her friends are talking excitedly in Russian. Since I can't understand them, I sit at the table next to theirs. I don't know where Luigi ran off to, probably to call some of his friends for the rest of the girls. Anastasia waves a hand at me and asks, "Come join us? We can switch to English."

"No, it's fine," I say, a sense of dread filling me. I hate social interaction.

"Sure? We're going to go dance?" Anastasia says with a warm smile.

I shake my head. "I'm not a good dancer, so I'll stay and watch the purses."

Anastasia nods. "If you're sure."

I watch them dance their way onto the dance floor and form a small group. It's sweet. I wish I had girlfriends like that growing up. It must be nice to have friends and people to talk to. I keep my eye on the bags and sip my drink. A few songs pass, and a rather raunchy one starts to play. I turn my attention to the group of girls and see a guy harassing Anastasia.

I look around for Luigi, but I can't see him or any of his guards. I keep an eye on her, but the guy won't let up, and when she tries to pull away, he grabs her ass and pulls her against him.

That's it for me. I get up, push through the crowded dance floor, and grab Anastasia. "It's time to go," I say, pulling her away from the guy. I can see her friends standing around awkwardly.

Before I know what's happening, this fat, balding asshole raises his hands and pushes me away from Anastasia, yelling at me to mind my own business.

He turns back to Anastasia, and I feel the anger seething through me as I tap his shoulder. As he turns around, I throw my hand back and slap him in the face. His face jerks to the side with the force of the hit.

He roars with rage and pain and steps toward me, but before he can do anything, my brother thankfully appears and steps between us. "What's going on here?"

I look around and see a few of my brother's guards are also around. The music is still playing, but everyone on the dance floor is watching the exchange.

The balding guy points angrily at us, standing in a huddled, united group. "These Russian bitches are causing trouble."

"He was groping and grabbing Anastasia," I shout over the music. "And when I tried to move her off the dance floor, he pushed me, so I slapped him."

Luigi looks at me and then at two of the guards. "Get rid of this punk. He's permanently banned from La Club." Before the guy protests, Luigi leans in. "Be thankful that's all you're getting for putting your hands on my sister and her friends."

The guy swallows and follows the two guards off the dance floor.

I look at Anastasia, and she hesitates a moment before giving me a hug, "Thank you so much. I really appreciate that."

"I'll get everyone a round of drinks," Luigi says. "You girls go back to dancing."

I turn to go back to the table, but Anastasia grabs my hand. "No, stay. You can bop around with us. It's not like we're professional dancers."

I swallow hard and hesitantly nod, although it does feel like we're finally connecting.

Chapter 13 - Ivan

I wake up earlier than usual and find Tori asleep, curled in a ball next to me. I don't know what time they came home, but it must have been late. I get up, freshen up, and get dressed. As I'm trimming my beard to keep it neat, I think about how hot Tori looked last night. I won't lie; I had a restless night thinking about all the horny men who were probably making eyes at her the whole night. I certainly would have.

I walk out of the bedroom and toward the dining room, where my coffee will be waiting. As I pour some into a mug, I hear the elevator open and see Leonid step out. I fill another mug and take it to him. "What are you doing here so early," I say, handing him the coffee and leading him to my office.

"We have a problem," Leonid says seriously. "Your wife got out of line last night."

I sigh loudly, sitting my coffee down and turning to Leonid with impatience. "What now, Leonid? It's no secret you hate her."

"Last night at La Club, your wife let a guy harass Anastasia, groping and grabbing her." He looks at me seriously, and I frown.

"Once the girls wake up, I'll talk to them about this," I say.

"You expect that Italian to tell you the truth? I have witnesses," Leonid says.

I shake my head and am about to say something when I hear the creak of Anastasia's door.

"Ana?" I call, getting up and walking out of the office with Leonid in tow.

My daughter looks a bit rough, and I know she partied hard. She yawns. "Morning."

“Is it true some guy was harassing you at La Club?” I ask, straight to the point.

She rubs her eyes and nods. “Yeah, there was this really fat ugly balding guy who kept coming onto me, and when I pulled away, he groped my ass and pulled me to him.”

I can feel my blood boiling, but then Anastasia continues, “Then Tori came to get me, and he pushed her. So she slapped the shit out of him. It was actually hilarious. Then Luigi showed up and had the guy banned. So we carried on partying. It was a really fun night.”

Behind me, my bedroom door opens, and Tori steps out, looking tired but happy, and I turn to her. “You protected Ana last night? You put yourself in danger for her?”

Tori blushes. “Sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?” I try not to smile too broadly in front of Leonid in case he thinks I’m soft. “Thank you, Tori. Thank you for taking care of Ana.”

Anastasia smiles. “Morning, Tori.”

“Morning Ana, let’s get some food,” Tori says, walking past us.

“Ana,” I stop her, “where were Aleks and our guards?”

Anastasia blushes, and I look at her pointedly, so she explains, “I asked them to stay out. Luigi had guards inside for us. I just didn’t want there to be a situation.”

I nod and turn to Leonid. “You should tell your sources to get their facts straight as much as I appreciate you keeping an eye on things. We only need facts.”

Leonid bows his head in submission. “My apologies. Perhaps we are lucky to have Mrs. Volkov in the family.”

I smirk. “That’s more like it. Are you joining us for breakfast?”

“No, I have affairs to attend to. I just wanted to sort this out.”

He gives me a dark smile and then leaves, so I join the girls for a nice, rather greasy breakfast.

After breakfast, Anastasia leaves to have her nails done, and Tori accompanies me to the office. We both sit in silence, working on our documents. I enjoy the comfortable silence between us as two hard-working individuals.

After a few hours of working, I hear her make a noise, and I glance up. “Everything okay?”

“I have another report here, but I don’t think it belongs to this situation. It’s about some buildings you want to buy,” she says, swinging her chair to look at me.

“I was going over it thinking it was one of mine, and I see some discrepancies,” she says. “Can I show you?”

“You don’t have to worry about those,” I say. “Those are actually for me from Evgeni and Leonid.” I hold my hand out, and she hesitates. “Yeah, but you’re losing a lot of money paying bribes you don’t have to pay. Like, there are legal loopholes that you can exploit here and save yourself some cash.”

I knit my eyebrows together and tilt my head. “Really? Can you show me?”

She wheels her chair over and opens the folder, setting it down between us. She takes her pen and points to a paragraph. “Technically speaking, you don’t have to rezone here. This area is already zoned as industrial. Whoever told you this wasn’t zoned that way is an idiot. It’s such an unnecessary step. You can literally just move your business in and start operating.”

She points to another paragraph and explains how I can set up a legit-looking company here that I can then pass money through without it being noticed. I watch her in fascination. She is so intelligent and clearly knows what she is talking about. I try to listen intently, but she amazes me, so eventually, I stop her. “Redo this report with your suggestions, and give it to me to look over. Make your suggestions in red, and I’m

going to see what idiot is making these suggestions and costing me money.”

“I hope no one is going to get hurt on my account,” Tori says anxiously. “I mean, I know that’s what families like ours do, but it’s probably just that they didn’t know any better.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” I say with a smile, reaching for her hand and squeezing it. “You’re doing great things for the family, and I’m pleased about it. You’re proving everyone wrong, especially Leonid, that you can’t be trusted. I knew you could.”

I raise her hand to my lips and kiss her fingers gently.

“There’s also a bunch of inspections you can bypass if you divide the units into smaller units,” she says shyly. “But I’ll make a note of it on the document. This one will take me a day, so I’ll do it now and get it to you by tonight.”

“Your family really lucked out,” I say suddenly, surprising even myself. “You’re by far one of the most intelligent people I’ve met, and you could have really boosted your family if they’d let you.”

“Try telling them that,” she laughs. “My family doesn’t exactly think I stand out. As the youngest of my cousins, I’m generally protected and kept in the dark about things.”

I shake my head. “They’re idiots, Tori. I mean that.”

She gives me a dazzling smile, and I can see she isn’t used to this kind of praise. That smile, though. I will praise her all the time if that’s what I get to see. Making her happy makes me happy in a way I haven’t felt in a long time, and even though there’s a pang of nagging guilt about Mila, I feel like my deceased wife would have loved Tori.

Chapter 14 - Vittoria

With guilt gnawing at me, I sit down at breakfast with Ivan. I have practiced this speech in my head over and over again. I need to do this.

“Is something the matter?” he asks me as we tuck into our eggs.

I smile at him. “I miss going to the public library. I know we have so many books here, but it’s non-fiction I’m after.”

“Why don’t you go this morning, then?” Ivan asks as I hoped he would.

I nod. “I think I will go this morning and get something light to read in the non-fiction section.”

With that, we settle into our comfortable silence as we eat. Ivan doesn’t seem to sense anything else is off with me though I worry he’ll send Aleks with me. However, after breakfast, he simply gives me a soft kiss before I leave.

I ask the driver to take me to the public library, and I sit back and relax. The hard part at this point is over, convincing Ivan I wanted to go to the public library. Technically speaking, that’s exactly where I want to be, but for nefarious reasons that are building a guilty feeling within me.

The driver finds parking a block away, and I walk toward the library, trying to appear casual, just in case anyone is following me. I can’t just go in, get a book, do what I need to, and leave. I need to make out as though I am actually enjoying myself there. Whoever sees me must think I’m a regular person browsing for books.

I walk through the doors and look around. I find the non-fiction section quickly but take my time running my hands over titles. Every so often, I pull one off the shelf and browse

through it as though I'm interested in its contents. I actually would like to check out some psych books while I'm here.

I move to that section and slowly browse the books, glancing around now and then to ensure no one is watching me. I move deeper into the section where it is harder to see me. I quickly skim through the books before I find the one I am looking for.

I open it to page one hundred and twenty-seven, slip a folded letter into the pages, shut it, and put it back. The letter details to Alessandro what he should be negotiating for and what he should make look appealing to Ivan. I want to do right by my family and focus on the fact that my father's still in hospital in a coma to squash the guilt building in me. There's a part of me that wants to do right by Ivan as well. It's a strong feeling, one that doesn't want to betray him. It's the part of me that feels safe resting in his arms at night. Who enjoyed the feel of his hard dick stretching me out.

I move to the more modern section on psychology and pick three books. I checked the time; it was almost noon. I've been here long enough.

When my phone rings, I jump slightly and look apologetically at the librarian, who is sternly gazing at me over her glasses. I answer quietly, "Hello?"

"It's me," Ivan says. "I want to meet for lunch at the restaurant if you're done."

"Yeah, I found some good books to read. I'll be there soon," I say before hanging up.

I check out the books with a different librarian, pack them into the book bag I brought, and then leave the library. I go to the driver and asked him to take me to the restaurant. We're not far away, so when I get there, there's no sign of Ivan.

A beautiful hostess comes to me. "Mrs. Volkov?"

"Yes, that's me," I say, feeling terribly awkward, everyone treats me like I'm so special here.

“This way, Mr. Volkov will be here soon. He is stuck in traffic.” She leads me to the private booth and sits me down. “Your waitress will bring you a glass of water and take your drinks order shortly.”

“Thank you,” I say and then look at her curiously. “How do you say thank you in Russian?”

“Spasibo,” she pronounces it slowly for me.

“Spasibo,” I say with a grin. She gives me a warm smile and walks off to seat other guests.

I’m just settled when Leonid, of all people, sits opposite me. I instantly tense up.

Leonid looks at me for a moment, then he laces his fingers in front of him, “You and I both know you’re going to betray Ivan, why not let me make it easier and help you.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing, I sit back nervous and can feel a blush creeping up my face as I answer him, “I’m not planning on betraying Ivan, you’re mistaken. Perhaps he should know about this conversation?”

“It was just a test,” he chuckles darkly before taking out his gun and placing on the table, “Of course, if you don’t think so and decide to run to Ivan with any misgivings, you may not find yourself breathing for much longer.”

I swallow hard, “Understood.” When he looks up sharply, I glance behind me and see Ivan walking in. Leonid gets up, puts his gun away, gives me a disgusted look, and leaves. Ivan sits down and smiles. “I hope I didn’t keep you waiting too long.”

“Not at all,” I say with a genuine smile.

“So, what did you check out at the library?” he asks.

A small part of me is nervous that he knows what I did, but I shake my head. “Just some books on psychology. I’ve always been interested in how the brain works.” I take them out to show them to him then I put them back in the book bag.

“Interesting, you’ll have to teach me some new things,” he smiles.

After lunch, we head back to the apartment.

“Where’s Ana?” I ask, setting my things down.

Ivan hangs up his jacket. “She’s gone out with friends. That child is a socialite and doesn’t sit still.”

“She’s sweet and very kind,” I say without thinking. Ivan pauses and then comes over to me. “You know, we’ll be alone for the rest of the day.”

I grin. “Really? Whatever will we do with our time.”

“I have an idea,” he says softly, kissing me, his hands coming up to play with my breasts.

“Ivan,” I breathe, “what if a guard walks in.”

“They’ll walk right back out again,” he says teasingly.

I’m hesitant, this is all so new to me, and his smiles and soft touch catch me off guard, this man is a monster and a killer, but I like to touch his body. I think back to my college days and how girls would talk about what they did with their boyfriends. I reach down and cup his crotch, massaging it gently.

He closes his eyes. “Are we getting over our shyness?”

“I just want to please you,” I say softly.

I rub his dick until I feel it get hard in his pants. “I’ve never... I want to....” I fumble over my words. “I know men like blowjobs.”

He chuckles and starts to undo his pants. “Is that what you want to do?”

I nod, looking down, but he tilts my face up. “You have to look me in the eyes while you suck my cock.”

I nod and slowly sink to my knees. I swallow hard as Ivan holds his cock out. “Lick the tip.”

I do as I'm told, swirling my tongue around it. He groans, letting me know I'm doing a good job.

I cover the head with my mouth and suck softly, and I feel his fingers grip my hair as he mutters, "Move it in and out of your mouth as you suck it."

I do as I'm told again, trying to fit as much of his cock in my mouth as I can without gagging. He holds my head, so he's in quite far, and holds me there. I breathe heavily through my nose and tilt my head to look up at him. His lust-filled eyes are gazing down at me, half closed in pleasure. Then he starts to rock his hips back and forth, sliding his cock in and out my mouth. I stick my tongue out, thinking it might be easier. He groans and moves his hips harder, going a bit deeper and causing me to gag. Suddenly he thrusts deep into my throat, and I choke slightly. He holds me there until I think I'm going to suffocate, then pulls out.

I won't lie; the roughness has my panties wet in anticipation. He holds out his hand, and I take it. He pulls me up and walks me over to the dining room table. He turns me around and bends me over it. Shaking with excitement, I prop myself on the table. I feel him pull my pants down, and then he moves my thong to the side, rubbing the wet tip of his dripping cock around my entrance.

I whimper softly and try to back onto it, but he holds my hips in place. He sweeps my leg with his foot, and suddenly my legs are wider apart, and my top half is flat against the table. He puts a hand on my back, keeping me there as he pushes his cock deep inside me, this time a little faster than the last. I groan out and pant slightly, rocking my hips.

"You..." he says, "your body belongs to me. Say it."

"I belong to you," I whimper out. "Please..."

He pushes into me deeply, and I cry out in pleasure. He starts pumping his hips, and I slowly feel the tension building up inside me. He's moving roughly this time, but I'm enjoying

the pain and pleasure mixed. When his hand leaves me, I lift myself slightly and pull my top off. He reaches around me and cups my breasts as I pull my bra down. The angle he's hitting inside me is so pleasurable that I'm already sweating from trying to hold back.

He pulls out slowly and then slams into me, lifting me a little each time. And when he does, the head of his cock hits my g-spot, and I cry out his name.

"Scream it louder," he murmurs.

"Ivan," I cry out louder. "Yes! Yes! Yes! God, yes!" I continue until I feel my walls clench around his dick like a vice.

He moves a little as though he is just pushing himself over the edge. I feel his cum fill me up inside, and the warm feeling makes me orgasm. He holds me as I do, and I know I'm falling hard for him.

Chapter 15 - Ivan

I can't stop thinking about how amazing it is to be with Tori. It's throwing me off slightly, I want her, but I feel like I'm betraying Mila. I need to get over this. Mila is gone, Tori is here now, and she's making a considerable effort to help my family. That in itself is surprising, I never thought a Sorvino could be so useful. Yet she's trying her best, to please me in every aspect of life. That's more than what I thought I would get when I married her.

After breakfast, I kiss her goodbye and head downstairs with my car keys in hand. I have a meeting with Leonid at one of our warehouses to inspect the workers packing the drugs.

As I pull out of the parking garage, I get an uneasy feeling. I brush it off and join the rush hour traffic that I will sit in for a while.

My mind wanders to Tori as we slowly make our way through the streets, myself and the hundreds of others trying to navigate New York. I hate driving at this time, but I get frustrated with my actual driver because he always tries to make detours and gets us stuck in more traffic—a sweet old guy, one of my cousin's uncles, but not a great navigator.

I arrive at the warehouse and see the usual cars parked in the bay. I park in the open so that I can get in and out and back on the road, back to Tori.

I climb out of my car and button my suit jacket. I realize I've left my phone in the car and bend down to get it. As I do, bullets whiz over my head. I keep ducking down as bullets rain down upon me, hitting my car but missing me. I crawl back into the driver's side and try to keep my head down. I start the car and pull off at speed, leaving the industrial area while weaving through traffic like a maniac. I don't dare stop or look to see if someone's following me.

Calm but annoyed, I grab my phone and call Aleks.

“Yes, boss?”

“Someone just tried to kill me,” I roar. “Get Evgeni and Leonid to my apartment immediately.”

I hang up and concentrate on my driving. Sirens sound behind me, and I sigh, pulling off to the side and waiting.

The cop touches the back of my car and then comes to the driver’s window. I roll it down and look up at him.

He looks at me, and I see he knows who I am. “Um, just your license and registration, sir.”

I get him both, and he checks them, nods, and gives them back to me. “You’re free to go. Thank you, and sorry for the bother.”

“No problem,” I say before pulling away and driving toward the apartment.

My guards are waiting for me in the parking garage, and I’m surrounded when I climb out of my car. I give Aleks the keys. “Take it to be repaired and bulletproofed, and tell them to send the bill to the restaurant.”

Aleks leaves, and I take the elevator with my guards to my apartment. I don’t want to freak Tori or Anastasia out, but I need to ensure they’re safe. I pause at Anastasia’s room, I can hear her talking to her friend on the phone, so I go to the office.

Tori is hunched over the reports marking through them in red pen. I clear my throat, and she glances at me. “Hey, you’re back early?”

“I was nearly killed.” I instantly see the worry in her eyes and I’m taken by surprise again. Could she actually have feelings for me? She gets up and comes to me.

“What do you mean? Are you hurt?” I can see the concern in her eyes and brush a stray lock of hair back from her face. “I’m okay, they missed, but we need to....”

“Ivan?” Evgeni calls, rushing in. “Thank God. Where did they attack you? Were you injured? Should I call the doctor?”

I hold my hand up. “They missed,” I say as Leonid hurries in. “But they knew I’d be there, and if I hadn’t forgotten my phone in the car, I’d probably be dead.”

“Thank God you’re not,” Leonid says, then he turns to eye out Tori. “Is this your cousins doing?”

Tori frowns, but I involuntarily snap at Leonid before she can say anything. “Give it a damn rest. Not everything is the fucking Italians.”

“There was an attempt on your life, Ivan, and the Italians will gain a lot from your death,” Leonid says, looking sorry for himself.

I turn to Evgeni. “Find out who ordered the hit. I want to return the favor as soon as possible.”

Evgeni leaves immediately, and Leonid perks up. “It could be the Italians. It is a possibility.”

I turn to Tori. “Speak to Don Sorvino. Find out if he ordered the hit?”

Tori nods. “I can, but they won’t tell me anything with your men there.”

“Phone your brother to collect you, and tell him to bring guards. I don’t want you getting hurt,” I say, then watch her leave.

“It’s a bad idea to trust her, Ivan. This could all be part of their plan to get revenge. Don’t you see that? You’re assuming she will be honest if the Italians did put a hit out for you.” Leonid is frustrated. I can see that. I pull my gun out, grab his shirt and slam his back into the wall, placing my gun under his chin as I growl, “I trust her, Leonid. That is the end of this goddam discussion. Now piss off and make yourself useful, and find out who the fuck put a hit on me! The Sorvinos are not the only fucking enemies I have.”

Leonid looks livid, but he won't talk back to me. I've effectively chosen Tori over him. We both know that, but Leonid leaves without a word after I release him. I feel fuck all. Does he think I'm an idiot? That I don't know who to trust.

Until Tori proves she can't be trusted, I will trust her. I've given her no reason to lie to me.

I sit at my office and shoot a text to Anastasia to come to see me. I pour myself a glass of bourbon while I wait for her, sitting back and sipping on it. I go over and over in my head who could possibly have it out for me. That list is long. I've fucked with many people in my life as a career criminal. There's no shortage of people who would be happy to see me dead.

I still don't think it was the Sorvinos, though. If I die, Leonid takes over. They don't want me out of the way until they gain some of my territories.

There's a soft knock at the door, and I look up at my daughter. "Ana, we need to talk. Sit down."

She knows when I'm serious and hurries to sit in the armchair in front of my desk. "What's wrong, father?"

"There was an attempt on my life today," I won't sugarcoat it for her. She knows what kind of life I lead. "And I don't know if they'll try to get to me through you or Tori, so I don't want you going anywhere without your security details. Do you understand me? This is serious. Don't evade them or leave them outside. Have them with you at all times."

Anastasia looks sad and asks, "Are you okay, though?"

"I'm fine, honey. They were lousy shots, to begin with."

Ana gets up and comes around to hug me. "I promise I'll take security everywhere."

"Good girl. For now, though, stay in the apartment for the day, okay?"

She nods and leaves quietly.

I sip on my bourbon, going over my list of enemies in my head.

Chapter 16 - Vittoria

While I wait outside, Ivan's guards protect me. Luigi arrives in his car, followed by security from our family. I bid Ivan's guards farewell and got into the car. Luigi pulls into traffic and immediately asks, "What happened?"

"Someone tried to kill Ivan," I say calmly. "He wants me to ask Alessandro if this is from him."

"He trusts you that much?" Luigi laughs. "The fucking idiot."

I feel so guilty when he says that. Ivan has been very trusting of me and always defends me against Leonid, who clearly suspects I'm up to something. I fidget slightly, and Luigi asks, "Is anything wrong? Is he hurting you?"

I shake my head. "Don't worry. I'm taking care of myself."

We reach Alessandro's estate, and I'm led to his office to wait for him. Luigi promises he's just outside the room if I need him, which I find sweet of my brother.

I don't wait long before Alessandro comes in, closing the door behind him. I stand respectfully, and he kisses each of my cheeks. "Caio, Tori, what brings you here? Has something gone wrong?"

I sit down with him and fidget slightly. "I can't stay too long. I need to sort things out."

"I got your letter in the book. Frankie has used the territories you suggested and is fudging the numbers to make them more appealing. Don't worry. If anything goes wrong, we'll get you out of there."

I nod. "I know you will, but there's something else we need to discuss."

"What is it?" he asks, looking worried.

I take a deep breath. “Ivan has sent me here to ask you for your honest answer. Did you try to gun him down this morning?”

Alessandro looked surprised, and I knew it wasn't him. I sigh in relief. “I didn't think you would, but he wanted me to ask you.”

Alessandro shakes his head. “No, it wasn't me. He must have more enemies than us, Tori. You can tell him it wasn't me who ordered the hit and that I honor our unity through marriage.”

I nod and breathe deeply. He asks, “So is it going all right? Is he hurting you in any way?”

“No, no. Nothing at all.” I feel awkward speaking about this because I don't know how to explain to my cousin that I'm falling for the man responsible for my father being in hospital.

Alessandro nods. “If you need anything, contact me. I'll have men over in minutes.”

I stand. “I will. Don't stress too much. I can handle this.”

As I walk out, my smart watch goes off, and I glance at it. Day three of my period. Weird. I frown; I'm as regular as can possibly be. My period should have started three days ago.

I doubt it's anything special, but I ask Luigi to stop at the pharmacy on our way to Kira's place. I don't tell him what I need, and I make them pack it in a brown paper bag so it can't be seen.

We arrive at Kira's, and I greet my sister. She looks even plumper than before, so I say, “You look ready to explode.”

“A big baby girl,” she comments with a smile. “We are thinking of names at the moment, so if you have any good ones, go ahead.”

I laugh. “I would probably pick something terrible, but before we sit down, can I use your loo?”

“Sure, we’ll wait in the living room for you,” she says, leading Luigi off. I go to the loo and hurry to unbox the pregnancy test. I read the instructions and awkwardly pee on the correct end of the stick. I put it aside and wash my hands. I don’t flush because I don’t want them to know I’m done just yet.

Time feels like it ticks by so slowly, and I know they will come looking for me soon. I figure it’s a negative, and I pick it up to throw it away when a faint line catches my attention. A line that turns the image into a plus sign.

No. No. No. No. No.

I feel panic rising as I realize I’m pregnant with Ivan’s child. This can’t be happening. I wasn’t planning on staying long-term with him. I am to screw him over and get out without any problems. I can’t be having a baby.

A sudden rapping on the door makes me jolt, and I hurriedly say, “Almost done.”

My voice comes out strained, and Kira says through the door, “Tori, are you okay? You don’t sound okay.”

I realize I didn’t lock the door too late when she turns the handle and walks in, seeing the pregnancy test in my hand.

“Oh shit,” she says loudly. “Oh shit. Oh shit. Is that? Are you pregnant?”

I look at her with wide eyes. “Please, Kira, don’t tell anyone. I need to figure out what I’m going to do.”

“You can’t have that asshole’s baby,” she says even louder. “Tori, it will tie you to him forever. You have to get out of here.”

I flush the toilet and throw away the stick in the trash. “Kira, listen to me. Promise me you won’t tell anyone until I have this figured out,” I say, looking at her sternly.

She swallows and sighs. “Okay, but you better think of something soon.”

“You’re pregnant?” I hear Luigi’s voice behind Kira. Kira turns and grabs his wrist, dragging him into the bathroom.

“You’re not going to say anything to anyone about it,” Kira growls. “Do you understand me? We need to stick together, we’re the only family we have.”

Luigi eyes us both, then sighs. “Fine, but let me know if I can help.”

I nod. “It’s agreed then. This stays secret until I’m ready to say something.”

They both nod, and I look at Luigi. “I better go home before they suspect something. Can you take me?”

“How else are you going to get there, dumbass?” he asks, joking with me. I smile and nod, and we all three leave the bathroom, much to the surprise of a nearby maid.

Luigi and I hug Kira goodbye, and we get into the car, and he drives me back toward the apartment. We don’t say a word. There’s nothing to say. No one can find out about this.

I take the elevator to the penthouse, placing a hand on my womb and removing it quickly when the doors open. I walk in and call, “Ivan?”

“In the library,” I hear him call back. I head that way, and as I enter the room, I see him sitting in the corner reading a book.

“What did he say?” He sets his book down and locks eyes with me.

“He had nothing to do with it, he swears. He is honoring our family unity through marriage.”

Ivan nods. “I didn’t think he would do it. He’s smart, and he wouldn’t start an unnecessary war. No, someone else is

up to something. You need security everywhere you go from now on.”

“I agree,” I say, then shift around awkwardly.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m actually exhausted,” I say with a sigh. “I’m just going to go lie down. You read.”

I go to him and plant a soft kiss on his lips. “I’ll see you later.”

Chapter 17 - Ivan

Something is bothering Tori, and that worries me. I'm not sure what to do, though. When I sit down for breakfast with her and Anastasia, I can see the worry on her face, and I want to ask her, but I'm not sure if she'll open up to me unless we're alone. Maybe I can get her alone later and ask her.

I do trust she isn't lying about her cousin not ordering the hit, but sometimes I wonder if Leonid is right, and I'm too trusting. Mila was killed because I placed my trust in the wrong person. I defended them as well, believing they would do what was right. The love of my life died as a result.

A maid puts the paper next to me, and I open it, scanning through the articles to see if any catch my interest.

Anastasia and Tori eat in silence while I do this, but there's no tension. Once I'm done with the paper, I finish off my breakfast.

"I'm going to check on babushka," I tell Anastasia. "Do you want to come with me?"

I stand as she's about to answer me, but she doesn't get a chance as the emergency stairway door bursts open, and armed men stride into my home, shouting as they enter.

I yell for Tori and Anastasia to get down, pull my gun out from under the table where it's secretly holstered, and fire at the men, forcing them back for a bit to give my guards a chance to respond.

As I hear my guards' footsteps, I duck down to look at Anastasia. "I'm fine," she says.

I look at Tori, who has buried her head in her knees, and I put a reassuring hand on hers.

The noise dies down, and I slowly get up. Aleks stands with one man who is bleeding from his arm. "We kept this one for you, boss."

“Take him to the guest room and make him comfortable,” I say coldly, helping Tori and Ana to their feet first.

“I want you both to stay in the beach house. It’s more secure. I’ll send extra guards. Go, I’ll follow soon enough,” I explain, leaving no room for argument. “Don’t pack. I’ll have the maids send your things over.”

They leave hurriedly with some of the guards, and I go to the guest room, where Aleks is strapping our captive in a chair.

This specific guest room is soundproofed, and the cupboard is full of toys to use when you want someone to fess up to something they did.

I stand at the door for a moment, looking at the man in question. I walk in, and Aleks shuts the door. I go to the built-in wardrobe and open the door, looking at my selection.

I look at Aleks. “The car battery should do.”

Aleks removes the car battery and sets it next to the man’s feet. Leonid comes in as Aleks stabs two metal rods into each of the man’s legs. He cries out and whimpers, and I know this isn’t going to be too hard. Alex connects the battery to car cables and attaches one to a rod in the man’s leg. He holds the other and looks at me until I nod.

“Who are you working for?” I ask.

“The Sorvinos,” he grumbles, and I nod to Aleks.

He taps the jumper cable against the other rod, and electricity shoots through the man’s body, causing him to clench his jaw but still cry out.

“No one would betray their family that quickly. This is a setup. Who do you really work for?” I ask.

He mumbles something in Italian, but I can tell it’s broken Italian. He’s trying to frame the Sorvinos. I nod to Aleks, who taps the other jumper cable to the rod again, causing the man to scream and pant hard.

Leonid steps forward and says, “I told you the Sorvinos were up to something, and you wouldn’t listen. You cannot trust Alessandro Sorvino.”

I shake my head. “No, he has assured me he isn’t involved. I believe that. This man is covering up for someone, someone closer to home.”

We torture him for almost two hours, but he doesn’t give up anything. Eventually, I have enough and take out my gun and shoot him between the eyes, turning to Alex, “Ditch the body in the river, clean this place up.”

Leonid follows behind me, “If not Alessandro Sorvino, then who?”

A thought occurs to me. I don’t want to believe it, but it is within the realm of possibilities. “Leonid, I trust you most of all. I think someone within our family is making a power play against me. I think Evgeni has betrayed me. I trust you because you are my brother, so look into it discreetly.”

Leonid puts a hand on my shoulder. “Of course, I will let you know as soon as I have any information.”

I nod and squeeze his shoulder. “Don’t let Ma know that anything is going on, okay? She worries enough about the two of us without learning someone close to us is sabotaging our family.”

Leonid nods. “Don’t worry. She won’t know a thing. No one will.”

I watch him leave and look around. The maids are all hiding in the kitchen, so I go there and explain that I want them to pack everything of my, Tori’s, and Ana’s and have it sent to the beach house. They can then sort out this apartment for when we want to return.

They all agree and hurry off, and I turn to see Aleks coming in. “Two of my trusted guys will dispose of the body. There’s an evil glint in Aleks’ eyes. He’s always enjoyed killing. “What do you want to do now, boss?”

“Gather my guards. I’m going to the beach house. I want more men sent over there, men we trust, Aleks. You vet them. I want my women guarded at all times. Do you understand me?” I ask.

Aleks nods. “You know I will always have your back, boss, after everything you’ve done for me.”

I nod, loyalty isn’t cheap, but loyalty like Aleks’ is irreplaceable. He leaves and comes back a few moments later with my personal guards. They escort me downstairs to our armored car, and I sit back. I texted Anastasia, and she confirmed they arrived without problems and were relaxing by the pool.

This satisfies me, but I’m on high alert as we drive through traffic. A lot of my enemies won’t hesitate to take me on in broad daylight. Although the beach house is secure, nowhere is truly safe. Not really.

We arrive at the estate, and the guards shut the large gates behind us once we’re safely in. We go through two more sets of wrought iron remote-operated gates before we reach the house.

I glance out the back as I walk past the living room and smile. Tori and Anastasia are lying in bikinis, tanning in the sun. Anastasia is on her phone, and Tori is going over what looks like contracts, ever the workaholic.

I decide to join them, changing into swimming trunks and coming out. I kiss Anastasia’s head, then Tori’s lips, and dive into the pool to let the water wash away the tension.

Chapter 18 - Vittoria

I stand in front of the mirror and place my hands on my firm stomach. Falling pregnant wasn't in my plans to get my revenge against Ivan. It was never the plan. I already know what is valuable to him and what isn't, and I've let Alessandro have all those intimate details through reference books in the library.

I pull my shirt down and check that I have the latest information for Alessandro in my book bag before I leave with Aleks for the library.

I wander the sections for a long time until Aleks finds a place to sit down and says he'll wait for me here while I browse for books. Taking the opportunity, I slip the note into the correct reference book and put it back on the shelf before browsing more psychology books to read.

I find them interesting. At least there's that. I wonder about the tiny human growing inside of me. Is it a boy? Is it a girl? I've never really thought about whether or not I want children, but now that it's happening, I'm even more confused.

Ivan put my father in the hospital. I don't care who ordered the hit. He is ultimately responsible. I think of my father dying, and I have to stop and take a few deep breaths. They said there was no chance, but I've been praying. Surely God can hear me. If my father dies, he'll never meet my child. The thought chills me to the bone, and an incredible sadness falls over me.

I compose myself and then meet back up with Aleks. "We can check these out."

He follows me to where the librarian is, and we check out my books. I put them in my book bag and try to suppress the feeling of guilt building up inside of me.

Ivan is getting royally screwed over. I think as we walk back into the house. I instrumented that. He will lose so much,

his family will lose so much, and I've made it look like they're gaining a good deal. I rush to the bathroom and throw up. I don't know if it's the morning sickness starting or just the overwhelming emotions I feel. I flush the loo and wash my face, patting it dry with a towel.

I go to the home office and get back to work, setting the books on one side. I read the contracts carefully, wanting to make sure there was nothing that I missed. Somewhere in the house, I hear Ivan's phone ring, and I perk up slightly, trying to hear what's being said.

I can hear him talking excitedly, and then he goes quiet.

"Tori?" he calls, "you around?"

"In the office," I call back, swinging my chair around to see him walk in. He smiles and holds a hand out, and I take it. I stand and look up at him. "Is something wrong?"

"Actually, something is very right," he says to me, kissing my fingers. "I just got news from the hospital. I managed to pull some strings with the Russian specialists to look after your father again, and they're confident he can recover fully. He's going to be fine."

I don't know what I feel. Numb, I guess, and then panicked and overwhelmed. The tears begin to fall without me realizing they formed at all.

Ivan strokes my face. "I thought you'd be happy?"

"It's your fault," I sob, punching him in the chest. "It's your fault he was ever there to begin with. Your men put him there, and he could have died. They said he was going to die. They said he wouldn't make it." I try to turn away, but he takes my hands.

"I'm so sorry, Tori. You are right, it is my fault this happened, but I'm glad he's making a full recovery and that it brought you into my life," his voice is soft and gentle, and I shake my head. I don't know what to say back. Everything feels upside down, and I sob harder.

He wraps his strong arms around me and draws me against him, my head resting against his chest. I can hear his heartbeat through his chest, and the rhythm makes me feel better. I try to time my breaths with his breaths. I eventually stop sobbing, and once I'm calm enough, he lets me go, and I look up at him. His eyes are filled with regret. I can see it clear as day.

"I promise I will never let anything or anyone hurt you like that again," he says softly. "I won't let anyone you love get hurt."

I swallow hard but don't break eye contact with him because I believe him. I think he would kill anyone who broke my heart. And here I am, about to break his at any moment Alessandro decides.

"I should get back to work. The distraction will do me good," I say quietly, and he steps back.

He looks down at me, then closes the distance again and kisses me deeply. I melt against him, returning the kiss passionately. I feel electricity charge through my body, my skin feels on fire, and there are butterflies in my belly.

Not to mention his child.

I pull away slowly and smile. "That's also a good distraction."

He chuckles and kisses my forehead. "I'll leave you to work."

We don't talk much for the rest of the day. At dinner, I'm quiet while he and Anastasia discuss plans for her to change universities because she wants to study something different. They don't ask my opinion, and I don't offer it. I simply eat my food and excuse myself, going to shower.

I sit on the edge of the bed and slowly rub cream into my body, taking extra care of myself. I'm still emotional, but I can't wait to see my father. Although I think he will flip when he finds out about our plan, he may want revenge too. I don't know what to think.

I slide into the bed and curl up, hugging my pillow under my head. I don't fall asleep, and Ivan is quiet as he cleans up and slides into bed. I turn over and curl up with my head on his chest. He wraps his arms around me and strokes my arm gently with one hand. It feels right.

This feels right.

I've never felt at home anywhere, constantly the odd one out. The overlooked one—the one who doesn't matter. Here I feel treasured, as though I've finally found my place.

But Ivan is an evil man. There is no getting around that. Just like there is no denying Alessandro is evil, along with Katya, or Miguel.

There's something more, though. I sense it. I think there's more than meets the eye. More than what the families see.

Is love possible in families like ours? I mean, between enemies. I don't know but what I do know is that right now, I feel safer than I've ever felt, and I close my eyes, starting to doze off to the sound of his heartbeat and the rhythm of his thumb stroking my arm.

Chapter 19 - Vittoria

I'm so damn nervous. In all the chaos, report checking, and deal-making, I've had to work around planning Ivan's grandmother's birthday party. Well, not plan but oversee. I was handed the plan that had already been made, and I had to ensure it was all accounted for and sorted.

A lot of it was relatively normal, what you would expect at a fancy birthday party, but some of the more cultural elements threw me a little off guard.

Anastasia finishes curling my hair. "Perfect."

I stand up, stare at the figure-hugging revealing dress in the mirror, and look at her pleadingly. "I'm basically nude."

"You're not. You look great," she assures me. "Hair and makeup are on point, smoking hot sexy dress, and some nice flat shoes because you'll be dancing a lot, trust me."

I pout and look in the mirror. The dress is a v-line that makes my cleavage pop. My somewhat growing cleavage. My boobs are starting to get so tender I don't know what to do with them.

It's a backless number and reaches the floor, sweeping a little behind me. It's dark red, a color I'm told Ivan is especially fond of on women, and the off-shoulder straps feel like they're going to fall off. The whole dress feels like it's just going to fall off.

Anastasia notices my panic and shakes her head. "It's secure, don't worry. You're going to be the talk of the family."

"I never was with mine, and now I'm not sure I ever want to be of anyone's family," I confess.

Ivan comes into the room, and Anastasia smiles. "She's ready. Let me go touch up my makeup."

It's an excuse to leave, we all know it, but she hurries off, and Ivan ogles me.

"Do I look okay?" I ask quietly, clasping my hands in front of me. Unfortunately, I realize it makes my cleavage pop more, which I can tell from how Ivan's eyebrows raise.

"You look magnificent, Tori," he says, coming over and kissing me softly on the lips. "The most beautiful woman I've ever met."

Knowing how much he loved Anastasia's mother really tugs at my heart. I'm such a dog.

I try to push the thoughts out of my head as I take his arm. He leads me out of the house with Anastasia ahead of us and into the limousine.

I sit nervously, fidgeting with my fingers as we drive to the venue where everything is set up for the party.

"It's going to be perfect," Ivan says, placing his hand over mine to still my fidgeting. "We're a big family, but everyone will love you."

"Except Leonid," I can't help but comment.

"He'll come around," Ivan says. "My brother is just hard-headed sometimes."

Once we reach the venue, we're expected, as the head of the family and hosts, to stand at the door and welcome all the guests. Ivan is to my left, Anastasia is to my right, and we greet everyone as they walk in. Ivan introduces every person to me, but I'm already struggling to pronounce some of the names, and I forget others. I'm pleased when Arina arrives, looking gorgeous in what looks like a longer version of a jazz-style dress right out of the musical Chicago.

She hugs me tightly and kisses my cheek. "You look radiant, my dear. I'm so glad to see you again."

"I'm so happy to see you again, too," I gush, giving her another hug before she moves over to embrace Anastasia.

I'm getting antsy with everyone still coming, and Anastasia must pick up on my nerves because she excuses us from her father and takes me to sit at our table.

"Thank you," I say. "It's a lot of people."

"Some of them are just business partners or people who work for the family," she says, pouring me a glass of ice-cold water. I sip it slowly.

"We get that too. Our families have a lot in common, actually," I mention.

"I wish my mother were here," she says wistfully. "She loved Babushka Maria so much."

I reach for her hand. "Your mother sounds like she was amazing."

"She was. Always the life of the party and always the one to heal any rifts that happened. She was a peacemaker and tempered my father a lot. Many people didn't like that. The guy who gave away our location the day it happened was my father's best friend. My father trusted him over everyone else even though everyone warned him that Donald was up to no good. My father regretted trusting him so much."

"My mother was also killed in a family-related incident," I say gently, holding her hand. "So, on that front, I can empathize with you, but I want you to know I am in no way a replacement for your mom. I could never take her place. It would even be kind of weird if I tried."

We both laugh nervously, and I continue, "But I am here if you need anything at all."

"Thank you," she squeezes my hand, and we sit back as Ivan joins us now that all the guests have arrived.

As we make our way through the meal, Anastasia, Arina, and I have a fun conversation about how men are all the same. We agree that they only want one thing. That the more ambitious they are, the more dangerous they are. They are all

stubborn mules who never realize the women standing behind them get them so far in life.

Ivan raises his eyebrows at a few comments we giggle over, and I squeeze his hand.

The music starts, and everyone watches as Ivan takes his grandmother out for the first dance. Everyone applauds, and soon a few people join them.

I turn my attention back to Anastasia when I feel a tap on my shoulder and look up at Ivan.

“We should dance, as the head of the family,” he says.

“I can’t dance,” I say, worried. “Like I have three left feet and nine big toes and cannot dance.”

Ivan laughs heartedly, drawing more attention to us, but then he takes my hand. “We danced at the wedding. All you have to do is trust me and follow me.”

I swallow nervously as we walk into the center of the dance floor. A song starts, one I don’t know, but Ivan puts my hand on his shoulder and takes my other hand, placing his hand on my waist.

“Ready?” he whispers.

“Yes,” I say with a giggle.

He slowly starts to sweep me around. I lean against him, responding to the way he moves. I try my best at least, and several couples from the tables applaud.

“Look at me. Focus on me,” Ivan says, and I look into his loving eyes. He sweeps me around, and I feel like an absolute princess. It wasn’t until after the song ended that I realized everyone is watching us. I blush, but Ivan chuckles and takes me in his arms for another dance.

We spend the night dancing, talking, and laughing, and I get to know a few more of his family members who seem enamored with me. I thought my social awkwardness would be my undoing, but I find Ivan’s family easy to get along with.

We eventually get home, and I can't help but admit that I've fallen for Ivan in a big way and that this is a very big problem. I wonder if I can stop Alessandro from screwing him. Maybe I can ask Alessandro to help me leave the country like Kira did, and I'll raise our child overseas. The thought of leaving Ivan and raising our baby without a father makes my heart ache, and I don't know what I'm going to do to fix this situation.

Chapter 20 - Ivan

Sweeping around the dance floor with Tori, watching her infectious laughter fill the room, and her intellect challenge others made me fall even harder for her. I'm head over heels, and I cannot deny it anymore.

It's as though I can feel love again, like a piece of me that died with Mila has been resurrected. I feel as though Mila has given her blessing for me to move on, to start again, to love again, and feel warmth and happiness.

Tori is so much more than her shyness. Behind her shy smile and demeanor is a brilliant young woman who has ambition and can go far in life. She is not only intelligent but strong, and I know she is the perfect queen to rule by my side for the rest of our lives.

While I'm sitting outside sipping on my afternoon coffee, I toy with the idea of having more children. Am I too old? I imagine any children Tori and I make would be absolutely gorgeous, like Anastasia. I seem to pick women with good genes. I think about what I would do if I had a son, someone to inherit the family. Someone who would take over when I'm done. Someone who will be brilliant, well-read, and fun.

I hear footsteps and glance to my left. I see Leonid approaching and set my coffee down.

"Why are you so happy?" he asks curiously as he sits to my left.

I shake my head. "Just planning the future, and it looks good, my brother."

"I wouldn't get too excited about the future just yet," Leonid says with a sigh. "You were right. There is a faction of men within the family that want to overthrow you."

“Evgeni has planned to overthrow me?” I ask, feeling a heavy disappointment settle in my stomach. “My own cousin?”

“The only one I can think of at this point.” Leonid looks at me sadly. “But I can handle it. I will make our little problem go away.”

I shake my head. “No, I want to deal with this directly myself.”

“Ivan, you are the head of the family, you delegate. Don’t get your hands dirty over a traitor,” Leonid insists, but I shake my head again.

“I’ll ask Evgeni to come to speak to me. I’ll get to the bottom of this.”

Leonid sighs again, so I ask, “What?”

“He’s gone to arrange another trade with a family and will be out of state for two weeks,” he shrugs. “That’s why I say I could just send someone to handle him, and poof, our problem is gone.”

“No, I want him to admit it to me before I put a bullet between his eyes for betraying me.” I stand up. “Thanks, Leonid. Just keep this between the two of us for now. I don’t want Evgeni to get wind and make a run for it.”

“Of course. Is there anything else I can help with?” he offers.

“No, nothing for now. Go to your family and enjoy your day,” I say, turning to go inside. I wander around for a moment, musing over the betrayal. I find Tori in the office, and I sit down heavily. She turns to face me.

“What’s wrong?” she asks gently, scooting over to me.

I take her hand in mine. “Evgeni is the one who tried to have me killed. He’s betrayed the family.”

Tori looks distressed, and I give her hand a squeeze. “It’s always harder when it’s someone we’re close to.”

“I’m so sorry, Ivan,” she pulls my hand to her lips and kisses my fingers the way I do to hers.

“I always try to do right by my family. I always try to make sure everyone is taken care of, but there’s always one ungrateful miscreant that has to betray me,” I say with a heavy sigh.

“You’ll figure this out. Speak to him and ask him for reasons,” she says. “There must be a reason. He seems to adore you so much.”

She swings around, pulls papers from her desk, and hands them to me. “I’m finished with the contracts,” she says. “You’re getting an excellent deal out of my family.”

I take the paper from her and start to rifle through them, reading her notes. “Your family isn’t getting anything too bad from me either,” I point out. “In fact, a few of these assets are really nice.”

“A mutual exchange,” she says quietly.

“Seems good to me,” I say, setting the paperwork down on the desk and pulling her off her chair and into my lap. “Now that you’re finished working like a slave, why don’t we curl up on the sofa and read.”

She smiles down at me and kisses my mouth softly. “That sounds like an amazing idea.”

I kiss her back, and for a moment, we simply sit there, kissing each other over and over again. I touch her breast, and she moans loudly, and I raise an eyebrow. “Horny much?” I tease.

She blushes and climbs off my lap. “Let’s go read before you get other ideas of what we should be doing.”

“But those ideas could be fun,” I point out as I let her drag me to the library. We both have books we’re busy with, and there’s a large sofa in here we both curl up on. She leans against me slightly as she reads. I love watching her read. She

concentrates so hard as though she could telepathically transfer the information into her brain forever.

I'm reading a horror novel at the moment, but my heart isn't into it after learning about Evgeni. I keep thinking that he, or whoever decided to go rogue, also was behind the missing money from my account and the situation with the contracts.

I decide to put an arm around Tori and lean back, closing my eyes and relaxing. "Read to me."

"It's psychological stuff. It's boring," she murmurs.

"Read to me anyway," I comment.

She shifts around and starts to read. Her voice is so pleasant to listen to, and it turns out that the stuff she's reading about actually isn't that boring. I listen intently at first, then a little less so. I'm tired, so I shift and lie down with her lying between my legs, her head on my chest. I get comfy and close my eyes. She stops reading after a moment, and I nudge her. "Carry on, or I won't fall asleep."

She giggles and carries on reading, and I slowly close my eyes.

Chapter 21 - Vittoria

With each day that passes, I feel worse and worse. At first, I blamed the morning sickness, which seemed to have hit me very hard. Pregnancy. Zero out of ten. Do not recommend it if you hate puking.

It's not just the morning sickness, though. I love Ivan, and I feel so bad for betraying him. The contracts have been handed to the family lawyer, and I know they are going over them. I'm stressed they'll pick up that something is wrong or point out that the Volkov family is being screwed. I don't know who the lawyer is or how good they are. I can only hope they don't pick up on what I've done.

I can't ask any questions as that will only rouse suspicion, and I don't want to do that. It could put my and my baby's life in danger. I can't just sit here doing nothing, though, as the wait is killing me, and I feel so useless.

It's after the tenth day that I've finally had enough. I go from the library to Ivan's office and knock softly on the door to get his attention.

He looks up and smiles, happy to see me. That's the worst part. He's always so excited to be with me.

"What can I do for the most beautiful woman in my life?" he asks, holding out his hand. "A massage? A date night? A holiday somewhere exotic?"

I take his hand, and he pulls me onto his lap. He kisses me deeply, tangling his fingers in my hair. I don't hold back. I kiss him hungrily before I start to giggle into his mouth. "You're insatiable."

"For you, every day," he growls, kissing my neck softly and giving me shivers.

"I came looking for something to do," I sigh, closing my eyes until he's done trailing kisses on my skin. Then I look

into his eyes. “I feel absolutely useless now that I have nothing to keep me preoccupied. I wasn’t made to play housewife.”

“While there’s nothing wrong with being a housewife, I know you need a challenge. So tell me, what is it you want most in life?” he asks.

I go quiet and think about it for a moment before saying, “Well, I want to practice law. I didn’t work this hard at my studies to be top of my class, not to practice law.”

“What kind of law do you want to practice?” he asks curiously, stroking my back gently. I love when he does that.

“I want to focus on corporate law, maybe some criminal law if the family needs it, but mostly, I want to be an active part of the family business, yours or mine. Even more than that, I want to build a successful business.”

I sigh and pout at him, and he chuckles before he runs his thumb over my bottom lip that’s jutting out.

“Why don’t we start by getting you some offices for your new firm? You better think of a name so we can set it all up.”

I balk at the idea and shake my head. “No, no, that’s too much, Ivan. You can’t just give me a law firm.”

“You’re brilliant, Tori, you’re absolutely amazing, and I have no doubt that it would be a raging success under your guidance,” he says, inclining his head to the side. “It would be an investment, really.”

I sigh and shake my head. “You’re too kind and too generous. I don’t want to take advantage of that.”

Especially because I’m betraying you, I think but do not say out loud.

He kisses my nose. “You will have everything your heart desires, and you can’t stop me from giving it to you. However, I need to finish this work, so can we discuss this later?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. I’ll visit Kira to distract myself,” I say, kissing him softly.

Aleks drives me to Kira, and from there, he hangs out with other guards outside the villa while we talk inside the library.

“Tori, this isn’t good. You need prenatal care and scans, and you need to make sure the baby is healthy. You can’t just ignore the situation,” she says in a hushed, worried tone.

“I know, Kira. I’m not stupid. I’m just figuring it out,” I say. “You don’t understand how complicated the situation is!”

“Oh, don’t I?” she says with a raised eyebrow. “As though I didn’t sleep with Uncle Romero’s rival’s son and have his son, now with a second on the way.”

“Miguel didn’t try to kill Uncle Romero and Papa,” I point out. “I just don’t know what to do at this point.”

“Are you planning on keeping it?” she asks suddenly. “Because you have to decide soon. After you reach a certain number of weeks, they won’t do it anymore.”

“I’m catholic. I would never have an abortion,” I hiss at her, shocked and hurt. “You can’t suggest things like that, surely? Papa didn’t make you have one.”

Kira reaches for my hand. “I didn’t mean you should. I’m just presenting you with your options, judgment-free.”

I squeeze her hand and sigh. “I know I have to deal with this soon, but I don’t know what to do.”

“You should tell Alessandro to get you out of there first of all,” Kira suggests. “And tell him you’re pregnant. He will protect you from Ivan. I swear Alessandro has more power at this point. Ivan wouldn’t dare hurt you.”

“Ivan wouldn’t hurt me at all,” I say confidently. “You don’t know him. You don’t understand him.”

“Are you defending him?” Kira asks, raising an eyebrow

I shake my head quickly. “Not at all. I know what I have to do for my family.” I stand up. “I shouldn’t stay too long. Ivan likes to have dinner with Anastasia and me at six sharp.”

Kira struggles to her feet and reaches for me. I allow her to hug me and awkwardly put my arms around her. She says, “I love you too.” She says it quietly, and I doubt what I heard for a moment.

I look into her eyes, and I can see the love she has for me. I’ve always felt ignored and unloved, but now, I can tell my sister would kill for me.

I kiss both her cheeks. “I love you too.”

We hug again, and then she escorts me to where Aleks is waiting. “I’m ready to go, Aleks,” I say, smiling.

Aleks throws his cards down. “Full house,” he says, taking the three cigars in the middle while Kira’s men complain. Kira clicks her tongue. “He won fair and square, so stop moaning.”

Aleks escorts me to the car, and when I get in, I snort. “How do you know to play poker so well?”

“My mother was a blackjack dealer at a casino. I’d sit at the poker tables when they weren’t busy, and the guys would teach me.”

I think it’s the most I’ve ever heard him say. I smile and sit back, a hand absentmindedly stroking my belly. Should I tell Alessandro? I need to decide soon because Kira is right. I’m going to start showing soon, and then I have no option.”

Chapter 22 - Ivan

I'm sitting out front enjoying a cigar, something I don't often do when Tori arrives home. When she gets out of the car, I can see worry etched on her face. She's upset about something.

I put out the cigar and catch her as she walks up the stairs. "Hey, what's wrong?"

She shakes her head. "Nothing's wrong. I'm just hungry and need a rest."

I frown. "Tori, I've come to know you better than that. If something is bothering you, you can tell me. I can help you fix it."

She shakes her head again. "It's just silly family politics with my sister. I don't really want to talk about it right now."

I kiss her forehead. "I hope it gets sorted out. Having siblings is a blessing in any family."

She nods, and I let her go inside, but I wait for Aleks. As soon as he comes up the porch, I ask, "What happened?"

"She was fine one minute, and the next, she was emotional," Aleks comments. "Don't know what's wrong."

I frown and glance down the hallway she walked down. "I don't like to see her unhappy."

Anastasia comes toward me as I walk into the house. "Father, who I love," she says sweetly, and I snort, "What do you want?"

"Come with me," she says, taking my hand and leading me inside to where Tori sat down in the lounge.

"Sit," she instructs me, pointing at the couch beside Tori. Tori glances at me, but I shrug. I don't know what this is about.

Anastasia smiles brightly. “Father, who I love,” she teases again. “Whatever are you up to tonight?”

“Relaxing?” I suggest. “That was the plan, at least.”

“You relax too much,” she says with a clap of her hands. “I’m in the mood for some good-hearted old-school fun. The three of us are going to the arcade to play games and bowl.”

I shake my head. “Ana, don’t you have friends to do that with? I’m far too old to be playing arcade games.”

She widens her eyes and juts out her bottom lip. “Don’t you want to spend time with me?”

I groan and look at Tori. “See what I live with between the two of you? Fine,” I concede. “Fine! We will go with you tonight.”

“Thank you,” she squeals and hugs me tightly. “Like, we’re leaving in half an hour.” She prances off, and I shake my head. “Change into something comfortable. This child can bowl for hours.”

Tori gives me a sad smile and nods, getting up and kissing my head before she makes her way to the bedroom. Maybe this will cheer her up. I go into the bedroom after her, changing into some track pants and a golf shirt. Nothing fancy, but I’m still presentable.

Tori side-eyes me, and I smirk. “What?”

“You have some, um, definition happening in those pants.” she blushes, looking away.

“Something you can look at all night long,” I tease, going to her and wrapping my arms around her. I kiss her softly, then smack her bum lightly. “Come on, we better hurry, or my child will be most upset.”

She smiles that sad smile again, and it breaks my heart.

She’s still subdued when we arrive at the arcade, but I know my daughter, her bubbly personality will make it fun,

and Tori will soon have a good time.

We start by ordering pizza at the bowling alley and getting our bowling on. We play against each other, and Anastasia wins the first round easily against us. I'm surprised. I didn't realize she'd been practicing.

Tori just barely lost to me, but every time she threw the ball, it would spin, and she would burst into giggles—it was a lot of fun. In the second round, Tori and Anastasia tied. I may have deliberately made a few gutter balls on accidental purpose. In the third round, though, I don't hold back and wipe them both out on the scoring board.

“You're a cheater,” Tori declares as she eats another slice of pizza. “You lulled us into a false sense of security.”

“I'm strategic,” I say, sipping on my beer. Nearby some guards watch over us, ensuring no one comes over and bothers us. Anastasia waves down a waitress, “Can we get another pizza and a large cheesy fries.”

I shake my head. “Who is paying for all this food?”

“You are,” she says with a grin. “Because you love us.”

I chuckle and sip my beer again before setting it down. Once the extra pizza and fries arrive, the girls devour them. I don't know who is more hungry, but it's fun to watch. I manage to squeeze in one slice for myself.

After we've paid for everything, we go into the outdoor arcade. The indoor arcade has video games, but the outdoor games have bigger prizes you can win, and I know Anastasia has her heart set on a giant teddy bear. We find the cutest one of the lot, and luckily for me, it's a shooting game.

I pay the guy for two rounds and pick up the pellet gun. I make my stance, take aim, and let her rip, hitting the targets perfectly.

Tori looks at me amazed, and I chuckle, “My father was an avid gun collector, and he always said he'd never raise his kids not to handle guns safely.”

“It’s unfair if you’re a professional,” the booth owner says.

I look at him, raise an eyebrow, and Anastasia picks up the pellet gun. “My turn.”

She also fires off accurate shots, missing only two.

“You won one giant teddy,” the booth owner gloats. I look at him, then grab him and pull him to me, so our faces are inches apart. “I believe I won two.”

“Of...of...of course,” the man stammers as he sees the guards advancing. “My mistake.”

He gets the two giant teddy bears, and I take them. I give one each to Tori and Anastasia and then smile. “Let’s go play some more games. I’m enjoying this.”

“Me too,” Tori says with a genuine smile.

The rest of the evening is filled with laughs, more food, and more games. By the time we get home, we’re exhausted. Leonid is waiting for me on the front porch, so I send Tori and Anastasia in to get ready for bed without me.

“What is it?” I ask, sure it has something to do with Evgeni.

Leonid holds out paperwork to me. “I don’t know what makes you think you can trust a Sorvino, but Ivan, you can’t.”

“I will trust her until she does something that breaks that trust,” I roar at him, now at my wit’s end with this conversation. I rip the papers from his hand and look at them. It’s the contracts.

“I wouldn’t sign if I were you,” Leonid says quietly.

“I’ll do as I see fit,” I say coldly. “Now get out of here.”

He leaves, and I dump the contracts on my office table before getting changed and washed up. Tori is already in bed. She seems to be asleep already. So at peace. I climb into bed behind her and spoon her. I stroke her hair softly, careful not to

wake her up because I need to admit this before it makes me explode.

“I trust you so much. I trust you’ve done the right thing for our family and us. Dammit, I trust you with my heart, something I thought I didn’t have anymore. Vittoria, I love you so damn much.”

I kiss her bare shoulder and settle down, closing my eyes.

Chapter 23 - Vittoria

I can't believe what he said. I know I shouldn't have pretended to be asleep, but I didn't want him to ask more questions about why I'm upset. I find lying to him difficult, but I know Leonid brought the contracts back. I stayed in bed when Ivan got up, and I've been too scared to have breakfast in case he's waiting for me for an explanation.

He loves me. Oh my God, he loves me. He trusts me with his heart. And I fucking love him. I love him so damn much that I feel like I can't breathe. And I haven't even told him about the baby. Oh God, what if he finds out how I screwed him and kills the baby and me.

I touch my belly protectively. I can't let anything happen to my little one. I'm seriously considering having Alessandro pull me out of the situation, but leaving Ivan would break me.

I don't know what to do, and I'm craving cheese so fucking badly.

I eventually drag myself out of bed and go to the bathroom to shower and freshen up. I wear a loose-fitting cardigan over some tights and my sneakers.

As I walk out of the bedroom, I see the office light is still on and go over there. Ivan is pouring over the paperwork, and I knock softly. "Hey."

Ivan smiles when he looks up. "You're looking cheerier."

I give him a small smile. "I'm always happy when I see you," I say, and I mean it.

I walk further into the room and stand by him. "Is there anything you need me to explain?" I try to sound as casual as I can.

He chuckles. I love his smirk and his damn chuckle. He looks up at me. “You’re so shy, but you really shouldn’t be. You’re seriously intelligent and will go far in life, Tori. You just need a little self-confidence.”

I blush slightly and stroke his hair back. “I’ve always been overshadowed in my family. I fought to prove that I had a place there and was worthy, but I still felt like an outcast. I still can’t find my voice.”

Ivan strokes my hand with his thumb as he holds it. “I’ll help you find your voice, and until you do, I will be your voice. Don’t ever be afraid to speak to me or in front of me about anything.”

I consider telling him to scrap the contracts, that he’s being swindled, but I can’t bring myself to betray my flesh and blood like that. Yet Ivan feels like family too. I’m torn between two worlds.

Ivan shifts his chair so that I can sit on his leg. “You like me sitting on your lap, huh?” I tease him, running my fingers through his neat beard.

“I like having you close to me,” he murmurs. “Any part of you. I will never let you go.”

I shiver as he caresses my back, and I lean down to kiss him softly. “You have been so good to me.”

“It’s about to get better, quick, jump up and stand by the door,” he tells me.

I do as I’m told and wait.

“Close your eyes,” he says, and then I feel him tying something over my eyes. “Ivan?”

“Don’t stress. I want to surprise you,” he assures me. “I’m going to escort you out of the house to the car, okay?”

“Okay,” I say shakily.

He guides me forward, but all I can think about is how he’s taking me somewhere to kill me, that he found out I

betrayed him, and this is it. I'm going to die.

I try not to whimper. I don't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing he scares me.

We reach the car, and we get in slowly. He's trying hard to avoid bumping my head.

I can feel when the car starts, and we're moving, and I won't lie, being blindfolded in a moving car does nothing for my morning sickness. My stomach turns, and I fidget with my fingers. God, I am so scared. I pray silently that it's quick and that he won't torture me for what I've done.

The drive feels like it takes forever, and when the car stops, Ivan sounds amused when he announces we've arrived.

He helps me out of the car and guides me to stand facing a certain way.

"Okay, Tori, now you're going to get what you deserve," I can't tell from his tone what he means, but I've resigned myself to this being the end.

He takes off my blindfold, and I blink in the bright sunshine. We're standing in front of an empty office building. I look at the building, then at him, then at the building, and then back at him. "I'm confused, Ivan."

"You want to practice law, so I got you your offices. This is going to be the starting home of the greatest corporate law firm in New York." He declares it so happily, and I can't explain the relief I feel now that I realize I've not been taken to be murdered. I turn back to the building and walk toward it. "Is it open?" I ask curiously.

He opens the door. "After you."

I walk into the carpeted reception area. It's huge. Ivan starts leading me around. "This is where we can set up two board rooms for you to meet with clients, and then this would be your office. It's the biggest and gets the most light. I was thinking of putting up some wall-to-ceiling glass cabinet bookcases, dark wood, of course." He's rattling the stuff off as

though he's had this planned for years, and not like we've just recently discussed it. My stomach turns and tears well up in my eyes.

“What’s wrong? Don’t you like it?” he asks with concern. “I can get you somewhere else.”

“No, I love it. I don’t deserve it.” I start to cry, then plaster on a smile. “I’m just so happy.”

Ivan smiles and pulls me to him. “We’ll have to have secret, late-night office meetings just the two of us,” he purrs, leaning down to kiss me deeply.

I throw my arms around his neck, and he lifts me as we kiss hungrily. Desperate to devour each other—as though we are two halves of opposite worlds that somehow make a whole.

He puts me down and rests his forehead against mine. “I told you, I will give you everything you desire. If you want me to burn this world to the ground, I will.”

I look down, sighing softly. “I would do anything for you.”

He kisses my forehead and glances around. “We can get you an L-shaped desk, lots of space. I know you need lots of space to work. I’ve seen how you work.”

I smile and look around. “It’s perfect in every possible way, Ivan. Thank you so much. You will never understand how much this means to me. No one’s ever done something this grand for me. Just...thank you.”

Ivan smiles and kisses me passionately again.

Chapter 24 - Ivan

There's a spring to my step as I make my way to the family restaurant from my car. Tori is beyond happy, and that makes me happy. Nothing in this world can break my spirit right now.

My Uncles Boris and Grigoriy are meeting me here today to finalize the signing of the contracts. A bright future for my family, a future with Tori, and not even the knowledge that Evgeni has betrayed me weighs me down.

I enter the restaurant to find my uncles talking amongst themselves. They stop when they see me, standing up until I've taken my seat.

The waitress comes past. "Whiskey, neat." I know she knows which bottle is reserved for me. I clap my hands together. "Tell me the good news, guys."

They look at each other, crestfallen, as though they can't decide which of them should speak to me first, which makes me hesitant. "Come on, out with it."

Boris leans forward and taps his finger on the copy of the contract in front of him. "Was this their final offer?"

"Tori vetted it herself and said they're being very generous," I say, narrowing my eyes. "Why?"

I went through those contracts, and we seemed to be getting a lot, but that didn't raise any flags for me. Maybe it should have.

Grigoriy leans forward and clasps his hands in front of him. "It's shit, Ivan. Everything they're offering is useless shit. Areas where we can't own the cops, can't bribe inspectors. These are territories no one would fucking want, not even the damn South Americans. They wouldn't even run their cheapest shit drugs through these places."

I clench my fists. "How obvious is this?"

“Obvious if you’ve been paying close attention to it,” Boris says. The implication is there. I take a few deep breaths. The waitress sets my whiskey down and hurries off. I down it and slam the glass on the table. “That fucking bitch.”

I feel like I’m in one of my supernatural story books where the demon has reached through my skin to wrap his hand around my heart and squeeze it until it bursts. Rage and pain course through my body. I trusted her. She made a fool of me. She pretended to care about my family and me. She lured me in like a hopeless idiot. I let her in.

“Fuck!” I yell suddenly, causing everyone to jump. I slam my fist onto the table and get up, walking out without a backward glance.

I get into my car and drive, glancing at the time. I shake my head; I’m not thinking rationally, but this is worse than killing a family member. They’ve gone too far.

I pull up to La Club and step out of my vehicle. The guards look at me curiously, but Luigi comes out and says, “What are you doing here?”

“Where is Alessandro?” I ask, trying to calm myself.

“He’s in the office with Frankie. This way.” He gives me a side eye but leads me in. I fear fucking nothing. They gave me my love back and ripped it from my life. It’s worse than when I lost Mila.

I walk into the office, and Alessandro looks up at me, standing. “Ivan.”

“Alessandro,” I say, sitting in the armchair.

“Drink?” he asks.

“No. But I’d like to congratulate you. It was fucking clever, it really was.”

“What?” he asks me.

“Planting Vittoria in my family, getting her to warm me up, and then having her betray me,” I shake my head. “I

was a fool, and you exploited it. Tell me, how did she communicate with you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Alessandro tries to brush me off.

I snarl at him, "Don't fucking lie to me." I sit back and take a deep breath. "I won't kill her. You used her as a pawn, and she obeyed. It's what happens in our families. Have her collected today." I stand up. "But I declare open war on all Sorvinos and related parties."

Alessandro stands up, "Ivan...."

"Collect her before I change my mind," I say before walking out. I don't look at a single person as I walk out. I get back into my car and drive back to the house.

When I walk in, I find Tori in the library reading. I stand at the doorway, watching her. My heart aches to hold her because she crossed me. How could someone so beautiful be so cruel? She didn't seem cruel at all. It was clearly all an act.

She's the enemy.

As I turn to leave, she looks up. "Ivan," she smiles broadly. Alessandro must not have phoned her yet.

She looks into my cold eyes, and her smile fades. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I turn to walk away but hear her running after me. She grabs my arm. "Ivan?"

I yank my arm away from her and whip around; I can't control myself. I want to hurt her, she doesn't deserve peace. "You betrayed me. You fucking took me for a ride and thought I wouldn't find out," I snarl. "I know about the shitty territories you were negotiating for us. We would have lost millions."

Tears well up in her eyes, I can't tell if she's sad or afraid, but she's probably both.

“Ivan, I’m sorry. I didn’t think I would fall in love with you.” she starts to cry. “At first, it was about betraying you, but I fell for you. I love you. I feel like being with you is where I belong. Please, please give me a second chance. I will make this right.”

“Lies,” I roar, and she steps back. “I don’t fucking believe you. Pack your shit. Your brother is on his way to fetch you, and I never want to fucking see you again. Don’t come near my family or me; my patience for you will wear thin, and I will have you killed for betraying me.”

I turn to leave. The sadness in her voice as she sobs my name does nothing. I shut down. I can’t feel. I get my driver to take me to our warehouse, and I walk into the office where Leonid is working.

“I should have listened to you,” I say after a moment.

“Boris phoned and told me,” he says quietly. “I’m sorry, Ivan. I know you were fond of her. A Sorvino is a Sorvino, though, and you were taken for a ride.”

“I’m having the marriage annulled. But I don’t want her hurt, not yet anyway. We will declare war with the Sorvinos, trample over them, and rule New York City.”

“I agree. We should, as you would say, play chess, not football. Clever attacks where it hurts them, but we must first deal with a situation closer to home. Evgeni is back this weekend.”

“I’ll deal with him swiftly,” I say. “I’m only a fool once. I should have believed you, brother. I’m sorry.” His hand clasps my shoulder and squeezes. “You thought you were doing right by the family. We can learn from this.”

I nod and look out at the warehouse. All I can hear in my mind is Tori sobbing my name.

Chapter 25 - Vittoria

As soon as Ivan walks out of the house, I crumble to the ground, holding my belly. I sob as hard as I can, but soon Aleks comes in and nudges me with his foot. “Pakhan Volkov said you were to pack your things and leave. Your brother is here to collect you.”

I pick myself off the floor and go to the room, packing what I brought with me and leaving the things that Ivan and Arina bought me. Anastasia passes and sees me sobbing. “Are you okay?”

“I’m so sorry, Ana.” I pull her into a hug. “Please, I know your father will say I betrayed him, but I do love him more than anything.”

She looks at me wearily, and I take off my wedding ring and leave it by the bed. “I hope you live the best life possible.”

I lug my suitcase onto its wheels and wheel it out the door. Whatever I’ve left can be replaced. Luigi is waiting on the porch with Aleks.

“Goodbye, Aleks,” I say, tears free-flowing down my face. “Thank you for protecting me.”

Aleks remains stony-faced, but I see he nods slightly, and I know he will miss me too.

Luigi takes my bag and puts it in the trunk before helping me into the car. We pull into traffic, and I hug my knees and sob hard. I don’t think I cried this hard when Mama was killed.

Luigi pats my back. “It’ll be okay, sis. You’ll see. You’re better off back with us.”

This just makes me sob harder, so he falls silent.

We arrive at my sister's house, and I climb out of the car, miserable and feeling nauseous, and I walk inside. I want to find a bed to curl up on and grieve the loss of the one person I will ever love.

My plans are haltered, though, when I find Alessandro in the entrance hall waiting for me. I look at him sadly, then he opens his arms, and I hug him, crying into his shoulder. "I fell for him," I sob. "I know I wasn't supposed to, but I did, and I regret betraying him, Alessandro. I want him back."

He pats my back softly. "There's nothing to be done about it now. Ivan will never forgive you for this. He has declared war on our family and will never trust one of us again."

I pull away and look up to see Alessandro looking at me sternly. "Is it true you're pregnant with his child? Luigi says you are."

The sudden change in my emotions is surprising even to me. I've never stepped out of line. I've never talked back. I wasn't even grounded ever because I was a good child and did what I was told, and the *one thing* I asked my brother to keep secret, he told the head of our family.

I ignore Alessandro and round on Luigi, who is standing awkwardly at the door. "How fucking dare you! How fucking dare you! You promised it would stay between us until I was ready to tell Alessandro."

"Vittoria..." Alessandro says, surprised.

Luigi holds his hands up. "He's the head of our family, and you were acting weird. I had to tell him. Just in case...."

"In case of what? In case I betrayed *our* family. The family that has cost me the love of my life and the father of my child. Fuck you, Luigi. I will never forgive you for this."

Before he can say anything, Alessandro's voice booms, "Luigi, leave it. Scram, let me speak to Tori."

After my brother leaves, I breathe heavily and move to sit down, holding my belly. “You mustn’t stress yourself out,” Alessandro says quietly. “Stress you feel is stress the baby feels.”

He stands there for a moment. “I assume Ivan doesn’t know, so if you want, I can send you out of state to a private place where no one will find you, and you can have the baby there.”

“No, I need to make things right.” I look up at my cousin desperately. “I think I know someone who can help. Please, Alessandro, let me try to make this right.”

He looks at me for what feels like the longest moment before he nods. “Just be careful. Call me if you need backup.”

I get up and hug him. Ivan doesn’t want to see me, and Evgeni has betrayed him. There is only one person I can try to turn to, and I know he hates my guts, but I have to try.

“I’ll go in the morning,” I tell him, getting up. “For now, I just want to be alone.”

He nods and lets me go upstairs.

I take one of my brother-in-law’s cars in the morning and drive to the main warehouse. I only know where it is from the reports I looked at with Ivan.

I park a safe distance away and approach carefully but try to appear casual. I have no weapons, but I know Ivan doesn’t want me hurt. I know he still loves me. I go to the guard and say, “I’m here to speak to Leonid.”

The guard looks at me for a moment, then opens the door. “We know who you are. I wouldn’t stay long.”

I nod, and he points to a set of stairs. “Office at the top.”

I knock on the door and hear Leonid call for me to come in. When he sees me, he raises an eyebrow. “You have some nerve.”

“Leonid, please, just hear me out,” I say, wringing my hands. “I need to speak to Ivan, and I know you can make that happen. You’re his most trusted person.”

“Well, he definitely couldn’t trust you. I was right about that,” he smirks, and it’s nothing like Ivan’s. It’s cold and heartless.

“Please, Leonid, I’m begging you.”

“I don’t care if you get on your hands and knees and lick the shit off my shoes, Sorvino. It’s not happening. Now I suggest you leave before I have you shot. The only reason you’ve made it this far is because Ivan made the stupid mistake of ordering us not to harm you. I can have him change his mind.”

The tears roll down my cheek as I walk out of the warehouse. I pretend to walk toward my car when I see a familiar black car. I’m sure it’s Ivan’s. When I’m sure no one is looking, I hurry around the back of the warehouse to see if I can sneak in and see him. I am desperate.

I pause as I reach the enormous open warehouse doors. I can hear Leonid talking to someone around the corner.

“Yes, the dumb bitch thought I’d help her get back to him. She did me a huge favor by betraying him. He’s more vulnerable now.”

“When do we do it?”

“We kill Ivan this weekend,” Leonid says, and I slap a hand over my mouth, my eyes wide. “He’ll never see it coming. He’s an idiot. We need a strong leader.”

“Like you,” his mysterious co-conspirator says. “That’s what this family needs.”

I hurry away, having heard enough. I get in my car and speed to Alessandro’s estate. I don’t wait. I barge into his office, where he is talking to Katya.

“Tori, what the hell?” he says, standing up. “Are you hurt?”

“They’re going to kill him. Ivan thinks his cousin betrayed him, but it’s his brother, who is a cousin but adopted. I don’t have time to explain. You need to warn Ivan.”

Katya comes to me and puts an arm around my shoulders. “Calm down, Tori.”

Alessandro pours me a glass of water and brings it to me. “Alessandro, please. I’ve never asked for anything of this family. Please do this for me.”

Alessandro looks at me sadly. “It’s not our affairs to get tangled up with. He wouldn’t listen to me anyway. I’m sorry, Tori, but you must stay out of it.”

Chapter 26 - Ivan

All I've thought about this week is Tori. The touch of her body, the sparkle in her eyes, the way she always tied up her hair. And how she broke my heart. I've always put faith in the worst people, but I swear this is the final time. I will not trust anyone outside of the family again.

I thought my heart was dead and gone after Mila. I only had love for Anastasia. Tori brought that love back out of me and made me believe it's possible to be happy. Not people like us. We don't get happiness. We get karma for the evil we do to the world.

I thought she was different. I thought she was sweet and innocent and that she loved me.

I was wrong.

I stand in the living room looking out at the pool when Anastasia walks in. I turn to her. "Do me a favor and have your hair and nails done today. I've got some serious business to take care of. Take guards with you. I'll see you tonight for dinner."

Anastasia looks at me, puzzled, but she just nods. She knows I've been grieving over Tori, and I know she has too. She was just starting to bond with her. I wish I could take it all back.

I wait until she leaves before I put my gun in my holster, throw my suit jacket over it, and walk out of the house.

"Want an escort, boss?" Aleks asks.

"Leonid's sorted it, don't worry," I say. "Make sure Ana gets back safely."

I get in my car and pull into traffic. It doesn't take me long to reach the pier at the dock Leonid told me to be at. Evgeni is going to pay dearly for what he's done. I might not

hurt Tori because I still love her in a sick, twisted way, but he is not exempt.

I step out of my car, and as I do, someone comes behind me and smacks my head with something hard. Stumbling forward, my arms are twisted behind my back, and my gun is quickly taken from me. Distracted by my thoughts of Tori, I hadn't seen the guy sneaking up on me. Another person takes my other arm, and I am dragged into a nearby building. They throw me onto a wooden chair and cable tie my arms behind me and my ankles to the legs of the chair.

I look up and try to focus on the person in front of me.

It's Leonid.

I narrow my eyes. "You."

"It's time for a change," Leonid says, strolling toward me. "You've gone soft in your old age, especially after Mila and now this situation with the Sorvinos. The family needs strength and unity, not dividing our territories between our rivals."

I shake my head. "Evgeni didn't betray me."

"No, he has no clue, and when he's back tomorrow, he will bow to me as the new head of the family, or I will do to him what I'm about to do to you. I considered giving you a quick death, Ivan. I really did. Because we're family, after all, but that's just it. You say I'm your brother, but you would not name me the next heir to the family. Why Ivan? Because I'm not really your brother? I'm just the adopted one."

I look up at him and swear at him in Russian, rather descriptively, before I say, "You're always rash. That's why. You don't think things through, Leonid. You just react."

"Well, you say that, and yet here we are. How was this for the ultimate checkmate, *brother*?"

I shake my head. "The family won't bow to you. They won't forgive you for getting rid of me."

“You’re right, Ivan,” Leonid says, looking thoughtful. “Unless I kill Evgeni and his men before they return and blame it on them. Then they would definitely recognize me as the heir apparent.”

I smile. I refuse to give him the satisfaction of seeing me beg for my life or plead for anything, in fact. I have honor. I have dignity.

My head snaps to the side as a resonating sound echoes from the back.

“Poydi posmotri chto eto bylo,” Leonid says, ordering two guards to go check out what made that sound. Once they are away, Leonid glances around, and one of his men suddenly hits the floor. We both look at the neat bullet hole in his head. Before Leonid can react, the doors burst open, and men rush in, detaining Leonid and the men he has with them.

Evgeni walks in behind his men and glares at Leonid, “Traitorous bastard. First, you make out that I’m the one who would betray our family, then you try to kill our Pakhan? Worthless shit.”

Leonid’s eyes are wide. “Evgeni, you have to admit he’s gone soft. We can share the power. We don’t need Ivan.”

Evgeni comes to me and cuts the cable ties. “Sorry we took so long.”

I smirk and take Evgeni’s gun. “Glad you showed up at all.”

Leonid squirms, and I raise the gun. “I’d torture you, but you’re not worth anything to this family.”

Before he can respond, I pull the trigger. My men let his body drop to the floor, and I turn to my cousin. “I thought it was you who betrayed me. It feels like everyone betrays me these days.”

“Ivan, I have no thirst for power. I don’t want to be in your seat, making the decisions you have to make. I’m pleased

to be by your side.” Evgeni grins. “Now, if we’re done being emotional...” he turns away, but I stop him.

“Evgeni, one question.”

“Yes?” he asks.

“You’re back a day early. How did you know I needed to be saved from Leonid?” I raise an eyebrow. “Sorry, but my trust is thin these days.”

Evgeni chuckles and puts a hand on my shoulder. “That girl of yours, Vittoria, got my number from Ana, saying it was an emergency. She called me in a panic, sobbing her heart out, begging me to save you. Naturally, I came back and did just that.”

Tori.

Tori saved me.

“I know you’re surprised. I heard what she did. But in the bigger picture of things, it’s not so bad. Perhaps peace is possible between our families.” He looks at Leonid. “He didn’t understand how costly war is. The money, the lives. Tori understands. She wants peace.”

I look away, my thoughts racing in my head. Tori wants peace, not war. She sent Evgeni to save me.

“I owe her a life debt, and I hate owing people,” I comment, straightening my jacket. “We will meet with Alessandro and discuss mutually beneficial terms for our families. That will be my repayment. Then I never want to see them again.”

Evgeni smiles. “I think that’s a wise decision. Also, I don’t think you’ve gotten soft in your old age. I think you’ve gotten scarier because you used to hesitate when it came to taking a life. It was predictable. Now, you are tactful, thoughtful, and strategic. I never know what to expect anymore with you.”

I smile. “Rewards for your loyalty, at least.”

Chapter 27 - Vittoria

I have never felt more confident than I feel right now. Alessandro keeps glancing at me as though I've grown something on my face, but I just smile.

"You seem very sure of yourself," Alessandro comments as we sit at the table.

I nod. "I know he loves me. It might take time for him to trust me again, but even if he doesn't, there can now be peace between our families."

Alessandro shrugs. "I've reached a point with this family that I fucking give up. You all fall in love with random people who we're supposed to be fighting with, not making babies with. But at least he'll know."

I grin and pat his arm. "Like you're any better."

He snorts, but he doesn't say I'm wrong.

I push my glasses up the bridge of my nose. It's a little-known fact that I need contacts or glasses to see. I even hid it from Ivan.

The door opens, and my breath catches as he walks in. I forgot how handsome and intense he is. He looks surprised to see me, or maybe surprised I have glasses on.

Maybe both.

He hesitates, then slowly sits down. "I don't see how bringing her here can help settle peace between our families."

His words hurt, but I deserve it after what I did to him. Alessandro nods. "I am sorry about that, Ivan. We weren't thinking straight. We just wanted revenge. Tori tells me you hired specialists that saved my uncle's life."

Ivan looks away, and my cousin continues. "I should never have let this go down the way it has, but I think what we have to offer will compensate for that. It was Vittoria's idea."

Ivan looks at me, and I push two pages to Ivan. Two simple, straightforward contracts. Ivan picks them up and reads them, his eyebrows knitting together. He sets them down and looks at Alessandro. “These are excellent offers, but I’m confused. Why is this going to my next-born child? I’m not planning any more children, so does this go to Ana?”

“Ivan,” I say quietly, and he looks at me. He’s trying to be cold, but it’s hurt, I see in his eyes. I swallow my pride and continue, “Ivan, I am so sorry. I wanted to prove a point to my family. I wanted to get revenge for them and let them see how useful I was. I didn’t expect to honestly and genuinely fall in love with you. I didn’t know how kind and generous you and your family are. I didn’t expect you to love me the way you did, and I didn’t expect to fall pregnant with your child.”

I leave that last sentence hanging in the air, and I see the surprise on Ivan’s face as his eyebrows raise and his eyes widen, “I... I don’t know what to say. I don’t want to make any hasty decisions. There will be a lot to be discussed. I need time.”

He stands up suddenly, takes the contracts, and leaves. I hug myself and look at Alessandro. “If nothing else, there will be peace,” he says quietly, rubbing my back.

I know Alessandro’s trying to comfort me, and I don’t know what I expected. For Ivan to forgive me and be in love with me again? What I did was dog dirty.

Alessandro takes me home, but I can’t sit still. Kira is overseeing an important meal at the bistro tonight, our cousin Bella’s first date with some politician. I decide to head there and keep her company.”

I arrive, and I find Miguel there. He and Kira are sitting in one of the back booths having drinks.

“Tori!” Kira smiles and stands up, her belly protruding far ahead of her. I hug her and smile. “Soon, I’ll look like that.”

“God, I hope your baby arrives on its due date. We’re five days over, and I can really have this baby now.”

I sit down with a smile, but Kira’s face falls, and I turn to look at what she’s seen. Large armed men are filing into the bistro. I recognize some of them as Evgeni’s men, and I realize Aleks is one of them.

I get up to my feet to face Ivan as he walks in. I don’t make him come to me, but I’m nervous as I slowly walk toward him. I’m unsure of what his intentions are.

He stops in front of me, gazing down at me. “Vittoria.”

“Ivan,” I say quietly, hating that he’s using my full name.

Our eyes are locked, and I can taste the tension in the air. I’m about to apologize again when Ivan holds up a hand. “It’s my turn to speak, your turn to listen.”

I nod obediently.

“What you did to my family, that’s unforgivable. You betrayed our trust after everyone tried to make you feel welcome. It’s unforgivable,” he repeats, then pauses. “For now. You took responsibility for your actions, paid tribute to keep the peace, and did it favorably for the family. You did the right thing.”

I swallow hard, tears forming in my eyes.

“I don’t know what the right decision is in this case, but I’ve spoken to my family, and we all agree on one thing. I love you. I haven’t loved anyone since Mila, and the love I have for you is indescribable.”

I look away, but he tilts my face back to him. “I want you to know I can trust you again because I love you. You’re my family now too. I want you to come home.”

I wipe at my eyes, sniffing rather unceremoniously. “Ivan... All I want is to come home.”

He smiles softly and leans down, kissing me deeply. I slide my arms around his neck and kiss him back. I hold myself against him, and he wraps his arms around me. We simply stand there in silence, holding each other.

When we part, I start crying harder, and he smiles. “Those are pregnancy hormones. Those I’m familiar with.”

I slap his arm playfully and look at Kira. “I have to go.”

Kira smiles as Ivan takes my hand and places my wedding band back on my finger. I look at it sparkling in the light and grin at my sister. “I’m going home.”

“I’m...” Kira starts, then pauses. There’s a strange look on her face then she widens her eyes. “I’m going into labor.”

Chapter 28 - Ivan

I tilt my head to the side. I don't know if I like this art. Suppose you could call this art. The weird painting on the wall of the nude guy bothers me, and I wave to the interior designer. "This is a no."

"It's all the rage right now," she says gleefully, and I stare at her. She backs down. "But we don't want trendy. We want uniqueness. I'll get rid of it."

I smirk and go back into Tori's office. The Sorvino Volkov Firm is coming along nicely. Tori is interviewing potential employees soon, and I know she's looking forward to that. I glance behind me as I hear Tori and Ana's voices. They are walking arm in arm, each carrying a brown bag. I head back out to meet them in reception.

"Luigi's just invited me to this random birthday dinner, like. He is such a nag. He's always asking what my plans are and if he can take me out."

"Do it," I hear Tori tell my daughter, I know she's been helping them see each other for a while now, and I frown.

"I think that's a terrible idea," I say to them as they walk up to me. "I think Ana should set her sights elsewhere."

They stare at me, and then it is an onslaught from the two of them.

"Don't you think my brother is good enough?"

"You have zero say over who I want to see or don't want to see."

"Luigi and Ana are perfect for each other."

"Even if we're not, I decide, not you."

It goes on for several minutes before I hold my hands up in surrender. "You've both made very valid points. I am a

terrible person who should not decide things.” I look at Tori.
“Except for the artwork on your walls.”

“I told her to get rid of the hairy, naked man,” Tori says with wide eyes. “Did she not?”

“She did after I asked,” I smirk.

Tori smiles evilly. I love that smile. She’s gotten so much more confident, and I know she’s excited both for the arrival of our baby and to start working in her own firm.

Anastasia rolls her eyes. “You two love birds carry on. I am going shopping and then to a birthday dinner, apparently.”

Tori smiles and hugs her. “You be safe, and if he’s an ass, tell me, and I’ll kick his ass.”

“I’ll...”

“You’ll nothing,” they both shout to me.

I hold my hands up again, and Tori waves Ana off before she turns and holds up the brown bag. “I have lunch.”

We sit side by side at the table in boardroom one. Tori unpacks the lunch for us. Two containers of an Italian pasta dish.

“From your sister?” I ask curiously.

“From the bistro, but no, she’s home with the baby today,” she smiles and hands me cutlery. I lean over and kiss her deeply, dropping my hand to hold her belly. Then we start to eat.

In between bites, Tori smiles at me. “So, with the baby joining us soon,” she grins. “Have you decided how we will introduce the little one to our families?”

“What do you want?” I ask.

She looks thoughtful. “I’ve always been pushed to the side. I don’t want that for any of our children. I want a huge venue, a big party, and all our family members to attend.”

I chuckle. “Not much, but we can definitely do whatever your heart desires.”

She falls silent for a moment and then looks up at me. “Can we paint the nursery walls a light blue?” she asks quietly.

I nod. “Of course...” I stop mid-bite. I swallow hard and look at her. “A boy?”

She smiles broadly and nods. “Yes, I’ve been waiting to tell you.”

I drop my cutlery and put my hand on her belly. “I’m having a son? Oh, Tori, you’ve made me the happiest person in the world.”

“I hope I always do,” she murmurs. We kiss softly and then go back to our food. Tori prattles away about what she wants to plan for the introduction party, and I listen, nodding in agreement. I would give her the world.

After a few hours, I can see she’s starting to get tired after being on her feet all day, so I insist we go home to our new estate near her sister’s villa.

We walk in, and she drops her oversized purse on the front table in the entrance hall. She stands there and groans, “This baby must come out now.” I smile and sneak up behind her, putting my arms around her to hold her belly. “There are ways and means to induce labor,” I whisper in her ear.

“Oh really?” she murmurs.

“If you come upstairs, I’ll show you,” I tease her, walking in front of her now and taking her hand. She’s lost that initial shyness about sex, and her confidence turns me on even more. She giggles, and we go slowly up the stairs to our room. I shut the door and undo my tie, tossing it to the side. Tori walks up to me and starts to unbutton my shirt. “So what are these magic ways of inducing labor?”

I chuckle as she suddenly pushes my shirt off and down. “What am I? Your stripper?”

“That would be fun,” she teases before leaning in and kissing my chest. She trails kisses against it and then smiles at me. “Although my back is sore.”

“You get undressed and get on the bed,” I say. “Leave the rest to me.”

She smiles and slowly undresses, dropping her clothes on her way to the bed. She climbs on the bed, leaving her thong and bra on and propping herself up on pillows. Fuck, she knows my weakness. I love fucking her with her underwear still on. My woman knows me well.

I grin and undo my pants, swaying my hips like I’m dancing. Tori giggles as I drop my pants and boxers. I’m already semi-hard just looking at my beautiful pregnant wife. She is absolutely perfect to me.

“What are you thinking?” she asks, narrowing her eyes.

“How perfect you are, especially for me, and I’m so glad we’re together,” I say, crawling onto the bed and resting beside her.

“I don’t know why you think that,” she said playfully. “Or how we’re going to get this right with me this huge.”

I smile, we’d only been doing oral sex for the last few weeks, but I know she’s horny for more.

I trail my hand up her belly to her large breasts, swollen and ready for our baby and me. I tug her left cup down and free her breast. The bra underneath keeping it lifted. I trace a circle around her nipple slowly. She closes her eyes and sighs. I know she loves nipples and clit. Sometimes my girl can be a bit dirty.

I lean in and whisper, “Turn on your side.”

She glances at me, and I motion for her to turn to her right side. I grind my erection against her ass as I squeeze her breast. She makes these little gasping noises, the ones she knows drive me wild. Little whimpers and gasps, feeble, as

though she needs saving, but at the same time, she begs for more.

I pinch her nipple between my index finger and thumb and roll it between my fingers. She tips her head back, exposing her neck. I kiss and suck on it, grinding harder against her.

“Stop... teasing...” she moans out, grinding back against me. My hand lets go of her breast. I use my right arm to prop me up as I slowly walk my fingers down her belly. “Lift your leg over mine,” I whisper.

She lifts it, and we adjust for a moment, my cock rubbing against her lips. I slip my hand around her leg and to her clit. It’s swollen already, and I swear it’s throbbing.

Tori arches slightly as I use my index finger to swirl it around. “Do you like that?”

“Yes,” she whimpers, “but you’re still teasing....”

“I want to make you soaking wet,” I whisper, nibbling on her exposed ear.

“I’ll fucking kill you if you don’t stop teasing,” she groans as my finger moves faster, flicking her Satan’s bean up and down. She’s panting now, just how I like it. I take my hand away and use it to guide myself to her now sopping-wet hole. She tries to spread her legs as much as she can, but I like it tight, so I don’t mind that it isn’t much. I shift my weight and push into her slowly.

She forms a fist with her hand, gripping the duvet we’re on top of tightly.

“Sweet mother of Mary,” she growls.

I stroke her belly softly, “Gently, love.”

I start to move slowly, letting her build up that tension that I know will rip through her body. It’s hard, though, as my balls are aching for release, but I control myself. I cup her breast again, and she turns her head, and we kiss somewhat awkwardly as I move a bit faster.

I steadily move faster and faster as the minutes tick by, building us both up for a blistering orgasm.

Tori squirms next to me, touching her clit between her legs, then playing with her nipples and gripping the duvet tightly.

“You ready?” I murmur, kissing her neck.

She can't speak, so she just nods hurriedly, and I move a bit harder, not wanting to hurt her but wanting to chase that release we're both waiting for.

My balls tighten, and I bury myself balls-deep inside her pussy, reaching around to stimulate her clit. She shakes like she's possessed as her orgasm rips through her, her eyes rolling back in her head as she cries out.

It takes a while but soon enough, we separate, and she turns over, resting her head on my chest.

“I'm not in labor,” she says after a few minutes. “So I think we'll have to do that again.”

I laugh and kiss her head. “Let's try the shower next.”

Chapter 29 - Vittoria

I hold Roman close to my chest. He's a few weeks old, and I'm absolutely in love. I look out the car window. "Are we nearly there?"

"Yes, love," Ivan says, stroking Roman's head.

"I'm going to be so sick of introducing him by the end of the day," I laugh. "Hello, thanks for coming. Here is Roman Sonny Volkov, have a nice day."

"You wanted a huge party," Ivan says with a smirk.

"Who is bringing Anastasia?" I ask.

"Aleks is fetching her after her hair appointment," Ivan says, settling back.

I look out the window. My own hair is down. Anastasia has been teaching me all the best ways to wear it, and I can apply proper makeup now after watching some video tutorials. I look down at Roman, asleep in my arms, and stroke his face. "Have you ever seen someone so perfect?"

"Yes," Ivan says. "You!" He kisses my head as the car pulls to a stop.

Evgeni opens the door and helps me out. We walk up the stairs to the front of the venue. I peek inside, and it's decorated beautifully in black and blue. The decorations are perfect, and the tables are set out nicely so the families can intermingle and get to know each other properly. I know Arina is excited about meeting my father at long last.

Ivan gets me a chair to sit near the door, so people can greet me as they pass. I'm thankful no one expects me to wear heels or stand all day in them. Ivan walks off with Evgeni to have a cigar and talk business, which I frown at but don't say anything. He comes back when the guests start to arrive, and they form a rather long line as everyone stops to ooh and ahh at Roman. The only person who skips the line is, of course, my

cousin Alessandro, along with his wife, twins, and my father. Everyone lets them in front.

Alessandro shakes Ivan's hand and excuses them both so they can talk. I shake my head, but Katya brings the twins to me.

"They've gotten so big," I gush. "Can you believe they're walking already?"

"I know, more like running around being chased by nannies," Katya smiles. "Roman is gorgeous, Tori. You're going to do a great job raising him."

"That means so much to me. Thank you, Katya." She leans down and kisses my cheeks before shuffling inside so the rest of the line can proceed.

Anastasia also skips the queue, but she gets a chair and sits next to me.

I'm surprised when my brother comes up to me with a bombshell of a playboy girl on his arm. He smiles brightly. "I'm so happy for you, sis. This is my date, Kate. Kate, this is my sister and Anastasia."

Anastasia gives Kate and Luigi a cold look I've seen her father give. "Excuse me, Tori, I need a drink." She gets up and strides off, and Luigi gives an awkward smile.

Kira and Miguel come up with Raphael and their new little one, Bella. We chat for a little before they go inside as well.

Once everyone's in, we settle down for Sunday lunch, something we will do together often, alternating between our family homes.

Ivan stands up and taps a knife against his glass to get everyone's attention. I smile up at him as he speaks.

"Thank you, everyone, for coming to meet Roman Sonny Volkov and to celebrate the unity of our two great families. As time moves on, so too does humanity. We evolve, and we adapt. We make things better. Years ago, this would

never have happened. We would have war and death and anger and hatred. Blood would flow down the streets with no side giving an inch. We are proving that families like ours can move past this and settle things amicably. I hope other families take note. If not, well... Alessandro will agree that we're not above reminding everyone where their place is.

Everyone cheers and the celebration carries on.

By the time we're back home, I'm exhausted, but I manage to get Roman to sleep. He's an easy baby like I was, but he will not be ignored or treated like I was. He is a prince, and he will be king.

I go to the living room when I hear soft music drifting upstairs. I find Ivan standing by the sound system.

"There was something missing today," he says quietly, walking to me and holding out his hand.

"What was that?" I ask curiously. I thought we had covered all bases.

"There was no dancing," he says, pulling me close. I put my hands on his shoulders, and he dances in a circle with me. "I want to dance with you every day as though it's our last. I want that to be our thing, something special just for us."

"You couldn't make me happier than I am, Ivan," I say softly, stroking the back of his hair. "All I ever wanted was to feel like I was part of a family and that I mattered. Now I'm a Queen with two amazing families."

We kiss softly, and he holds me. I could dance all night with him.

THE END

About the Author

Veda Rose loves getting lost in the intense, dark and suspenseful alternate universes she creates. Although her characters may be complicated and twisty, at the core of it all is a deep and profound love.

Born and raised in Portland, Veda Rose has always been an introvert and as a result could often be found deeply engrossed in a book. Or multiple books. It was only natural that at some point she embarked on her own journey of giving life to her wild imagination.

When she is not writing or brainstorming about obscure literary worlds, she enjoys hiking with her furry children and exploring unfamiliar places.

Books by Veda Rose

“Sorvino Mobsters” Series

The Sorvino Mobsters series takes you to the streets of New York, where ruthless Italian mafia dons rule the world. These are not the hero's from your old story books. They are arrogant, rich, brutal and whether you want it or not, they will break your heart only to ultimately heal and love it.

[**Kidnapped by the Mafia**](#)

[**Married Off to the Mafia**](#)

[**Traded to the Mafia**](#)

[**Claimed by the Mafia**](#)

[**A Secret Baby by the Mafia**](#)

Pregnant by the Mafia