

K. C.
CROWNE

SECRET

Daddy

SECRET DADDY

AN AGE GAP, SECRET BABY ROMANCE



K.C. CROWNE

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DESCRIPTION



My darkest secret?

I allowed a complete stranger to seduce me.

That night I walked away with two things:

His first name. And his baby.

Now Dominic's back and this time he won't let me out of his sight.

Years ago, I had the most erotic night of my life.

Dominic showed me what a real man's touch felt like.

How it could awaken parts of me I never even knew existed.

But what we shared went up in flames after I learned the truth.

So I left him high and dry with zero intention of turning back.

Now, he's back and I'm freaking the hell out.

"We've got unfinished business."

"No. You have the wrong girl."

To which he replies: *"Maybe I wasn't clear. You left once. I won't allow you to leave twice."*

Now it's becoming abundantly clear to me Dominic has a few dark secrets of his own.

Secrets like being an enigmatic billionaire and the leader of a dark criminal underworld.

There's no telling how a man like him will respond when he learns I've kept his child a secret.

CHAPTER 1



ARIN

“**F** **K YOU, YOU CHEATING SCUMBAG!”

This isn't one of my prouder moments. But everybody has their limits, and I'm no exception.

“Marina, calm down,” Corey says over the phone, his voice anything but soothing. “You need to give me a chance to explain.”

“Explain?” I echo, incredulous. “What's there to explain? I caught you sleeping with our wedding planner hours before our wedding!”

People are full-on staring now, not that I can blame them. I'd stare, too, if some teary-eyed, hysterical lady was cussing her ex-fiancé up and down in the middle of the airport's first-class lounge.

This is a nice place, complete with complimentary buffet and champagne, luxuriously spacious leather seats, and massive flatscreens everywhere to entertain you while waiting for your flight. And then there's me, hair still up in partial curls and my mascara all runny, ruining the hours I spent in the makeup chair transforming myself into a blushing bride.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. In another universe, Corey would be at my side, waiting for our first-class flight to Hawaii for our month-long honeymoon. A weaker person might go home, hide in shame and humiliation at having been told the groom was caught fucking the wedding planner on the church organ's keys.

Except I don't have a home to go back to. The house was given to him by his parents. The car's in his name. Every small comfort I took for granted before was only possible because Corey paid for them. After we graduated from high school, he promised to provide. Filled my head with stupid ideas of how he'd go off to work and make all the money, that I wouldn't have to worry about anything. He said he didn't like the thought of me having to work. He'd take care of everything. He'd take care of *me*.

Stupid, I know. So fucking stupid, but hindsight's twenty-twenty.

Screw him.

"You're being emotional, Arin," Corey says bitterly. "Just come home so we can work things out. You're not going on our fucking honeymoon without me."

"Watch me."

"Jesus Christ, Arin. You're overreacting."

"Do you really think I'm going to let you gaslight me into thinking any of this is okay?"

"I can't talk to you when you get like this."

"Get like what? Justifiably angry?"

"Look, I'm under a lot of pressure, okay? All this wedding planning shit... I've been so stressed out."

"I've been stressed out too, Corey, but guess which one of us had enough goddamn self-control to keep their legs shut!"

"I made a mistake, alright? Would you just come home so we can figure this out?"

"Fuck no! I never want to see your face again!"

"So you're just *never* coming back? You need me, Arin. How are you going to support yourself?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll finally put myself through fashion school. My inheritance from Granny Ruth has been sitting there for me for years. It's about time I use it."

“Not again with this stupid fashion school nonsense! If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times. There’s no fucking way you’re going to make a living as a designer!”

I take a deep breath, so angry I can feel my pulse vibrating through my teeth. I genuinely, from the bottom of my heart, thought Corey was my one.

But this betrayal cuts too deep. My pride’s bruised black and blue, and I’m nowhere close to giving him even an ounce of forgiveness.

“Here’s an idea, Corey,” I say firmly and clearly. “Shove your hand so far up your own ass that you can give yourself a handshake, m’kay?”

I hang up, numb from head to toe. My cheeks are warm, my eyes puffy from crying. A few people in the lounge are nice enough to give me pitying looks. Some of them whisper, others shoot judgmental glances in my direction. I clearly don’t fit in here, but I’m not going anywhere. If I’m not going to enjoy a fairytale wedding, I’m sure as hell going to treat myself to the all-you-can-eat shrimp, margaritas, and palm-sized lemon cakes they’re serving for free here.

Beside me, a low chuckle catches my attention.

The table next to mine is occupied by a man in a sharp black suit and polished leather shoes. I peek at him through my clumped lashes, wiping my nose with the back of my hand. My mouth goes dry when I manage to get a good look at him.

Hot damn, now *he* belongs in first class.

He’s older than me, maybe in his late thirties? Dark brown hair like a steaming cup of coffee. Deep, dark eyes that lure you to their depths, an endless abyss that I’m curious to explore. He’s got strong shoulders and a wide chest, and his arms are so big I can see the curves of his defined muscles beneath the straining fabric of his suit jacket. He looks the part of a businessman, but there’s something... gruffer underneath.

Dangerous.

I don’t know what it is. There’s an intensity to him, like he’s seen some shit and lived to tell the tale. Equal parts

mesmerizing and intimidating, raw strength bundled up in an understated yet respectable package. Now I'm staring. My heart stutters when his eyes lock onto mine, an immediate and almost overwhelming heat shooting down to pool between my legs.

He doesn't look away. Neither do I. I can't. He's just too handsome, too mysterious.

And he's laughing at me.

"What?" I demand, hating how my voice comes out all squeaky.

"You need to work on your trash talk."

A shiver slithers down my spine, goosebumps crawling down the length of my arms. His *voice*. Deep and rich, so low I can feel his words vibrate in the pit of my stomach. It's enough to leave me breathless and my brain blank. I have no clue what I'm supposed to say.

Thankfully, I don't have to say anything because he makes the first move, reaching into his inner pocket to pull out a handkerchief. The corner is embroidered in delicate burgundy thread, the initials *DC* decorating the corner.

Talk about fancy. Who casually carries around handkerchiefs these days?

"The wedding planner on your wedding day," he comments once I've taken the handkerchief from him. "That's low."

I frown. "You heard that, huh?"

"Hard not to."

Wiping my eyes, I briefly wonder if I'm one of those girls who can pull off the hot mess aesthetic. Signs point to unlikely. As if these last forty-eight hours haven't been mortifying enough, I now find myself sitting not five feet away from one of the most gorgeous men I've ever laid eyes on and I look like shit.

Hey God, it's me. Would you mind —oh, I don't know— giving me a break?

“You’re better off without him,” the stranger says.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. The last thing I want right now are unsolicited comments about my crumbling personal life. Instead of telling him to mind his own business, I say, “I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“You’ll be fine.”

His response is blunt, but it isn’t exactly harsh. I actually appreciate his directness. I can’t count how many people have tried to console me, coddle me, spew all sorts of Pinterest quote board BS about how love is a journey, how marriage takes work and *blah blah blah*. Buddy over here is the first person since my disastrous would-be wedding to give me a straight answer.

“I just don’t get it,” I mumble, scrunching up the soft silk of the handkerchief in my hands. “It was his idea to get married so soon. He clearly wasn’t ready, so why...” I shake my head. “Sorry. You probably have a flight to catch. I won’t keep you.”

He glances at his wristwatch, and I notice how big his hands are. Thick knuckles, beefy wrists. I catch a glimpse of ink gracing his skin, but it disappears beneath the crisp cuff of his sleeve. “If I didn’t want to talk to you, I wouldn’t...” He arches a brow slightly, expectant.

“Marina,” I supply. “My friends call me Arin.”

He doesn’t smile, but I swear I catch a glimmer of something in those dark eyes of his. “Marina,” he repeats, testing my name on his tongue. “A pleasure.”

I snort, too exhausted to worry about sounding foolish. If I haven’t scared him off already, I doubt my dumb laugh will do the trick. “And you?” I ask. “Do you have a name, or are you trying hard to keep up your *international man of mystery* vibe?”

The corner of his lips tick up into the smallest of amused grins. He sticks his hand out to shake, easily enveloping my smaller one. His palms are deliciously rough. For a moment, I wonder what they’d look like wrapped around more than just

my fingers. My skin tingles at the thought of his hands gently gripping my knee, slipping beneath my shirt...

“Dominic,” he says, pulling me from my thoughts.

I smile. The name suits him. “Dominic,” I repeat. “So, where are you flying off to today?”

“Milan, and then a quick stop in Sicily.”

“Business or pleasure?”

“A little of both.”

I nod slowly. “Got a girlfriend waiting for you over there?”

“What gave you that impression?”

“Well, you’re not wearing a ring, so I assumed...”

Now he grins for real, the sight so unexpectedly charming I forget my train of thought. “Is this your roundabout way of asking me if I’m single, Marina?”

I clear my throat, heart pounding in my ear. What am I doing? Why is it suddenly so hot in here? You’d think a first-class lounge could afford proper air conditioning.

“Can’t a girl be curious?” I ask, arching a brow.

“I’m not attached,” is his vague answer. “And what about you?”

“Oh, I think it’s pretty obvious that I’m *very* single right now.”

He chuckles again, the sound once again making my knees tremble with burning desire. What is it about this man that makes me want to melt into a puddle? “No, I meant where are you flying off to?”

My cheeks warm, though I can’t tell if it’s because I’m embarrassed or insanely turned on. “Hawaii. I’m going on what’s supposed to be my honeymoon.”

Dominic clicks his tongue in disapproval. “What a shame.”

“What is?”

He tilts his head to the side slightly and regards me, his intense dark eyes sweeping over me slowly. It's amazing how naked I feel beneath his observant gaze. I feel like he can see right through me, can see every minute breath and small shift of muscle and maybe even read my thoughts. Nervous excitement crackles inside me; the air around us is thick and tense. When I nibble my bottom lip, his eyes dart to watch the motion with an almost hungry darkness.

"A beautiful woman," he says, "all alone in a romantic place. Your ex is a damn fool for treating you this way."

I'm the first to glance away, unwilling to let this man see me cry. I've known him for less than ten minutes, but there's no denying how easily he sees me. I'm an exposed nerve, yet I trust him to be nearby. Maybe it's *because* we're basically strangers and that's why I can afford to be so open with him. Anonymity can be liberating that way. That, and I can't stop thinking about how it might feel to just let it all go.

I want to forget all about my disastrous wedding, my cheating fiancé, my lack of direction or plans for the future. I thought I was all set for a picture-perfect life, complete with house in the suburbs, a white picket fence, and a couple of kids running around. Now that it's all gone straight out the window, I'm suddenly aware of how free I am.

Free to make mistakes and learn from them. Free to live for myself. Free to look into the future and do whatever I want. I'm a twenty-one-year-old woman capable of making my own decisions—screw what anybody else has to say about that. And right now, what I want is to listen to my body.

My body aches for more. I crave his hands on me, his lips. My fingers itch to know what his hair feels like, if his body is as hard and muscular as it looks. I want to lean in and press my mouth to his. After almost five years of only knowing Corey's touch, I want to erase him completely from my mind, even if only for a little while.

"Dominic?"

"Hm?"

I lick my lips, hesitant. I've never done anything like this before, but I can tell by the way he leans forward and hangs on my every word that I'm not crazy. He feels it, too, this pull toward one another.

"When's your flight?" I ask him before my nerves give out.

"Not for a couple of hours. You?"

"Same."

"Hm." Dominic nods once, as if reading my mind. "Come with me. I'm going to help you forget all about that cheating fiancé of yours."

CHAPTER 2



ARIN

The Centurion Lounge at JFK doesn't let just anybody walk in through their big blue doors. My first-class ticket alone isn't good enough to grant me access. But when Dominic flashes his Amex Black, the peppy receptionist welcomes us in with a big smile and a sweeping motion of her arm. The place is relatively empty—no doubt thanks to the exclusivity—but that's not what I'm choosing to focus on right now.

It happens fast.

Dominic has clearly been here before because he guides me to the back section of the lounge where the private showers are. He takes my hand and pulls me inside, immediately moving in to crash his lips against mine, his demanding tongue sweeping over mine like it's new land to claim.

I'm rigid and awkward at first. This is all so new, after all. I've only kissed one other person before, and it turns out he's a cheating douchebag. Kissing Dominic is like trying a new cocktail. The taste, the feel, the tingling sensation he leaves on my lips—it's all exciting and new and requires a bit of adjustment.

"Relax, Marina," he says, loosening his tie as he speaks.

"I've never done this before," I admit, thirstily helping him with the top buttons of his shirt.

Dominic pauses, pulling away a few inches. A soft whine escapes me at the sudden lack of warmth. "Are you sure you want to do this? We can stop at any time."

“I’m sure,” I rasp, tugging at his belt greedily. “I’m just letting you know I don’t... have a lot of experience, that’s all.”

“With quickies?”

I roll my eyes. “Sex in general. I’ve only been with—”

“The cheating scumbag?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t worry, dolcezza. He was just a boy. I’m going to show you how a real man fucks.”

I shiver, my knees practically jelly. The wet heat between my legs is starting to grow unbearable. “Then what are you waiting for?” I mutter against his mouth.

It’s all the permission he needs. Dominic circles me in his arms and lifts me up. I wrap my legs around his hips instinctively, clinging to him as his lips slot together with mine. His kisses are rougher, but I like it infinitely better this way. He’s rough and demanding, proof that he wants not just my mouth, but the very air I’m trying to breathe. It’s all-consuming and wonderfully dizzying.

Dominic carries me into the shower stall, the polished tiles cool to the touch. His big hands are surprisingly deft, peeling my clothes off piece by piece with amazing fluidity. I don’t even have time to feel awkward about it—because on some level this *should* be awkward. God knows it was the first time Corey and I had sex. Back then, I’d been self-conscious and unsure with no idea what I was supposed to do.

But Dominic leaves no time for doubt. He looks at me like he’s ready to devour, pressing hard kisses against my throat, down to my chest, squeezing my breasts while teasing my pebbling nipples with his teeth. He sucks marks against my breasts, a hand slipping between my legs to gather up the slick heat there. A heady groan rips itself from my lungs when his fingers slide over my folds.

“Hurry up,” I rasp. “Shouldn’t you be naked by now?”

Dominic rises to full height, peering down at me with a mischievous glint in his eyes. “It’s called foreplay, dolcezza.

Ever heard of it?”

I chew on the inside of my cheek. “Honestly? Corey didn’t usually—”

“Don’t say his name.”

Swallowing, I nod. I don’t even want to think about him right now. “My *ex* didn’t usually bother with that stuff.”

“Stuff,” Dominic grumbles derisively. “Dear God, you were really going to marry the man?”

“I didn’t know better.”

“Now you do.”

He brushes the pad of his thumb over my sensitive clit, sending sparks flying through my body. Pleasure ebbs and flows through every fiber of my being, punctuated with his kisses and caresses. I claw at his shirt, eager to see him naked and equally exposed. The hard press of his cock against my thigh thrills me, hard and hot and doing its best to escape the confines of his pants.

He works me over with his fingers, teasing me until I’m on the edge of insanity, so consumed by pleasure I can’t help but scream against his shoulder as I crash into my climax. I accidentally bump the shower knob, turning on the high-pressure spray. We’re drenched through in seconds, steam filling the already hot space.

“I’m sorry,” I half-laugh. It’s hard to feel genuinely bad now that his shirt is transparent, revealing the mosaic of dark tattoos beneath the white fabric.

Dominic doesn’t seem too upset. “That’s fine. I’ll just buy a new suit.”

He finally—*finally*—shrugs off his shirt while I reach between us and make quick work of his belt. Hooking my fingers over the waistband of his pants, I push down and marvel at the sheer size of him.

Good God, the man’s massive. His cock springs free, hard and standing at attention. Corey doesn’t even compare. I know

it's not the size of one's tool that matters, but how you use it—and I'm starting to get the sense that Dominic has both.

“Are you, um...” I lick my lips, the spray trickling over my hair and shoulders.

“It's a little late to be shy, dolcezza.”

“Clean. Are you clean?”

“I am but let me grab the condom I have in my wallet.”

“Okay. I mean, I'm on birth control, but there's nothing wrong with being extra careful.”

Dominic leaves for a minute. I stay under the warmth of the shower's spray, willing my heart to calm down. This is exciting and wild. I don't believe in fate or karma, but my chance run-in with Dominic is starting to feel like a sign from above, reinforcing that leaving Corey's sorry ass was the right decision.

Why waste my time with a selfish boy when I can have a man instead?

When Dominic returns, his cock is sheathed and ready for me. He holds me close, his arms secure and comforting. It's strange how safe I feel with him. His kisses take a more tender turn, gentle and teasing as he presses his weight against me, my back pinned against the shower wall. I bristle against the cold, but quickly adjust, too distracted by the earthy scent of his skin and his tattoos to care.

“I'm going to ask you one last time,” he says. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

I nod. “Yes, Dominic. Please fuck me. Help me forget about him.”

“I'll do you one better. When I'm done with you, you'll forget how to *walk*.”

I barely recognized the pitched moan that bubbles past my lips. “I can't wait.”

Dominic grabs my thigh and lifts my leg, hooking it over his hip for better access. He doesn't get straight to it, rubbing

the head of his cock slowly over my wet folds. My pussy clenches around nothing, desperate to feel full. He distracts me with a deep kiss, tongue dancing over my own in a waltz for dominance. He lifts me like I weigh nothing at all, pinning me against the shower while my feet dangle on either side of him. I gasp, circling his neck for stability.

“I’ve got you,” he mutters, pressing the head of length against my entrance. “Ready?”

“Please. Please, please, *please*—”

He shoves into me, my walls stretching to take him. The sensation is divine. I’m so full and warm and drowning in pleasure. I don’t think I’ve ever felt this way before, complete and satisfied before the fun has even begun.

Dominic’s first thrust is careful, testing the waters, but then his pace picks up. Before long, we’re fucking in earnest, our bodies moving as one as we work together to find pleasure. The hot slap of skin against skin makes me even wetter. His hot, low grunts against my ear make me feral.

It’s almost shocking how quickly I lose control. The tight, bright coil in the pit of my stomach suddenly burns with such intensity that there’s no time to brace against the euphoria flooding my veins. I moan languidly against Dominic’s mouth, clinging on for dear life as ecstasy erases my thoughts.

“Oh, *God*,” I pant, breathing in the steam. “Wow, that was —”

Dominic huffs, snapping his hips against me. Sparks fly across my vision. “Not done with you yet.”

“But I—”

“You’re going to give me one more.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

My head spins. *Holy crap, what did I get myself into?*

Dominic sets me down carefully so I’ve got one foot firmly planted on the shower floor. I lean against the side,

hands pressed against the wall as Dominic lifts my outside leg and slots himself between my thighs. The new angle is heavenly, the head of his cock sweeping over a spot I'd only ever read about. It's a new kind of pleasure, this sweet spot, something so deep and powerful that I don't have the words to describe it.

He grasps me by the chin, holding my gaze as he thrusts his cock in and out of me. "Lovely," he praises. "So nice and tight for me, dolcezza. Tell me, has he ever made you feel this way?"

"Dominic—*oh*—"

"Tell me."

"N-no, never."

He curses in something that sounds like Italian. I'm about to ask him what he said, but he interrupts my train of thought with another bruising kiss. He pumps into me faster, harder, the head of his cock sweeping over my sweet spot over and over again until I shatter around him, my whole body trembling as the climax claims me. It's a good thing Dominic's holding onto me because my jelly legs likely would have collapsed out from under me.

"That's it," he encourages roughly, breathing in the scent of my wet hair. "Absolutely wonderful." He kisses my cheek, surprisingly sweet for a man being so deliciously rough.

Dominic turns me around so I'm facing the shower wall, my palms pressed up against the tile as he bends me over. The water trickles over my back, but the only sensation I'm focused on is his big hand stroking the length of my spine, dipping down to grab my ass. His softening cock rubs against my cheeks with a satisfied hum.

"Such a tease," I grumble, backing up slightly to grind against his length.

He claps me across the ass, not hard enough to be painful, but it's definitely still a shock. "Such a gorgeous body. You're so beautiful, Marina, you know that?"

I squirm, unsure what to do with all this praise. I think Dominic senses my mild discomfort because he asks, “That bastard didn’t tell you that often.”

I shake my head. It’s so weird that *now* is the moment my brain decides to feel ashamed. Not when Corey was caught fucking our wedding planner, not when I screamed bloody murder in first class, but now when it’s painfully obvious how little Corey actually cared about me. Compliments were rare, and what little praise I did get was half-assed and often empty.

“Bella mia,” he says with a sigh, slipping an arm around my waist to pull me against him. I don’t think I’ll ever stop marveling at how gentle this giant man is capable of being. “Why did you even agree to marry him?” he asks, a whisper.

A single tear betrays me, slipping down my cheek just to be washed away with the rest of the water. I’ve been too angry to cry. The irony isn’t lost on me. I recognize how strange it is for me to feel safer and more open with a stranger than with the man I was going to marry. Yet it feels like the most natural thing in the world to wear my feelings on my sleeve. For some reason, telling Dominic my deepest, darkest secrets is as easy as breathing.

“Because I loved him,” I admit. “I loved him more than he loved me, and I was too naive to see it until it was almost too late. I was an idiot, that’s why.”

He kisses the back of my shoulder, the crook of my neck. “You’re not an idiot.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“Yet I feel like I’ve known you my whole life.”

I turn just enough to offer him a smile. “I was thinking the same thing.”

Dominic kisses the corner of my mouth. “You’re not an idiot, Marina. There’s nothing wrong with loving someone despite their flaws. What’s unforgivable is how he didn’t give you the same level of love and devotion in return.”

I laugh softly. “You should write a romance advice column.”

“If I ever get fired from my day job, I’ll consider it.”

“Thank you, Dominic. I really needed this.”

“I have a proposal for you,” he says as he pumps some complimentary guava and papaya scented shampoo into his hand. “It’s going to sound crazy.”

“I’m down for a little crazy,” I reply with a smile.

“Don’t go to Hawaii. Come with me to Italy.”

“Are you serious?”

“This... connection,” he says slowly, “it doesn’t happen to me often. I’d like to spend more time with you, and I’d rather not think about you spending your honeymoon all alone.”

I grimace. “It’s sad, I know.”

“Come with me, then. I’ll cover all the expenses.”

“Do you want me to be the pleasure portion of ‘business and pleasure?’”

He gently pinches my ass, earning himself a bubbly giggle. “That’s not a no.”

I take a moment to think. This is all happening so fast. I’ve never been the kind of girl to fly at the seat of my pants. I like to plan things, be organized, micromanage every penny. Spontaneity has never been a part of my character. My choices are always safe and calculated and without risk.

Deep down, I think I was looking for security when I said yes to marrying Corey. A loving husband, a couple of kids, and a big back yard for them to run around in. That’s what people are supposed to want out of life, right?

Not having sex with a stranger in an exclusive VIP lounge at JFK. Not traveling to a foreign country on a whim with a handsome stranger. But my safe choices are what landed me here. If I pass up this opportunity, I might regret it one day.

I look at Dominic and nod. “Let’s do it.”

He smiles, a real, genuine smile that lights up his whole face. It’s so beautiful, my heart skips a beat and my breath

hitches.

Maybe there is such thing as fate.

CHAPTER 3



ARIN

“**Y**ou have a private jet?” I exclaim, gawking at the luxurious cabin.

I’ve only flown economy, so an entire plane to myself is enough to gob smack me. There’s a fully stocked mini bar with polished glass tumblers, a small fridge loaded with all sorts of chocolate-covered fruits, a big TV built into the wall of the cabin, spacious white leather seats, and even a bathroom in the back complete with a functioning shower.

“Courtesy of my employer,” Dominic says. He’s checking something on his phone, brows knitted in a steep frown.

“Everything alright?”

“Need to make a phone call. Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“And then we’re off to Milan?”

Dominic nods, flashing that rare grin of his. “Then we’re off to Milan.”

He climbs down the steps of the jet, phone pressed to his ear as he speaks in rapid-fire Italian. I settle into my seat, giddy as hell. Not only have I met a dashing stranger, but I’m also going to one of the biggest fashion capitals in the world!

Ever since I was a little girl, it’s been a dream of mine to be involved in the world of fashion. I used to pour over Granny Ruth’s old magazines from the fifties, sixties, and seventies that she had stored up in the attic. Watching fashion trends change over time was incredibly fascinating. I was less

concerned with the models who wore the clothes and enthralled by the artistic process that went into a designer's piece. From finding the right material to stitching it all together by hand to selling it directly to a client or retail... Everything about the fashion cycle blew my mind.

I had every intention of going to fashion school with the hopes of one day becoming a designer. I used to dream about my label being up there with the big players—Prada, Gucci, Chanel, Dior. Corey had other plans for me. He wasn't exactly subtle about his disinterest in my passions, going on and on about how I'd have a better chance of winning the lottery than making it as an independent designer. No chance in hell. Besides, what does a married woman need with a career if she's got a good, all-American husband to provide?

Looking back, I realize now how foolish I'd been, placing all my faith in him. He kept me financially dependent on him at every turn. Maybe him cheating on me is a blessing in disguise. At least now I realize I've dodged a bullet. I can't imagine what would have happened to me if I'd legally tied the knot.

These changes... They hurt like hell, but for the first time in a long time, I'm hopeful that I can turn things around. I won't let anybody stand in the way of doing what makes me happy.

Heavy footsteps climb up the jet's stairs. At first, I think it's Dominic returning to join me. I'm disappointed to see it's someone else entirely, though they're dressed in similarly cut suits. The man is a couple inches shorter than Dominic, and he has short black hair and dark green eyes. When he smiles at me, I catch a glimpse of the hole in his teeth. The man's missing his right incisor, making his grin gappy and off-putting.

"Hello, gorgeous," he drawls. "I didn't know the boss was treating us to some in-flight entertainment."

I frown, my stomach growing tight. "Um, hi? I'm Arin. Are you the pilot?"

The man approaches me without hesitation, dipping in to take my hand and press a kiss to the back of my fingers. It's jarring how he shoves himself into my personal space like he owns it. "I'm not the pilot, baby doll," he says. "But I can get my hands on a uniform if that's what turns you on."

A chill rakes through me. *Ugh. Creep.*

I take my hand back and squirm in my seat. "Dominic's going to be here any minute. He said he had to make a call."

Gap Tooth blinks, looking surprised. "You're Dom's girl? My, that's a surprise."

"Why would that be a surprise?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just that my dear colleague promised to swear off hiring escorts for these sorts of trips." Gap Tooth winks at me. "Got in a bit of trouble with our boss not too long ago, you see. He was accidentally charging the company card. You're one hell of a babe, so I'm sure your rates are through the roof. I keep telling him cash is the way to go. We don't want that kind of paper trail lying around, do we?"

I stand, absolutely disgusted. I can't believe what I'm hearing. "I'm not an escort!" I hiss. "How could you say such a terrible thing?"

Gap Tooth takes a step back, his face blank. I can't tell if he's putting on a show or if he's genuinely caught off guard. "You're... not a high-end hooker?"

"Of course not." My face is hotter than the surface of the sun.

He puts his hands up in mock surrender. "I'm sorry, lady. It was an honest mistake. I'm just so used to Dom letting loose on these international business trips."

My heart twists in my chest. "You mean... he does this often? Bring girls with him, I mean."

"Oh, yes. All the time. He has a new girl on his arm every week. Really, you'll have to excuse me. I didn't mean to offend."

I grit my teeth, refusing to cry. What the hell is wrong with me? First Corey, and now I've been played for a sucker by Dominic? But how can that be? I swear to God, what I felt when I was with Dominic was real. Fleeting and new, but sincere and intimate. He was sweet and encouraging, made me feel safe and comforted. Was I just another notch in his belt?

The more and more I think about it, the more I realize how silly I'm being. Did I honestly expect to fly off to Italy with him for a couple of weeks of wild fun? I don't know a thing about him. I don't know what he does for a living, I don't know who he works for, and I don't even know his last name.

Without another word, I storm off the jet, climbing down the steps in a hurry. I need to get my life in order, do some real soul searching. I'm tired of playing the naive fool. It's time to grow the hell up and take charge of my life. No man is going to take advantage of me ever again.

Dominic spots me a few yards away. He hangs up hastily and half-jogs to catch up to me. "Marina? Where are you going?"

"Fuck you," I hiss, shoving past him.

"What's wrong, dolcezza? Tell me what happened."

"Why don't you ask your buddy on the plane?"

"My buddy on the... You mean Milo? What the fuck did he say to you?"

I shake my head, so angry at myself I want to scream. "I thought we... You made me feel special, Dominic. Turns out I'm a dime a dozen to you."

Dominic's face is cold and hard. "Whatever he said to you, it's not true. Marina, wait—"

He tries to take my hand. I pull away.

"Have fun on your trip," I grumble bitterly before walking away.

CHAPTER 4



DOMINIC

Five Years Later

“Mr. Costello, *please*.”

The little old lady sitting on the other side of Lorenzo’s desk—*my* desk—is as frail as a quivering leaf on a bare branch. A strong breeze could easily knock her over. She dabs at her pale blue eyes, hands shaking and nose running as she worries her bottom lip with her teeth.

“There’s nothing I can do, Mrs. Jones,” I say firmly. “Your payments are three weeks past due. As per the contract you signed, your collateral is now forfeit.”

“My collateral is my *home*, Mr. Costello. You’d be forcing me out onto the street.”

“It brings me no pleasure to do this—”

“I just need a bit more time to find a job,” she whimpers, her voice cracking. “I have an interview for a grocery clerk position tomorrow afternoon. I’m sure I can land the job.”

I clench my teeth. If Lorenzo were here, he’d already have a yellow eviction notice plastered to the woman’s front door. She’s somewhere near my own mother’s age, though frailer and smaller with even poorer eyesight. If it were *my* mother being forced out of retirement to find a job to help make ends meet, I’d be livid.

But this job requires my indifference. In my line of work, it’s the only way to survive. There are only two things you can be when you’re a part of the Mob: an earner or a killer. Since

I've never had the stomach for killing, I have to put my foot down and see that Mrs. Jones pays up.

"Please," she says, a whisper. "My husband hasn't even been gone two weeks and the cost of his funeral ate into what little savings we had. Not to mention all the medical bills I'm trying to pay off since he suffered his stroke."

Desperation has a smell. It's sweaty and musty, something Lorenzo has spent years learning how to sniff out and use to his advantage. There's a reason he's one of the Family's best performing capos. He has a knack for finding people's pressure points and a black enough heart to stab them clean through.

I personally don't have a taste for it, yet here I am, manning my boss' desk while he's off having a wild week in Atlantic City. There's order to the madness, an unshakeable hierarchy that must be followed and respected at all times. If Lorenzo tells me to jump, I ask how high. That's what it means to be a capo's right-hand man.

But just because Lorenzo is a heartless son of a bitch doesn't mean I have to be.

"I'll give you two more weeks," I tell her. "But it's the only extension I can give you. Anymore and the boss will have my head."

Mrs. Jones sucks in a sharp breath, tears streaming down her face. I can't tell if she's grateful or fearful or a healthy combination of both.

"Oh, Mr. Costello! Thank you so much! I swear I'll get the money this time, just you wait and see!"

I reach into the inner pocket of my suit jacket and pull out a business card. Flipping it over, I quickly jot down a phone number. "I also want you to call this woman. Tell her I sent you for a job. She needs a housekeeper, someone to help her with menial tasks and maybe prepare a meal every now and then."

Mrs. Jones examines the card and the name I wrote along with the number. "Isabella Costello—"

“My mother,” I grumble under my breath. “I’ll see to it that she pays you fairly. It beats a grocery clerk job at minimum wage.”

A fragile smile graces Mrs. Jones’ dreary face. “Thank you,” she says earnestly. “I honestly don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything. In fact, this conversation never happened, got it?”

Mrs. Jones nods quickly, getting up from her chair in a hurry. She mumbles something that sounds an awful lot like *oh, what a sweet boy*, though I don’t think the term is very becoming of a forty-one-year-old man.

Elio steps in a few minutes later, looking pleased as punch. He leans against the door frame to Lorenzo’s office, arms crossed over his chest. “Don’t you ever get tired of it?”

“What?” I snap, leaning back in my chair.

“Your ever-bleeding heart.”

I grab the heavy metal stapler off the desk and chuck it at him. Elio dodges out of the way, and the stapler smacks against the hallway wall behind him. Elio simply laughs. He knows if I really wanted to hurt him, I would.

“You look like shit,” he says gently, his smile slipping into something a tad more sympathetic. “Why don’t you close up shop for today?”

“Can’t. Someone’s got to run Lorenzo’s districts while he’s out.”

“I could take over for a bit.”

I give him a pointed look. I trust Elio with my life. While I’m Lorenzo’s right-hand man, Elio is mine. When the going gets tough, I know without a shadow of a doubt that he has my back.

Like right now, for instance, even though I want him to piss right off.

“Go home, Dom,” he says. “Take it easy.”

“I’m fine.”

“Liar.”

“I’m *fine*.”

“Do you still have nightmares about it?”

I clench my jaw and glare at him. “Choose your next words carefully.”

“You should be home with your mother,” he continues, ignoring me. “She’s still shaken up over Tommaso’s death and —”

I shoot out of my chair, take three long strides to close the gap between us, grab Elio by the shirt lapels, and slam him up against the nearest wall. “Keep my brother’s name out of your fucking mouth.”

I haven’t spoken about Tommaso in over a month. I can’t afford to. The moment I even *think* about him and what happened that day, I’ll unravel—something I simply won’t allow myself to do. I don’t have time to mourn. Too many people are counting on me, too many people relying on my clear orders and unwavering judgment. Why Elio insists on needling me, I’ll never know. Probably watching too much *Dr. Phil* or something.

Elio doesn’t fight back. “That’s okay, boss. Take it out on me if you have to. That’s what I’m here for.”

I huff, releasing him with a hard shove. “Who’s the asshole with a bleeding heart now?”

He calmly smooths the wrinkles my grip left on his shirt. “Seriously, Dom. Go home. I got the weekly reports from the other laundering houses. I can crunch the numbers and report to the higher ups for you.”

“Did Milo submit his reports?”

“Yep. Surprised me, too.”

“The fucker’s been slacking lately.”

Elio shrugs. “Probably because he knows the boss man’s too distracted in Atlantic City.” He pats me on the shoulder and nods once, an affirmation. “One night of decent sleep,

fratello. That's all I want for you. Then you can come back tomorrow and be your grumpy, loan sharking self, hm?"

I let out a heavy sigh. "Fine. But only because I know you're going to keep annoying me until I cave."

Elio beams. "I'm the best, aren't I?"



My mother's been spending a lot more time at my apartment ever since...

Since.

She putters around while I'm busy at work, tidying despite the fact that I have a maid service come through once a week. She's probably just looking to keep herself occupied, her mind busy. Anything to keep her thoughts off Tommaso. Or, rather, his glaring absence.

I find her in the kitchen, leaning over to check on the lasagna baking in the oven. Three other fully cooked lasagnas are cooling on the marble surface of the kitchen island. She's clearly been at it for hours.

"Are we expecting guests?" I ask her.

My mother startles but gives a watery laugh when she realizes it's only me. "Oh, you're back! I thought you weren't going to be home until after seven."

"Needed to check on you."

She waves her hand dismissively, but her paper-thin smile tells me all I need to know. She looks as exhausted as I feel. There are dark circles beneath her eyes, her hair is a fraying nest of tangles, and I'm fairly certain she's worn her shirt four days in a row.

"These are for you," she gestures, trying to sound like her usual upbeat, chipper self. I don't buy it for a second.

"You didn't have to do this."

“Nonsense. You don’t eat nearly enough. Look at you, practically skin and bones.”

She’s being overly dramatic. If she thinks my two-hundred and thirty pounds of muscle is skin and bones, I’d hate to imagine how she’d describe herself.

“I really worry about you,” she rambles on. “When was the last time you went grocery shopping?”

“You know I don’t have time to cook.”

“What a terrible excuse! You really should find yourself a wife.”

“We’re not having this conversation again.”

“Dom, you’re over forty now. It’s well past time you find yourself a wife to look after you.”

“If I wanted someone to cook for me, I’d hire a personal chef. A wife is capable of being more than a housekeeper, Mother.”

“And what about children? I’ve been asking for grandchildren for ages.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, I already take care of dozens.”

“Those man-babies you call associates are not your flesh and blood, my boy. It’s not the same.”

“We’ve sworn allegiance to one another. It feels the same.”

An awkward silence falls over us. Neither of us knows what to say. There’s a gnawing grief in the center of my chest, eating me alive. All I can do is try to not let it consume me whole. I watch my mother carefully, her lips pressed into a thin line as her eyes gloss over with the threat of tears. There’s no doubt in my mind that her anguish is ten times worse. I may have lost my little brother, but she lost her son.

“I should get going,” she whispers.

“You’re welcome to stay the night,” I tell her. “I have more than one guest room to use.”

My mother shakes her head, picking at her fingernails. “That’s alright, cuore mio. I’ve already been here a week. I don’t want to be in your way.”

“You’re not in the way.”

She licks her lips, eyes cast to the floor. “I have to go home some time. My poor plants are in desperate need of watering.”

I nod once. “If you’re sure. I’ll have the boys escort you home.”

“Is that really necessary, Dom?”

“Whoever did this...” I grind my teeth, ignoring the tight burn in the back of my throat. “They’re still out there. I’d rather I send a few of my men to protect you in case.”

My mother walks over and stands before me, reaching up to give my cheek a loving stroke. Her bottom lip trembles, but she refuses to cry. “Promise me something, Dom.”

“Anything.”

“When you find the fuckers who gunned down your brother, make sure to kill them slowly.” Her eyes are suddenly cold and dead like a shark. My mother wasn’t always a frail old woman. Sometimes I forget; once upon a time, she was one of the most feared women in all of Little Italy. She gave it all up after she met my father, but every now and then, I get a glimpse of the fierce woman she used to be.

I press a kiss to her forehead. “Don’t worry. I’ll tear them limb from limb.”

“Promise to let me watch?”

“Of course.”

“Good.” Her smile is tight as she pats my shoulder. “Put those lasagnas away. They’ll keep in the freezer for up to three months.”

CHAPTER 5



ARIN

“I’m sorry, Ms. Wilson, but your credit history leaves much to be desired.”

I sit across from Marnie, a financial advisor with Tillman-Hopkins National Bank, anxiously reminding myself to take deep, calm breaths. The contents of my portfolio are spread out over the surface of her desk, detailing every single step in my proposed business plan. I’ve even brought in a few sample pieces I made to show her I’m not all talk. I was told having proof of concept was something bankers like, after all.

Swallowing the lump in the back of my throat, I say, “I know my credit is—”

“Next to non-existent?”

“—a work progress. But like I told you, I graduated from the Fashion Institute of Technology two years ago, and I’ve spent the last year interning at Ralph Lauren. As you can see from my designs, I’m ready to launch my own label. All I need is a loan of twenty-thousand dollars to provide my business with enough capital to—”

Marnie collects the documents before her, gathers them into a neat pile, and taps the edge against her desk before slipping everything back into the folder. She adjusts her glasses and sighs deeply. “Your designs are beautiful, Ms. Wilson, but I cannot approve this loan. According to your bank statements, you barely make enough to cover your bills and the minimum payments to keep your loan in good standing.”

Desperation claws at my lungs, my heart beating frantically. I've been waiting for this opportunity for ages, and I can feel it slipping from my grasp.

"Isn't there anything I can do?" I ask. "Please, there has to be *something*. Fashion Week is coming up in September. I'm hoping to launch my label by then and use the event to drum up hype. If enough people learn about my designs, maybe they'll buy enough to pay back my loan and then some."

"That's the thing, Ms. Wilson," the financial advisor says, resting her elbows on her desk. "*Maybe* your launch will be a success, and *maybe* you'll have enough interested customers buying your pieces... But banks don't operate on *maybes*."

She stands, a silent signal that this conversation is done.

I rise, my chin held high. I knew this was going to be a long shot, but no one can say I didn't give it a good old fashion try.

"It's nothing personal, Ms. Wilson," Marnie says, giving me a sturdy handshake. "For what it's worth, your dresses really are beautiful."

"Thank you," I mumble before turning on my heels to leave.

I step out of the bank, heart still pounding loudly in my chest. Got my hopes up for nothing. I tuck my carefully prepared business plan beneath my arm and start down the street, glaring at the ground like it owes me money. Back to square one.

New York is loud and bright, an anonymous sea of faces I've learned to blend in with. The sound of traffic fills my ears, a cacophony of rumbling engines, distant sirens, and insistent honking. The streets are crowded, not just with passersby going about their business, but with massive piles of black garbage bags awaiting collection on the curbs. It's a sweltering day in mid-July, the heat of the sun exacerbated by the mirror-like windows of the towering skyscrapers all around us. I'm greatly looking forward to the cooler, crisper months of fall.

I take the subway and walk the rest of the way home, taking in the colors of the city as I go. The streets are yellow with a seemingly endless stream of cabs. The sides of buildings are a beautiful mosaic of graffiti. The people I pass are colorful, too, the stories of their lives reflected in the clothes they choose to wear.

Marnie was right. I make just enough to cover my bills from month to month. The money Granny Ruth left me went to finance my education. Do I wish I made a little more? Obviously. But I have to remind myself that I'm doing fine. I'm making it on my own, and I'm immensely proud of that fact.

I'm just about to climb the stairs to my apartment on the third floor when Mrs. Jones hobbles up the front steps of the building, a small grocery bag in hand. She's got an entire stack of coupons in the other, several of them already clipped out.

"Arin!" she greets. "How are you doing today? Did your meeting at the bank go well?"

I smile stiffly. "They're going to... get back to me."

"Ah. Not so well, then?"

"It'll be fine. I'll figure something out. Can I help you carry up your groceries?"

"That's quite alright, my dear." She hands me her stack of coupons. "I dog-eared a few pages for you. Saw some things you and your little one might like."

"Thank you, Mrs. Jones. That's really sweet of you."

She reaches into her pocket next and pulls out a business card. "And *this* is just in case the bank doesn't get back to you."

"What is it?"

"The number of a private lender."

I turn the card over, reading the golden embossed lettering. *Lorenzo Marroni*. "Private lender," I repeat. "You mean a loan shark? I don't know if that's such a good idea..."

“I know, I know,” Mrs. Jones said, a flash of something sad misting her eyes. “His interest rates are through the roof, but if it’s money you need, they rarely say no to anyone. Plus, there’s a really nice young man working there right now. He helped give me an extension—”

“You made a deal with a loan shark?” I gasp. “I’m sorry. That sounded really judgmental.”

“These are desperate times, my dear. Sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do.” Mrs. Jones gives my hand a gentle pat. “You’re under no obligation to call. I just thought it could be helpful.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Jones. I’ll... keep it in mind.”

“See you later, dear. You’re coming to the block party next week, aren’t you?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

I take the stairs two at a time and reach the door at the very end of the hall. On the other side, I hear the familiar sounds of “Paw Patrol” playing on the TV. I enter quietly, all my troubles forgotten the moment I see my daughter. Felicia sits on Lana’s lap, watching with focus as the characters get up to their usual shenanigans. She immediately loses interest when she spots me out of the corner of her eye.

“Mommy!” she cheers, hopping up to rush over to me.

I drop everything on the small hallway table and pick my four-year old up, kissing her cute little cheeks. “There’s my favorite girl in the whole world!”

Lana, my roommate, laughs. “I thought *I* was your favorite girl in the whole world.”

I roll my eyes, hugging my daughter close. “Believe me, you’re in close second. If anything changes, I’ll be sure to let you know.”

The three of us share a two-bedroom apartment in the Downtown Eastside. The building’s one of the older ones, pushing seventy-five with questionable dingy carpet. The once dark green wallpaper has faded with years of sun exposure,

there's an ever-present musty smell in the hallway, and the kitchen is cramped as all hell. Still, it's home. With the rent split between Lana and me, it's honestly not the worst place to live.

Our furniture is a mishmash of different pieces, nothing belonging to its original set. Our dining table and rickety wooden chairs were picked up off the curb, the couch we got from a neighbor moving out almost a year ago, and many of our mismatched cutlery and plates we scored at the local flea market. It's messy and a bit chaotic, and I definitely yearn for a bit more space, but at least it's mine.

"How'd it go?" Lana asks me, brushing off the back of her jeans.

My silent head shake is enough of an answer.

Lana shrugs. "Tillman-Hopkins is shit anyway."

My little girl gawks. "Auntie Lana said bad word."

I laugh. "Do you think she should put a dollar in the swear jar?"

"Yeah!"

Lana sighs dramatically. "When will I ever learn?"

Setting Felicia down, I pat her gently on the back. "Can you please clean up your toys and wash your hands? I'm going to get started on dinner in a minute."

"Okay, Mommy!" she exclaims, waddling off toward the living room to pick up her various knickknacks.

Lana takes her place beside me, smiling nonchalantly as I shrug off my coat. "Water bill arrived earlier today. So did the electric and phone. Need me to spot you?"

"I'm not going to take money from a friend."

"You know I don't mind."

"You already do so much for me. I can cover my half of the water bill, don't worry. Do you remember the Gomez family that commissioned me last month?"

“Yeah. They had, like, triplets or something?”

“They loved the dresses I made for their girls’ quinceañeras so much that they referred me to a couple of friends of theirs. I’ve got two dresses lined up. That’s a grand a pop. If I can figure out how to sell one more, I’ll be golden this month.”

“That’s good to hear, babe, but...”

“What?”

Lana gives me a side hug as Felicia puts away the last of her toys. “You’re working yourself to the bone. I don’t want you to burn out, that’s all. Are you sure you can’t reach out to the father and ask for a little support?”

I take a deep breath. Lana and I met at the Fashion Institute of Technology. When we discovered we were taking most of the same classes, we very quickly became friends. She was surprised when I walked in on my first day, baby Felicia on my hip. She was one of the only ones who offered to help me when she’d start crying or if I had a presentation to give at the front of the class. She knows I’m a single mom, but I’ve never told her the full story.

I think about him often. Dominic. It’s the only name I have to go on. That creepy guy on the jet freaked me out so much I didn’t even think to ask for Dominic’s last name or his contact information. Imagine my surprise when, a month later, I discovered that my period was late. The rest was history.

Keeping Felicia is a decision I’ll never regret. Yes, sometimes things get hard. The thought of raising a baby alone was daunting, but so very worth it. My daughter is one of my biggest motivations in life. I’m determined to make it as a fashion designer so I can give her the life she deserves. The way I see it, if I can bring this beautiful little girl into the world all by myself, I can do anything if I put my mind to it.

“You know he’s out of the picture,” I whisper to her. “But it’s all good. Everything’s going to work out.”

Lana kisses my cheek. “You’re a damn inspiration, you know that? You should get a book deal or something.”

I snort. “Maybe we can get Oprah to add it to her book club.”

“Mommy, ‘m hungry!” Felicia announces from the living room. “I want ice cream.”

“Ooh, I want ice cream, too,” Lana says, hurrying over to scoop my daughter up.

“You know the rules, sweetie. Eat all your veggies first, *then* you get one scoop.”

“Aww,” Lana whines. “But I’ve been good all day!”

Felicia places her hand over Lana’s mouth and frowns. “Rules!” she says, exasperated.

I laugh as I head to the kitchen, running my fingers along the edges of the business card hiding in my pocket.

Sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do.

CHAPTER 6



DOMINIC

Breakfast is a cup of coffee. Black, because that's the only way to enjoy it properly.

When Elio knocks on my door at 7:00 a.m. sharp, I'm ready to go.

He hands me a thick manila folder, walking while talking. "Cops busted the Renato's gambling den in Chinatown," he explains as we head to the elevator.

"Any casualties?"

"None. They raided the place last night, but it was empty."

"Shame."

"Do you think we should swoop in there? Renato's men spook easy. I doubt they'll be returning any time soon now that the location's been made."

"That's Lorenzo's call, not mine."

"But we been trying to get a foothold in Chinatown for ages—"

"Do you *want* a turf war on our hands?" I snap. "Drop it, Elio. It's good enough that the Renatos are running scared. There's a good chance their clientele will come flocking to our location on Seventh. Let the cops do the hard work for us."

Elio nods. "You're the boss."

A black Maserati is waiting outside for me. I recognize the associates standing by the curb, on guard. They're not dressed in impeccable suits—and they won't get to until they've

proven themselves worthy of the title made man — so they look more like a professional security team than members of the Mob.

“Good morning, Mr. Costello,” they greet in unison.

I nod at the one opening the passenger door for me. “Johnny, how’re the kids?”

Johnny’s one of our younger associates. He’s as dumb as a brick, but he’s eager to please and a hard worker. I happen to think that’s a good thing. It’s the associates with a little too much ambition and drive that you have to look out for.

“They’re good, Mr. Costello. Thank you for asking.”

“Did they end up going to that comic book convention?”

“Yes, they did. They had a great time. I used the bonus you gave me last month to buy them the tickets.”

“Glad to hear it,” I say, slipping into the car. “Gentlemen.”

Elio gets behind the wheel, merging seamlessly into traffic. “You’re like a damn pop star to them. I’ve never seen Johnny so starry-eyed.”

I ignore my second-in-command and open the folder, pouring over the financial reports. This is technically Lorenzo’s job, but he entrusted me to keep everything running smoothly while he’s away. It’s grueling, mind-numbing work, but someone’s got to do it.

“The nail salon is underperforming again,” I mutter, mentally crunching the numbers.

“There’s been a recent increase in police presence in the area,” Elio explains. “It’s hard to print counterfeit bills when the cops are always sniffin’ around.”

“Don’t we have a mole inside? We can have him shift some of the heat away.”

“He got caught two nights ago. He’s been sittin’ pretty in holding.”

“Why wasn’t I informed?”

“I thought you were. Milo said he’d tell you.”

My nostrils flare. His name is more grating than nails screeching across a chalkboard. We were both born into the life — legacies of legacies — but we started off as associates just like everyone else. For years, he’s been a massive pain in my ass. Sure, he’s loyal, but to the Family, not to me. He’s been gunning for me ever since Lorenzo appointed me his right-hand man. Where I got ahead by keeping my head down, following orders, and working hard, Milo got ahead by specializing in cheating, brownnosing, and pinning the blame on others.

Simply put: a rat.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I sigh. “I’ll deal with him later.”

“What do you want me to do about the nail salon?”

“Give them a warning. Lorenzo’s going to be back in a few weeks. I’m sure they’d like to avoid a visit from him.”

“Will do.”

Elio brings the car around on time, but there’s already a line of waiting customers wrapping around the building, at least fifteen of them, all of them smelling of desperation. I’d turn them away if I could, but I’m under direct orders never to turn anyone away. Lorenzo’s loan shark business is what brings in the majority of his racket’s money. For better or for worse — usually for worse — these people are always approved.

My morning goes by quickly. I hear sob story after sob story, excuse after excuse. I don’t particularly enjoy the insidious nature of this job, but I’ve never disobeyed my capo’s direct order, nor will I start now. I approve loan after loan, pay them in cold hard cash, then send them on their merry way.

Many of them express their thanks, their gratitude. I wish they wouldn’t. Nobody should ever thank the man who helped them sign away their soul. They’ll be singing a different tune when it’s time for me to collect on their payments and they

realize far too late that there was no hope for them in the first place.

By noon, I'm exhausted and ready to call it quits. Even with the sleep aids my doctor prescribed me, I haven't had a good night's sleep since the funeral. I'm haunted by the sounds of the screaming, the violent ring of gunshots ripping through the air, the memory of the light draining from my brother's eyes. If anything, the sleep aids only exacerbate my nightmares. I'd rather not sleep at all.

There's a knock at my door; must be another potential customer. I don't have an appointment scheduled for this one, so I figure it must be a walk-in.

"Come in," I command.

In walks a woman with long black hair and legs for days. She's dressed plainly in a pair of light blue jeans with a fitted black V-neck tucked in, accentuating her ample breasts and the sleek curves of her hips. She has a grey garment bag draped over her left arm and a folder tucked under her right. All in all, much more put together than the usual sort to come into my office.

Her eyes do me in. A delicate grey that reminds me of the winter sky after a heavy snowstorm. They're strangely familiar. I can't shake the feeling that I've met this woman before.

Her mouth drops open when she sees me. "*You*," she breathes.

And then it hits me. Five years ago. The breathtaking spitfire of a woman I met at the airport. The one Milo scared off, insisting he did no such thing.

"Marina," I reply slowly, rising from my chair. I round the desk and take a careful step toward her. She mirrors me, taking a step toward me, staring as if she's seen a ghost.

"You remember?" she whispers.

"How could I forget?"

The air between us is electric. She's so close I can smell the sweet vanilla scent of her shampoo. She hasn't changed all that much in five years. If anything, she's even more beautiful than the day I met her. She's close enough to touch, close enough to kiss...

But a thought occurs to me, one that makes my stomach clench.

"What are you doing here?" I ask firmly.

She frowns, turning a little to read the name painted on the glass window of Lorenzo's door. "I'm here to talk to somebody about getting a loan. Am I in the right place?"

I almost scoff. I have half a mind to chase her out. This is no place for a woman like her. Signing a deal with her will only worsen her troubles. For whatever reason, I refuse to put her in a position where Lorenzo can dig his claws into her.

She puts a hand on her hip. "Well?" she asks, not unkindly. "Am I in the right place?"

Say no, say no, say no.

"You're in the right place."

Fucking idiot.

I gesture to the guest chair, pulling it out for her while she takes a seat. Instead of returning to my chair, I stand in front of her, leaning against the edge of the desk.

"I didn't know you worked here," she says gently, looking around. "It's quite the coincidence."

"Yes. Quite."

"How've you been?"

Ha. Isn't that a loaded question.

"Good," I answer simply. "You?"

"Good."

Her eyes rake over my body, her plump lips parted just so. Her cheeks are an adorable shade of pink, her chest rising and falling at a noticeably slow pace.

I clench and unclench my fists. This was not how I was expecting today to go. My fingers itch to reach out, touch her, hold her. How many nights did I spend sleepless, wondering what happened to her after our chance encounter at the airport? Did she look for me just as I tried looking for her? It took months for me to stop kicking myself for not getting her number, for not chasing her through the airport and setting Milo's gaffe to rights. But now she's here, breathtakingly gorgeous...

And in the middle of Lorenzo's shark tank.

Curiosity burns in the pit of my stomach. I want to know what she's doing here. I'm normally not this invested, but I have to know. Because maybe I can keep her from making one of the biggest mistakes of her life.

"You said you're looking for a loan," I prompt.

She sits up a bit straighter, quickly reaching for her folder. She hands it to me, something heartbreakingly hopeful painting her expression. "Yes, that's right. My business plan is all here."

I open the folder and take a quick glance. "You're asking for twenty-thousand dollars?"

"That's right. To start my own fashion label."

"Why not go to a bank?"

"I tried. Several times."

"And their reasons for rejection?"

"Lack of credit."

"How much do you have currently saved?"

"Only two grand."

Oof.

If this were anyone else, I'd approve them on the spot. It's shady practice to give a loan to someone with a shit track record, but that's how sharks make their money. Tack on a 300% interest rate to the lump sum and you'll be rolling in cash until the customer's pockets are bled dry.

Somewhere deep down, I refuse to let that happen to her. I can't explain where this protectiveness comes from, and I know for a fact that I haven't suddenly grown a conscience, but I won't have a part in ruining this woman's life.

I close the folder and shake my head. "Look—"

"Wait," she says hastily. "Let me convince you."

Oh, I shouldn't like the way she says that.

"Convince me?"

"I brought a few of my dresses," she says. "I made them myself. Let me prove to you that my work is a worthy investment. My label will pay for itself."

I set my jaw. This whole thing is a bad idea.

My straining cock, on the other hand, is simply excited to be this close to her. And seeing her in a pretty dress? How can I possibly say no to that?

"I need you to turn around," she says. "I'm going to model one of my dresses for you."

"What?"

"Please?" She blinks up at me with those pretty grey eyes, her long lashes fluttering.

"Okay," I murmur, too lost in her gaze.

CHAPTER 7



ARIN

If my life had closed captioning, it'd read something along the lines of [*incoherent mental screaming*] right about now. I mean, what are the chances?

I recognized him the moment I stepped into the room, just as breathless as the first time we met. My mouth is dry, a jumble of thoughts trying to arrange themselves into coherent sentences on the tip of my tongue. What am I supposed to say?

My first instinct is to tell him about Felicia, that he has a daughter he doesn't know about, but I decide against it. That's not something you can just unload on a person. I'm worried about how he might react. Will he freak out? Call me a liar? He doesn't seem like the kind of man to panic, but I honestly don't know what to expect.

I debate with myself as I quietly slip into one of my dresses, draping the others I brought over the guest chair as an impromptu display. Maybe I should hold off telling him the truth for now. After all, I don't know a single thing about him. Is he really a loan shark? But this clearly isn't his office. Unless he lied to me and gave me a fake name the day we met, and he's really called Lorenzo? Besides, even if he isn't Lorenzo himself, he clearly works for the man.

And what about the fact that he used to hire, or maybe still does hire, escorts? Taking advantage of women in that position is despicable. But I don't know that for sure; I only have the word of his associate, who seemed like a complete scumbag. Who knows what the truth is there?

Smoothing the delicate fabric of my dress, I take a deep, contemplative breath. Maybe I can use this opportunity to get a better sense of him. The last thing I want is to welcome him into Felicia's life without knowing his character. I refuse to do that to my daughter, so for now, I'll focus on the task at hand.

I clear my throat. "Okay, you can turn around now."

I'll give credit where credit is due, Dominic didn't peak once while I was getting changed. When he turns, I'm suddenly reminded of the intensity of his gaze as it sweeps over me, raking over every inch of my body with precision. I stand tall, my head held high as I ignore the pooling heat gathering between my legs.

"This is my best piece," I tell him, biting back the nervous excitement thrumming through my veins. "My greatest influences are Chanel and Dior, especially some of their more classic collections. I wanted to give their elegant styles a modern update, combining sleek with sexy meant for people of all sizes."

Dominic remains perfectly still, his gaze so dark and hungry I'm not sure if he's even listening. I continue anyway, because once I start talking about all things fashion, my brain is a runaway train on speed.

"The fabric I purchase is sustainably sourced, and everything is sewn together by hand. I've got at least fifteen other pieces at my studio. It's easier to get a sense of their silhouettes when they're on a model, but as you can see, they're very haute couture."

"And see-through," he grumbles, his eyes landing squarely on my chest.

I glance down. Nothing particularly suggestive is showing thanks to strategically placed floral appliques I stitched by hand, but the sheer fabric of the corseted bust of my dress is just transparent enough to give him a peek at the lace bra I have on underneath.

"It'll look better once I have the funds to hire a model," I say, ignoring the rapid beating of my heart. God, he looks at

me like he wants to eat me. If he keeps this up...

I just might let him.

He glances away like I've slapped him across the face.

"You think twenty thousand is going to be enough?" he asks, glaring at the floor like it holds the answer to life's mysteries.

"More or less. I've factored in the cost of renting a venue for the runway, the general cost of marketing to get my name out there, and the amount of money I'd need to hire a small crew of assistants and models for the actual show."

"You're aware that our interest rates are exponentially higher than that of a bank, correct?"

I swallow, unable to dislodge the sticky lump in the back of my throat. "I'm aware, but I don't have very many options."

Dominic is quiet for a moment. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he looks... conflicted. He dares to look at me again, this time taking in the small details of my dress. He steps forward silently, entering my space with ease. He brings with him the scent of his earthy cologne and the heat of his body, hovering barely a few inches away.

He circles me slowly, taking me in. A small gasp escapes me when I feel the tips of his fingers gently graze down the delicate appliques sewn onto the back of the dress. His touch is light and fleeting, yet it leaves a firestorm trailing in its wake.

"Interest is calculated weekly," he murmurs close to my ear. His voice sends a shiver down my spine.

"I know."

"What do you have for collateral?"

I wait on bated breath, feeling him loom just out of my field of vision. "I don't have much," I whisper. "But these dresses are worth their weight in material."

"I don't have much use for a dress collection," he replies quietly.

“Please. I know my label is going to be a massive success.”

“How do you know?”

“I can feel it.”

Dominic clicks his tongue, his fingers whispering down my forearm to linger just at my wrist. He takes my hand and lifts just so, studying the detailed embroidery work I put into the beaded sleeves. I designed them to look like tiny floral buds in bloom, the glass beads shimmering under the warm office lighting. My hand looks so small in his big, rough one.

It’s at this moment that I suddenly remember why I was so taken with him the first time, all those years ago. It’s not just his good looks, but his essence. He exudes silent command and respect. I’ve heard stories of people who walk into the room and own it. Standing here before me, there’s no question Dominic is one of them. He’s the sort of man I have no doubt could do whatever the hell he wants, but right now, all he wants to do is look at *me*. It’s easy to get high off the feeling, his attention unspeakably addictive. And the fact that he’s giving it to me so freely makes me so damn hot it hurts.

He finally steps away with a sigh. “I can’t give out loans based on a feeling, Marina.”

“Arin, please,” I insist, ignoring the panic rising in my chest. “I can pay the loan back, I swear. I have what it takes to be a great designer. I just need somebody to give me a shot. I’ve worked my ass off to get here and—”

“I don’t doubt that.”

“Then *why*? Aren’t loan sharks supposed to be...”

“What?” he challenges.

I set my jaw. “Don’t loan sharks play it fast and loose with who they give their money out to? You’re counting on people like me to miss payments so you can profit off the interest.”

“Maybe I’m different.”

“Dominic, please.” I peer up at him, my sweaty hands clenched. “If you don’t approve this loan, then that’s it. I’ll be

stuck making dresses for quinceañeras and sweet sixteens for the rest of my life. All I need is for someone to give me a chance.”

He leaves my side and returns to his office chair, sitting down with a heavy sigh. “My answer is no,” he says sternly. And then, under his breath, “Trust me. I’m doing you a favor.”

“Favor?” I echo, incredulous. Ignoring the sting of tears in my eyes, I gather my other garments and pack it all away.

Dammit, this is so embarrassing! It’s one thing to be rejected by a bank, but to be turned down by a loan shark, too? Is my dream of becoming a fashion designer really that much of a lost cause? Just when I thought I was making progress, life had to go ahead and kick me in the stomach.

“Okay,” I say, forcing a smile. “Thank you for your time.”

“Marina, wait—”

I’m already out the door, the train of my dress fluttering behind me as I whip around the corner to leave.

CHAPTER 8



DOMINIC

I can't stop thinking about her. Those dazzling grey eyes, the gentle curl of her raven locks, her pouty, full lips I craved to taste. When I turned around and saw her in that beautiful dress, I damn near lost my mind. Every fiber of my body screamed to hold her, kiss her, tear that beautiful lace off her so I could make her mine in every sense of the word.

There were two perfectly good reasons why I didn't, though:

1. If word ever got back to Lorenzo that I fucked a woman on his desk, I can guarantee a watery grave at the bottom of the Hudson
2. I didn't want to put Arin in an even more complicated position.

She walked into this office looking for money. I can't very well make a move on her without my ethics being called into question. I'm a man who takes what he wants, but not at the risk of abusing my power—especially not over a woman in dire straits.

My mother raised a gentleman.

A soldier for the Cosa Nostra, sure, but a gentleman all the same.

Seated behind Lorenzo's desk, I look over Arin's business plan again, studying every page with an almost amused fascination. She forgot it in her haste, but I'm thankful she left it behind because now I finally know her name. After five long years of not knowing who she truly was, she's given me all the answers herself.

Marina Wilson. She apparently works out of a small storefront in Mott Haven. This new information makes me frown. That's one of the rougher parts of the city, known for rape, murder, assault, robbery... I could go on and on but thinking about Arin walking to and from work alone makes my blood boil. It just isn't safe for a beautiful woman like her to—

I take a deep breath. Where is this burning protectiveness coming from?

All I need is for someone to give me a chance.

Her words echo around inside my skull. If I'm being perfectly honest, I was *this* close to giving her the money straight out of my own pocket. I'd rather she owe me than be in Lorenzo's books, but I was too distracted by how gorgeous she looked in that dress. I don't know the first thing about fashion, and I sure as fuck don't care about style or clothes, but there's no questioning her talent.

She looked like a fucking goddess in that sleek black gown. A seductress of the night. I don't think I've ever been more jealous of a dress before. The way the fabric hugged her body, flowed over her curves and accentuated the dip of her waist...

My cock strains against the confines of my pants.

I ignore it because I'm a man capable of self-restraint.

Three sharp knocks sound at the door. Before I have a chance to look up, Milo fucking Palermo waltzes in with a smug grin on his face.

"Dom, my old friend! You're looking good. Been hitting the gym lately?"

"You missed the last two meetings I called."

“Ah, classic Dom. Always straight to business.”

“I’m being serious, Milo. You can’t keep slacking like this.”

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a pack of cigarettes, lighting one without a care. “Give me a break, Dom. We never discuss anything important in those meetings. As long as I get my reports in to you, who gives a shit?”

“I give a shit. Lorenzo expects me to stay on top of things.”

“Yeah, because the boss is too busy pissing away all his money on slots and whores.”

“Careful,” I warn, shooting him a glare. “We’re all entitled to our own vices. As long as he follows orders and doesn’t do anything to piss off the Family, he can do whatever the fuck he wants.”

Milo crosses his arms over his chest, leaning his hip casually against the edge of the desk. “And what about you, Dom? What are *your* vices?”

“Did you come here to check in, or are you trying to waste my time?”

“Can’t I spend a little quality time bonding with my dear old friend?”

I squint at him. He’s as subtle as a knife stabbing me straight through the chest. I’ve known Milo long enough to know he hates my guts just as much as I hate his. There’s always an ulterior motive with him. The only question is *what?*

Despite his easy air and annoying personality, there’s a murderer hiding under that smile. I’m not afraid of him, but only in the same way I’m not afraid of a dog until it starts showing off its fangs.

I might be Lorenzo’s earner, but Milo is Lorenzo’s killer. His ledger is at least half a mile longer than my own.

Standing, I gather what little paperwork is scattered over the desk and tuck everything away. “I have places to be, so

unless you have anything important to say, I expect to see you the next time I summon you.”

His suspiciously friendly facade finally cracks, his mask slipping for the briefest of seconds. “*Summon* me? It sounds like someone’s getting a little too comfortable playing head honcho. Don’t get too used to ordering everyone around. I’m sure Lorenzo won’t appreciate it very much when he gets back. You should be careful, old friend.”

I don’t bat an eye. I brush right past him after grabbing my coat off the back of my chair. “Lorenzo knows where my loyalties lie,” I tell him simply. “I don’t think he can say the same for you.”

With a final glance, I leave.

Looks like he’s showing his fangs, after all.



“Are you sure this is the address, boss?” Elio asks me from the driver’s seat.

I peer out the window and take in our surroundings. Elio’s got the car parked by the curb, but my Maserati still sticks out like a sore thumb. The sidewalks are crowded with street vendors peddling their wares — bootleg DVDs, knockoff designer purses, other more questionable items I can’t identify from where I’m seated — all in front of a small storefront big enough for one dress in the window display.

Marina’s Lil’ Dress Shoppe.

Cute.

“Are we here to collect on rent or something, boss?” Elio asks me, frowning. “A little outside our territory, isn’t it?”

“This one isn’t ours,” I tell him.

“But it *will* be? I’ve got the tire iron and baseball bat in the trunk—”

“No. We’re not making a move.”

“Then what are we doing here, Dom?” Elio grins at me in the reflection of the rearview mirror. “Are you gonna buy me a pretty dress? If you must know, I prefer pink frills over blue ones.”

I snort. “Would you shut up? I’m trying to—”

Inside the shop, movement. The front door swings open, the tiny brass bell affixed just above it jangling as a woman and a little girl walk out. There’s a third person just behind them, and although her face is blocked from view, I instantly recognize her silky raven hair. I roll down the tinted window an inch so I can listen.

“Thanks so much for the quote,” the older woman says. “We’re still doing a bit of shopping around, but I adore your work.”

“Thank you very much,” is Arin’s soft reply. She sounds a bit run down.

“Ugh, *Mom*,” the teen beside her says with a dramatic eye roll. Her hair’s dyed blue, pink and green. Very much an *I’m-not-like-other-girls* vibe. “I already told you. I can just buy a cheap dress online. You’re going overboard with all this prom crap. It’s not even *your* prom.”

The mother shushes her daughter. “No, sweetie. I already told you that shopping online isn’t a good idea. You never know if what you buy is going to fit you, and then you end up looking like a sack of potatoes. Mark my words, my daughter’s going to be prom queen just like I was.”

“There, ordered it,” the girl says, her thumbs swiping over her phone. “It’ll be here in three to five business days.”

“Now, young lady—”

“Come *on*, Mom, I’m starving.”

“What am I going to do with you?” the woman grumbles as she rushes after her angsty teen.

Arin remains at the doorway, her gaze far off and distant. Her expression is blank. Defeated. I watch as she takes a deep breath, chewing on the inside of her cheek before slowly

flipping the *Come In, We're Open* sign on her front door. She retreats inside and locks up, the lights inside flickering off.

I can't describe the feeling twisting in the pit of my stomach. Whatever it is, I don't like it.

"Dom?" Elio calls to me from the front seat. "What do you want to do?"

I roll up the window and settle in my seat, mulling the question over.

What I *want* is to go in there and ask her for one more amazing night together. What I *want*, for reasons unknown to me, is to take all her troubles and worries away. What I *want* is to ask her what she's been up to in the five years since and to ask if she's free tomorrow night and the night after that so I can spoil her rotten.

But a man like me means trouble. I don't mean that in a hyper-inflated bravado kind of way. My line of work is dangerous, as are the people I am surrounded by. A beautiful, sweet, passionate young woman like Arin isn't built for my world. No matter how interested I may be, bringing her into my life will only complicate her life.

And yet...

"Tell Johnny he's on sentry duty. Place him across the street and have him keep an eye on the shop. It's under our protection now."

Elio arches a brow. "But we're not collecting? I don't think Lorenzo —"

"This isn't Lorenzo's order. It's mine."

I glance towards the shop as Arin is leaving. She walks to the nearest subway station and descends the steps, disappearing from sight. Elio notices. He gives me a cocky smile.

"I read you loud and clear, boss."

"Good. Now, take me home."

CHAPTER 9



ARIN

All things considered, I'm doing alright. Granny Ruth didn't raise a quitter. Just because my dreams have been dashed for the zillionth time, I refuse to give up. Failure simply isn't an option. I'll have to hustle three times as hard if I want to give my daughter the life she deserves. Until then, it's time to put my nose to the sewing machine and work until my fingers bleed. I just wish...

I just wish I could stop thinking about *him*.

It's been over a week since I wandered into Dominic's office, yet he occupies my every waking thought. His hulking frame, his luscious hair, those hauntingly beautiful eyes that seemed to see every inch of me. I'm still marveling at the fact that the father of my child has been in New York this entire time, only three subway stations and a transfer away.

Maybe I should go back and tell him about Felicia. But that'd be kind of embarrassing, wouldn't it? Especially on the heels of being rejected for a loan. And if he really is a loan shark, do I want to expose Felicia to that kind of person?

A million and one thoughts swim around in my head, punctuated by the rhythmic beat of the sewing machine needle bobbing up and down as I sew a hem.

"Mommy!" Felicia whines from her play area. I have a little spot set up in the back corner of my shop where she spends most of her Sundays with me at work. My budget is unfathomably tight, and that means I can really only afford to

take her to daycare from Monday to Friday. The weekends are just for us, even if I do have to work.

“Yes, sweetie?” I ask, momentarily looking away from my work.

“Pudding!” my daughter announces.

I smile at her gently. “You had a snack pack twenty minutes ago. Plus, Auntie Lana’s making tuna casserole tonight. You don’t want to be too full.”

I’m not at all surprised when my daughter’s face crinkles up, her cheeks red and her nose runny. She starts to whimper before breaking into an outright wail, throwing a tantrum in the back of my empty store. She cries and cries, pouting with distressing effectiveness. She’s as cute as a button and she knows it.

Abandoning my desk, I go and pick her up, holding her close as I press kisses to her wet cheeks. “Look at this!” I gasp, snagging a swatch of soft emerald green satin. “Isn’t it beautiful? Don’t you think your Barbie would look pretty in a dress made out of it?”

Felicia takes the fabric in her tiny hands, running her fingers along its surface. My distraction works like a charm because she sniffles once, twice, before she stops crying altogether. “Pretty,” she echoes in agreement.

“Tell you what. I’ll make your Barbie a new dress right after I’m finished with my client’s, okay? And then we can show Auntie Lana once we get home.”

The bell over my front door chimes. In walks a familiar redhead, shaking out her umbrella beneath the small awning outside.

“Ah, speak of the devil,” I say. “I thought your shift at the restaurant wasn’t over until after five.”

Lana sighs, exasperated. “My manager sent me home. Someone fu — I mean — messed up the schedule so we had way too many servers. And here I was hoping to make a little extra in tips, too. My MetroCard is about to expire, and I

could've used the money to top it up. I'd really hate to stall hop again."

I grimace. "Didn't you get caught last time?"

"Yeah, but it wasn't like I had a choice."

"You can just borrow my card if you need to. I can work out of the apartment for a little while."

Lana shakes her head. "I can't ask you to do that. You're already paying out the ass to cover the store's overhead."

Felicia gasps. "Bad word!"

I chuckle as I say, "Let's give Auntie Lana a break today, hm? She deserves it."

"C'mere, you little troublemaker," she says, walking over to take Felicia from me. "How was it today? Slow going?"

I gesture around to my empty store. "What are you talking about? Can't you see I'm swamped?"

"Sorry, babe. If that's the case, feel like heading home early? I can get a head start on that casserole and—"

The bell over the door chimes yet again.

When I look up to greet the customer who just walked in, I'm stunned into silence. This massive bull in my tiny dress shop is no customer at all. Instead, it's a familiar man dressed in a sharp suit and a tan peacoat. Behind him, two similarly dressed men I've never seen before gaze around.

"Dominic?" I breathe.

He tips his head. "Afternoon."

The air rushes from my lungs. I'm suddenly very aware of how small and underwhelming my store is. Dominic looks misplaced here, far too classy and rich for the likes of my humble business.

A moment passes. Nobody makes a move; nobody utters a sound.

"I was hoping to have a word with you," Dominic says to me. "In private."

Lana leans in, eyeing the men with a combination of confusion and cautious suspicion as she holds onto Felicia a little tighter. “Do you want me to stay?”

I chew on the inside of my cheek. This whole situation is weird. A small voice in the back of my head wonders rather dryly if I’m about to be robbed, but for some reason, I know Dominic would never do that to me. Right now, I’m more concerned with the fact that Felicia is *right here*. Will he realize who she is just by looking at her? Now that I have them in the same room together, their features are strikingly similar. The same nose, same ears, same lips.

Thankfully, he doesn’t seem to notice the girl in Lana’s arms. I tell myself that’s a good thing. I don’t think I’m ready to have that conversation yet.

“It’s okay,” I tell Lana. “Head on home with Felicia and I’ll meet you there later.”

Lana nods, watching the men at my front door warily. She kisses me on the cheek. “Be careful, babe,” she whispers in my ear before shuffling off. The men part to give her plenty of room to leave.

“Bye bye!” Felicia waves at me.

“I’ll see you later, sweetie.” I wipe my hands on my apron, my heart thudding in suspense. “So, um... Who’re you guys?”

Dominic turns to his colleagues, gesturing. “These are my...friends, Elio Bertoneli and Johnny Mancha.”

“Aww,” the guy to his right, Elio, says with a smile. “I’m your friend? That’s a big step for us.”

“Not now, stronzo.” He waves them off. “Wait outside.”

They follow his orders without question. It’s hypnotizing to watch.

And then we’re alone.

Dominic looks at me the same way he did when I walked into his office a week ago. Hungry and dark, but with an undercurrent of something warm and fond.

“What are you doing here?” I ask quietly.

“Not happy to see me, huh?” he replies with a smirk.

A light laugh bubbles past my lips. “I didn’t say that.” I lick my lips, excited beyond belief when I see his eyes dart down to follow the motion. “I’d give you a tour,” I say sheepishly, “but this is pretty much it.”

“Nice place you’ve got here.”

I roll my eyes, but there isn’t any heat behind it. “You don’t have to lie.”

“I never lie.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it.” A second later, I ask, “Seriously, Dominic. What are you doing here? Is this about the loan?”

“No,” he says. “Well, maybe a little.”

I glance at him, my interest piqued. “Care to fill me in? Or are we going to have to play a game of twenty questions?”

He chuckles, the sound rich and smooth like brandy. “I was wondering if you make suits.”

“Oh.”

“I assume that’s a no?”

“Not no. I just wasn’t expecting you to ask that. Uh, yeah, I can make suits. I can make anything, actually.”

“And what would your rate be for a full set?”

I run the numbers in my head. Making a suit is very different from dressmaking, although a lot of the same principles apply. “It depends on the quality of the material,” I tell him honestly. “And how quickly you’d want it. I have a couple of customers ahead of you, too, so if you don’t want to wait, it might be better if you go to a tailor and—”

“I don’t want another tailor. I want *you*.”

Three simple words, yet their effect on me is overwhelming. My skin heats and the ache between my legs is

suddenly too difficult to ignore. How am I supposed to respond to that?

“A thousand,” I tell him. “For a bespoke suit.”

Dominic’s brows furrow slightly. “That’s all?”

“I could make it two thousand, if that’s what you want?” I reply dryly.

“Make it five.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re underselling yourself.”

I cross my arms, feeling strangely defensive. “You *want* me to charge you more?”

“I want this to be *fair*.” He reaches into the inside pocket of his suit jacket and pulls out a checkbook and pen. “I think four custom suits will more than cover me. I’ve seen your work. I think this amount reflects that.”

I’ve never experienced a heart attack before, so I have to assume that the uneven thud-thump of my heart can only mean I’m suffering from a serious cardiac event. Four suits at five thousand dollars? That means—

Dominic hands me the check without pomp or circumstance. To him, this is just another perfunctory shopping spree. To me, it’s my future career pinched between my shaking hands. His name is printed neatly in the top left-hand corner: *Dominic Costello*.

“Is this some kind of joke?” I ask him, staring at all the zeros he’s drawn.

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

“Wait a second. You wouldn’t give me a loan for twenty-grand, but you have no problem shelling out twenty-grand for a couple of suits?”

His jaw ticks. “I have my reasons.”

“Care to enlighten me?”

“Not particularly.”

I make a sound that's half-laugh, half-huff. "I don't know if that answer is going to fly, Dominic."

"Do you make a habit of sassing your customers?"

"No, just you."

The corner of his mouth pulls up into the smallest of amused grins. "I feel so special."

"I can't take your money."

"Sure you can."

"I... I feel guilty."

"Why? I'm paying for a product upfront. You ask your other customers for a deposit on their dresses, don't you?"

"Of course I do."

"Then how is this any different? We're even now. You won't owe me anything except my suits."

I want to keep arguing with him, but I don't want to push my luck. Not when I finally have the money I need to get my fashion label off the ground. I've been working up to this moment for years, and I sure as hell know when I'm looking a gift horse in the mouth.

"Okay," I whisper, clearing my throat so I can speak normally. "Four suits. You'll need to come back tomorrow so I can get your measurements. Are you free around noon?"

Dominic nods. "I'll see you then, dolcezza."

CHAPTER 10



DOMINIC

I tried to stay away.

My resolve lasted for about a week before I couldn't stand it any longer. It didn't exactly help when Johnny reported back at the end of each day that *Marina's Lil' Dress Shoppe* had no more than four customers — sometimes fewer — per day, most of the time leaving empty handed. The fact that I made it a full seven days without bursting into her store to buy every damn dress in sight is, frankly, a testament to my will power.

But now that I find myself here, standing atop a small wooden platform in front of a big tri-fold mirror, I can't help but wonder if I'm in over my head. Who knew having one's measurements taken could be so... erotically charged?

Arin places the end of her white measuring tape at the nape of my neck, sliding her hand down my spine to measure the length of my back. She's stripped me down to the black undershirt I wear beneath all my button downs, but the warmth of her deft fingers makes it feel like we're touching skin to skin.

"Would you mind relaxing?" she asks gently. "There's no need to be nervous."

"I'm not nervous."

"Then why are you clenching?"

Elio, who's parked himself in a plastic fold-out chair near the front of the shop, cackles. "He just wants to show off his buns of steel," he teases.

“Didn’t realize you woke up today with a death wish,” I snap at him in Italian.

He puts up his hands in mock surrender.

Arin simply laughs. “So is he supposed to be your bodyguard or something?”

I huff. “More like an assistant.”

Elio snorts. “*Puh*-lease. You don’t pay me enough to be your assistant.”

Arin laughs yet again, her hands pressed against my back as the sound of her voice floats into my ears. Her touch lingers, as does the warmth her lovely giggle leaves behind.

She continues to work with the utmost diligence, measuring the width of my chest, the length of my arms, the circumference of my neck. She circles around and places herself between me and the mirror, subtly licking her lips before she steps forward, wrapping her arms around my waist to slip her measuring tape around me. She can barely get her arms around my girth, her face a mere inch away from pressing against my chest.

This is getting dangerous.

Every passing second feels like a test. I can’t tell if she’s dangling herself in front of me or not, but it’s all I can do not to throw her over my shoulder, set her down on her work desk, and give her a repeat performance of five years ago.

I have to wonder if I subconsciously planned this. Now that I think about it, I totally did. I don’t need suits; I have a whole closet full of one of the finest tailors in Little Italy. What I really wanted was to help Arin out without having her owe Lorenzo, and maybe get to have her all to myself. Between running my boss’ loan shark business and making sure his racket runs smoothly, I wanted this one lovely distraction for my own.

“Spread your legs,” she tells me.

I damn near choke. “Excuse me?”

Arin laughs softly, glancing up at me through her long lashes. “Don’t get so excited. I need to measure your inseam.”

And then she gets down on her knees.

The sight of her kneeling before me sends me spiraling. My cock strains against the confines of my pants. I’m suddenly very worried that Arin won’t be able to get the accurate measurement she’s looking for. She starts at my heel and slides her hand up the inside of my leg, inching closer and closer until her hand just grazes the tent of my pants.

Her breath hitches. She’s about to pull away. “Oh, I’m sorry, I—”

My hand shoots down to keep her fingers pressed there. Our eyes lock. I’m a goner the second I see her cheeks turn red and feel her give my cock the gentlest of squeezes.

Fuck being a gentleman. When it comes to her, I’m a damn scoundrel.

“Elio,” I snap. “Out.”

I think he can hear in my tone how deadly serious I am, so he saves his usual wisecracking and leaves the store, shutting the door firmly behind him. The second I hear it close, I grasp Arin by the chin.

“Tell me you want this,” I growl. “Because if you don’t—”

“I want this,” she interrupts.

I stroke my fingers through her hair, admiring the fierceness in those frosty grey eyes. “There’s my spitfire.”

Arin makes quick work of my belt and zipper, hooking her fingers over the waistband of my pants. Her eyes don’t leave mine until my cock springs free, the head red and leaking with want. I hiss as I throw a cautionary glance over my shoulder. We’re alone, but this has to be quick. She must have the same thought because she wastes no time wrapping her pretty pink lips around me.

I moan as the heat of her mouth surrounds me. Her tongue licks my shaft as she strokes the base with her slender fingers. Arin hums contentedly, bobbing her head up and down

my length. She takes more and more of me into her mouth with each pass until she can't anymore. Arin hollows her cheeks and sucks in earnest, the tight coil in the pit of my stomach growing hotter and brighter alarmingly fast. I'm not going to last very long at this rate.

That won't do at all.

"Up," I command, pulling her head back by the hair. My grip is careful enough not to hurt, but firm enough to move her. Arin seems more than happy to comply, letting me guide her to her feet before lifting her into my arms.

She circles her legs around me, our lips crashing together in a chaotic, feral duel. The taste of her lips and her tongue drive me insane, but what does me in is the sound of her languid moan rushing straight through me. Her hands are everywhere, flying to my hair, to my chest, to my face. Her hips buck against me, her desperate, frantic whimpers making my cock that much harder.

It's a frantic race to get to her work desk. She paws at my shirt while I grab a handful of her sweet ass. I'm just about to set her down when she flails.

"Wait! Wait!"

"What's wrong?"

"Not here. I'm working with delicate lace."

I notice the beautiful lingerie set she's apparently been working on. It's pinned to a soft cushion, a pretty string of pearls gliding along the bust of the brassiere. The straps are made of a thin silver chain.

"Next time," I huff, carrying her to a nearby pile of unused fabric on the floor, "you're going to wear that for me."

Arin frowns but doesn't protest when I set her down on the soft cotton. Hopefully she won't be too uncomfortable.

"Do you have protection on you?"

I freeze for a moment. "No, I don't."

Her expression is answer enough, but she tells me what I already suspect. “I stopped taking the pill a few years ago.”

My disappointment is immeasurable. After all these years, I want to remember what it feels like to be deep inside this wet pussy of hers. It’s no matter. There’s more than one way to please a woman. Now that Arin’s had her fun, it’s time for me to have mine.

I’m quick to settle between her legs, brushing her flowing skirt aside. I suck a line of hard kisses up the inner length of her thighs, intentionally leaving marks against her soft, pale skin. By the time I reach her core, the thin fabric of her underwear is practically soaked through. With a wicked grin, I mouth at her through her panties relishing the breathy gasp that escapes her as her hands fly to my hair.

“D-Dominic!”

“This’d be a lot easier if you weren’t wearing anything under your skirt,” I chide.

“Just *hurry*.”

“I’m going to have to teach you a thing or two about patience.”

Arin’s hips buck as she groans in frustration. Her pussy is practically weeping for me, glistening with her untamed want. She truly is a sight to behold now that she’s at my mercy. Slipping her underwear down her legs, I toss the offending garment somewhere over my shoulder before diving in for my well-deserved treat.

She moans and writhes beneath me as I suck on her swollen bud, licking slow, deliberate circles against her with the tip of my tongue. She tastes wonderful, her pussy so nice and soft and utterly perfect. I know I’ve got her teetering over the edge when her breathing becomes tight and frantic, her grip on my hair the perfect amount of painful. Climax hits her hard and fast, her body curling forward as her legs tremble and squeeze either side of my head.

“Oh, *fuck*,” she wheezes.

I grin as I rise to my knees, giving my aching cock a stroke. “You’re welcome.”

“What about you? I want you to feel good, too.”

Licking my lips, I take my time drinking in the sight of her. For now, this is more than enough. I tuck myself away, readjusting my waistband and smoothing my shirt. “Dinner,” I tell her. “Tomorrow night. I’ll pick you up.”

Arin readjusts herself too, brushing out her hair with her fingers before cooling her cute red cheeks with her palms. “I have plans,” she replies.

“Change them.”

“Can’t. I’m... babysitting.”

“That little girl from yesterday?” I ask, taking her hand as we rise to our feet. I briefly recall seeing the child when I entered Arin’s store, but I focused on her at the time.

“My... roommate’s kid,” she says slowly. I don’t know what to make of her hesitant tone. “I can’t get out of it. Lana works most evenings, so I have to be home to take care of Felicia and—”

The front door swings open rapidly, the metal frame slamming against the wall behind it as a rush of air blows through. It’s so sudden that Arin yelps in surprise. Elio stumbles in, his phone hovering near his ear. My first instinct is to snap at him, but the look on his face tells me something major is going down.

“There was another shooting!” he informs me. “Johnny and a few others were caught in the crossfire.”

Beside me, Arin’s face goes incredibly pale, her eyes wide with concern. “What are you talking about? What do you mean there was a shooting?”

Shit. Talk about a mood dampener.

“It’s nothing,” I say gruffly. “I’ll take you to dinner another time.”

I'm already out the door, Elio following close on my tail. This isn't how I want to leave things with Arin, but I don't have a choice. If shit's going down in our territory, it's my job to see it fixed. Family matters come first.

No matter how much I want to stay with her.

CHAPTER 11



ARIN

It's been a whole week since I've heard from Dominic, but I don't know if I should be concerned or relieved.

Things between us got intense. *Really* intense. So much, in fact, it's all I can think about. The way he kissed me, held me, touched me. The taste of his skin on my tongue, the smell of his earthy cologne in my nose, the sound of his deep growl reverberating in my ear. Obsession doesn't feel like the right word to describe what I'm feeling, but that's exactly what it is. Dominic has somehow managed to find a way to occupy my every waking thought, and I'm not even mad.

But that doesn't mean I'm not mentally kicking myself.

I had the perfect opportunity to tell him about Felicia, but I didn't take it. It just didn't feel like the right moment. What we have right now is new and undefined, raw and exciting. If I tell Dominic he has a four-year-old daughter, what then? To make matters even worse, his bodyguard/assistant/friend Elio came running in with news of some kind of shooting. What am I supposed to make of that information?

It's nothing.

No, you brooding hunk of a tree, it's most certainly not *nothing*.

My little shop has been quiet all week, which I wish I could say was unusual, but this is pretty par for the course. I've finished the three prom dress orders I received and have them packed and ready for pick up. Lana's at the restaurant

working a double shift, and I'm not due to pick Felicia up from daycare for another couple of hours.

Dominic's check cleared without a hitch.

I've been staring at my laptop's screen so long I'm starting to question reality. My bank account has never looked this good in my entire life.

I don't want you to feel pressured.

His words echo inside my skull. I think it's kind of sweet how concerned he was. The truth is, I don't feel pressured in the slightest. It's like he said. He's paid for my services, and I fully plan on delivering the final products. Everything else is a welcome bonus.

Glancing over my shoulder, I peek at the suits I've put together, pinned to four different adjustable mannequins. Once I'm done with Dominic's order, I'm seriously considering closing shop for a while to put all my energy into getting ready for fashion week so I can get my label off the ground. The suits are far from finished, but they're definitely taking shape. There isn't much else I can do until Dominic comes to try them on so I can make adjustments. Until then, all I can do is wait.

Unless *I* go to *him*.

Maybe I do need to learn a thing or two about patience. Too bad today's not the day.



Lorenzo Marroni's loan shark office is buzzing with activity. It's twice as busy today than it was when I first visited. There's a line of people waiting outside, wrapping around the corner of the building. Some bounce impatiently in place. Others distract themselves on their phones. Most look like they've had a rough few days. I remember standing in that line not too long ago, and a part of me feels sympathetic. Asking someone for help — especially from a loan shark — isn't always easy.

There's another presence here, too. Men in suits. Lots of them, all with mean mugs and intimidating airs. I don't know what to think of the tense energy lingering in the air. A few of them stand off to the side in a group, talking quietly amongst themselves as they smoke cigarettes and give me the side-eye when I dare approach with a garment bag draped over my arm.

"Where do you think you're going, little miss?" one of them asks me with a chuckle.

I glare at him. Little miss? What a condescending prick. "I'm here to see Dominic."

One of the other guys snorts. "The back of the line is over there."

"I'm not a customer."

"Oh? A girlfriend, then?"

"I didn't know Costello had a woman," the first man comments. "Coming for a lil' lunchtime quickie, are you?"

My face flushes with heat. "I'm his tailor," I state firmly.

"No, you're not," the second guy says, dropping his cigarette to crush beneath his heel. "We all go to the same tailor, and I guarantee you our guy doesn't have a fabulous pair of tits like yours."

Rage boils inside me. Are these the sorts of people Dominic hangs out with? "You're incredibly rude," I snap at them, grinding my teeth. "Your mothers clearly didn't teach you any manners."

The men laugh, watching me with amused interest. There are four of them, circling me like birds of prey. They're all taller and bigger, but I see them for what they are — boys playing dress up. They're trying so hard to exude the command and confidence that Dominic so naturally does. While Dominic is certainly cocky, at least he always treats me with respect.

"Look out, kitty's got claws."

"Come on. We were only joking."

I put a hand on my hip. “Take me to see Dominic. *Now.*”

“What’s the magic word, toots?”

I huff. “I’m not wasting my manners on people who refuse to show me the same decency.”

“You’re no fun,” the first guy gripes. “Get outta here, babe, you’re startin’ to annoy me.”

“Are you *threatening* me?”

“Take the fuckin’ hint and get outta here, ya dumb bitch. You can’t just waltz into our boss’ office.”

“Like hell I can’t.” I attempt to sidestep them, but they’ve got me surrounded.

“Don’t make me manhandle you,” one of the men growls.

“Don’t make me kick you in the balls, asshole,” I snap right back.

“Listen, I’m warnin’ you—”

“What’s going on?” a deep, booming voice slices through the air.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a familiar silhouette with broad shoulders and wide chest. I know it by heart by now, especially since I’ve been working with mannequins adjusted to his exact proportions. I’m so attuned to the shape of him that I could probably pick him out of a chaotic crowd, or even at a distance.

“Dolcezza?” Dominic breathes. The men who were busy harassing me suddenly part like the Red Sea as Dominic approaches. “What are you doing here?”

“You haven’t been by the shop in a while,” I tell him softly, holding up the garment bag. “I need you to try these on so I can make adjustments.”

Dominic shoots the men a deathly glare. “Were they bothering you, Marina?”

“We didn’t do nothin’, boss,” the first guy insists. “We didn’t know who she was.” All his bravado has melted away.

I'm pretty sure he's two seconds away from pissing his pants.

"I wasn't talking to you, Bruno." Dominic places a hand on my shoulder, his intense gaze locking with mine. "Tell me the truth, dolcezza. If they were rude to you, I'll see them punished."

Oh, well isn't this nice?

I'm sorely tempted to throw these dickheads under the bus, but the last thing I want right now is to cause Dominic any trouble. "It's fine," I say quickly. "I handled it. I'm sorry for dropping by unannounced."

"You can drop by anytime you wish," he says gently to me. To his men, he says, "You idiots got that?"

They nod in unison. "Yes, sir."

Dominic's hand falls to the small of my back. "Come inside. We have much to discuss."

It's significantly quieter here but no less tense. The halls are crawling with even more men in suits, the murmur of serious conversation humming just out of earshot. Dominic welcomes me into his office.

"Who are all these people?" I ask him as he closes the door. "Is there a big loan shark conference in town or something?"

Dominic chuckles, but the laughter doesn't reach his eyes. In fact, he looks incredibly tired. "I just wrapped up a meeting with my... employees."

"Those were your employees?"

"Technically my boss' employees."

"So you're not the *boss boss*?"

Dominic sighs as he rounds the desk and takes a seat. Even in his exhausted state, he's still as handsome as ever. "I'm the second-in-command," he explains. "Lorenzo is out of town. Until he gets back, I'm in charge."

"Sounds tough."

“Don’t even get me started.”

I drape the garment bag over the back of the guest chair, at a momentary loss for words. “Dominic, can I ask you a question?”

“Anything.”

“Being a loan shark, all these big Italian guys in suits, the way you boss people around... Are you in the Mob or something?”

I say this as a joke, of course, because there’s no way that’s possible. I’m only trying to ease this strange tension in my gut. I can’t even imagine it. The unsuspecting father of my child, a Mob boss? Hilarious.

Dominic’s expression darkens and is serious. “What would you do if I was?”

A nervous laugh bubbles past my lips. “I would get the fuck out of here,” I answer honestly.

He’s silent for a long time. Too long. It’s uncomfortable as all hell.

Swallowing hard, I mumble, “You’re not, though. Right? Because that’s...”

“That’s what?”

“Terrifying.”

Dominic rises slowly from his chair, stepping toward me like he’s approaching a frightened animal. There’s nothing malicious in his body language, nothing threatening about his general air. He is, however, laced with something dark. The first time I met him, I could sense danger surrounding him, but I don’t get the sense that the danger is in any way directed at me.

He’s a Cane Corso. Strong and fierce and something to be wary of, but nothing to fear so long as we remain on the same side.

“Do you find *me* terrifying?” he asks in a low tone. He’s in my space, but I find myself drawn to him instead of repelled. I

breathe in his deep cologne, already lost in his presence. “I don’t ever want you to be afraid of me.”

“No. I’m not terrified of you, but...”

“But what?”

“Why won’t you answer my question?” I whisper, barely audible in my own ears. “Are you in the Mob? It’s either a yes or a no.”

He pauses for a second, but it feels like it lasts for an eternity. “No,” he finally answers. “I’m not in the Mob. How ridiculous.”

“What about the shooting Elio mentioned? I haven’t forgotten about that.”

Dominic tenses. “Loan sharks work with desperate people, Marina. And when desperate people can’t pay back what they owe, they sometimes do drastic things. Like trying to shoot us in broad daylight to absolve their debts.”

My heart leaps into my throat. I never knew something like that could happen, but the way Dominic explains it, it makes perfect sense. Guilt burns a hole in my chest.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble. “I didn’t mean to call you a, um...”

“A criminal?”

I nod.

Dominic places his fingers beneath my chin and tilts my head up, nothing but gentle warmth in his eyes. “Think nothing of it. I suppose on the surface, my job does make me look questionable.”

“Has... Has anyone ever tried to hurt you to absolve their debts?”

“Yes,” is his blunt answer.

My heart skips a beat. The thought of someone coming after Dominic disturbs me to no end. I’m sure he can handle himself. He’s capable and strong and surrounded by a fairly large team, but that doesn’t stop the what ifs from running loose inside my head.

“Let’s drop the subject,” he says. “Before you upset yourself.”

“Ha. Too late.”

Dominic leans forward and kisses me tenderly on the lips. I can’t believe how easily I melt into his touch, leaning forward to welcome the pressure of his mouth against mine. He then brushes the pad of his thumb between my brows, tenderly smoothing my frown.

“You said you brought the suits?”

“Yes, I did. I want to verify their fit before making final adjustments. Care to try them on for me?”

“Sure. How about we grab lunch after?”

“Oh, um...”

“You’re not stuck on babysitting duty during the day, are you?”

I take a deep breath. “No, no I’m not.”

“Excellent. Lunch it is.”

CHAPTER 12



ARIN

“**W**hen I said I was craving sushi, I thought we’d go to one of those places that serves everything on a conveyor belt.”

“And risk food poisoning?” Dominic mutters derisively. “I think not.”

By some miracle, he managed to get us a last-minute table at Nobu Fifty-Seven, one of the finest Japanese restaurants in all of New York. It’s right around the corner from Carnegie Hall, the Museum of Modern Art, and Central Park. I thought for sure they’d kick me out for not being dressed fancy enough, but one word from Dominic and the host led us to a private table near the back without batting an eye.

Now I’m staring at the assortment of beautifully plated dishes that I don’t even know the name of, which is how I *know* this lunch bill is going to be expensive. When I reach into my purse for my wallet, Dominic frowns.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Paying my half.”

“You’re not paying a cent. This is on me.”

“But Dominic—”

“When was the last time you let someone take care of you?”

His question sends me through a loop. I stare at him as he calmly handles his chopsticks like a pro and helps himself to a piece of delicious fatty tuna. I chew on the inside of my cheek,

mulling his question over silently as I stab my chopsticks into a piece of California roll.

When *was* the last time I let someone take care of me? I'd have to say five years ago when I almost married Corey. He made all sorts of promises to love and care for me, and that's exactly how I ended up burned. I've been on my own ever since, raising Felicia by myself. Granted Lana's been a massive help, too, but she's the exception.

I briefly considered getting back out there but dating as a single mother is hard. The few men I did go out with treated Felicia like baggage, a conditional term that came with being with me. Some guys were sympathetic, but others looked at my baby girl like some kind of burden. I was always quick to kick those to the curb. After a while, I gave up on dating entirely.

I shift in my seat, giving Dominic a genuine smile. "Is that what this is? You trying to take care of me?"

"Would you allow it?"

He's always answering questions with more questions. "I don't know," I admit sheepishly. "You probably wouldn't find me worth the hassle."

"That's for me to decide," he says, sounding very much offended.

I can't help but laugh as I grin into my teacup. Why is he always so serious? "Well?" I ask. "What's your verdict?"

He tilts his head to the side and regards me. "I think you already know my answer."

My heart skips a beat. Surely, he can't be serious. We haven't even spent that much time together, yet he speaks with so much conviction. Every time I think I'm starting to get used to his charms, he blows me away with some profound statement or grand gesture.

At a glance, he looks hard and cold and unyielding. But would a hard, cold, unyielding man go to the trouble of putting in a massive order to keep me from taking out a loan? Or take me out to lunch and insist on covering the tab? I'm starting to

realize there's more to him than meets the eye. Beneath his semi-permanent scowl, there's a good man hidden not far beneath the surface.

I'm just about to ask if he wants to share a bowl of green tea ice cream when a woman approaches our table. She's dressed in a beautiful, cream-colored business suit, her head haloed by a mass of gorgeous black curls.

"Excuse me, Mr. Costello?" she greets him with an easy smile. The woman sticks her hand out. "Miriam Singh. We met a few months ago at your cousin Catalina's wedding reception?"

"Yes, of course," he says as he shakes her hand. "A pleasure seeing you again."

A weird twist of jealousy stabs my chest. Dominic's being polite, but I kind of hate the way he shakes her hand.

Miriam turns to me next and smiles. "And who might your friend be?"

I smile stiffly. "I'm Arin Wilson."

"Arin is a fashion designer," Dominic informs her.

Miriam's eyes widen in delight. "Really? Well, talk about kismet!" She slides into the booth beside me without invitation, smiling enthusiastically as she reaches into her suit jacket's pocket and pulls out a business card. "I happen to work for a fashion agency. I've represented big and small designers alike. How long have you been in the business? I feel like I would have heard of you."

My heart races a mile a minute. *Oh my God. A fashion agency?* It could be a huge step forward for me if I can land a fashion agency to help me with the legal and marketing aspects of building my brand.

"I'm just getting started," I admit, my voice a bit shaky. "I guess you could say Dominic is one of my very first clients."

"You don't say? How would you describe your style?"

"Classy and modern," I tell her. "But sexy, too. I'm planning on a very inclusive range of sizes, all made with

sustainability in mind.”

“*Love* that for you. Tell me, how would you describe your target audience?”

I can feel myself on the verge of rambling, but I don’t care. I’m incredibly passionate about fashion, and it’s rare to find someone just as interested who I can bounce ideas off of.

“I really want my clothes to be accessible to all. My pieces are on a sliding scale, from affordable everyday workwear to high-end evening gowns.”

“Do you happen to have any pictures on you?”

I immediately dig my phone out of my purse, opening to my picture gallery. Most of the images are of Felicia, but I do have a few images of my dresses and lingerie sets, too.

“Oh, *wow*,” Miriam gasps. She sounds genuinely amazed. “Arin, these are beautiful!”

“Thank you so much. This isn’t everything I have, though.”

“You should definitely give me a call some time,” she says. “I’d love a chance to check out your full portfolio.”

Whatever flicker of envy I might have felt before flies straight out the window. I nod quickly, so excited I just barely manage to thank her. “That’d be wonderful. Thanks so much. I’ll definitely reach out.”

Miriam stands, smiling wide. “I’ll let you two enjoy your lunch. It was great seeing you again, Mr. Costello.”

He nods once. “Ms. Singh.”

By the time she’s out of earshot, I’m barely holding it together. I all but kick Dominic under the table.

“Holy shit!” I squeal. “Did you see that?”

He chuckles. “I did indeed.”

“This is *huge*. If I can convince her to take me on as a client, it could do wonders for my label’s launch. What are the

chances of running into her? Damn, I'm so glad you convinced me to come —”

I cut myself off, a realization suddenly dawning on me. Dominic casually drinks from his piping hot cup of tea, but there's no denying the amused glimmer in his dark eyes.

“You brought me here on purpose,” I accuse.

“Yes. I brought you here for lunch.”

“No, I mean... You knew she'd be here. Was this some kind of set up?”

“I may or may not have had my people inquire into her whereabouts.”

“I don't understand. Why would you...” Confusion swirls inside me. “Why are you doing this, Dominic?”

“Doing what?”

“Being so nice to me.”

Dominic sits up a bit straighter, his lips a set line. “Do you know what I see when I look at you?”

“A woman running on four hours sleep and a coffee addiction?”

“I see a beautiful, talented young woman trying everything to get ahead. The other day when you came to the office, you asked for someone to give you a chance.”

“And you think you're that someone?”

“I'd very much like to be, yes.”

He returns his attention to his meal and doesn't say much after that, which is perfectly fine because I'm too busy drowning in excitement. Dominic's kind of... amazing. At first, I was wary of letting him into my life — and Felicia's by extension — but those worries are quickly beginning to fade. Dominic seems like a stand-up guy who's done right by me at every turn. Maybe telling him he has a daughter isn't such a bad idea. Now that I'm getting a glimpse of who he really is, lying to him doesn't feel right.

“Dominic?” I ask softly.

“Yes?”

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

“I’m listening, dolcezza.”

“That little girl in my shop the other day…”

“Your roommate’s kid?”

“Yeah… I wasn’t being entirely truthful with you.”

Dominic’s brows furrow slightly. “What do you mean?”

I take a deep breath. This is it. Time to rip off the Band-Aid and deal with whatever comes next. “Well, Felicia’s actually —”

His phone goes off. Dominic glares at his screen, canceling the call. “Apologies,” he says gruffly. “You were saying?”

I lick my lips, my throat suddenly very dry. “I wanted to tell you that Felicia is —”

His phone rings again. Dominic huffs. “It’s work,” he grumbles.

“It’s okay. Go ahead and answer. I can wait.”

Dominic offers me a small, appreciative smile before he answers. “What do you want, Elio? Didn’t I tell you not to disturb —” He trails off, his expression suddenly grave. Dominic’s jaw ticks, his brows knitted together in a mix of anger and maybe even disgust. “I understand. We’ll get moving. Tell the boys it’s time to go hunting.”

“Is everything alright?” I ask as he hangs up hastily, reaching for his wallet. He throws a couple hundred-dollar bills on the table.

“We need to go,” he says.

“What? But we haven’t finished yet.”

“Marina. *Now.*”

Something in his tone strikes fear into me, but there’s nothing I hate more than being kept in the dark. “Not until you

tell me what's going on.”

Dominic stands, offering me his hand to take. “We’re in danger. I need to get you somewhere safe.”

My head spins. “Danger? What on Earth are you talking about?”

Before he gets the chance to explain, a sudden commotion breaks out near the main entrance of the restaurant. A group of angry men barge past the host and servers, their eyes locked on Dominic and me.

“That’s him,” one of them hisses. “Remember boys, Renato wants him brought in alive.”

Dominic quickly takes my hand and drags me with him just as one of the men brandishes the cold, unforgiving metal of a gun.

“Marina! Run!”

CHAPTER 13



DOMINIC

The sound of a gunshot rips through the air.

Restaurant patrons scream as they trample over each other, scrambling for the nearest exit. Dishes break, glass shatters, tables flip over in all the confusion and chaos, but I remain focused. Fear doesn't serve me, and if I want to get Arin out of here alive, I can't afford to panic.

I drag her toward the kitchens, ignoring the confused shouts of the kitchen staff as we barrel on through toward the back exit. Our pursuers are hot on our tail, trailing behind us by only a few feet. One of them takes another shot. The bullet hits one of the roaring hood fans.

This isn't good for a multitude of reasons. Someone's going to get hurt, and there's a very good chance it will be a civilian. The fact that they're making a move in broad daylight is also a massive pain in the ass. There's no shortage of witnesses, and the police are definitely going to be involved.

Not to mention how this complicates matters for *me*. What the fuck is Renato thinking, calling for an open hit on the right-hand man of another capo? This is a very firm declaration of war, which means things are about to get ugly. Now that my boss has been out of town long enough, Renato probably thought this was as good a time as any to move in on his racket.

One of our assailants gains on me, snatching me by the shoulder. Relying on instincts alone, I whip around and nail the fucker square in the jaw. He reels back, falling to the

slippery tile floors below. But the other three aren't far behind him, charging toward us with murder in their eyes.

“Dominic!” Arin screams. “Duck!”

My body reacts before my brain can, dipping out of the way just as Arin picks up a nearby pot of boiling water. She throws it at the nearest man, scalding his face and body. He groans in agony, his flesh already blistering.

A third assailant lunges at me, attempting to pummel me with his closed fists. I managed to block two of his swings before he abandons the idea and snatches a sharp kitchen knife. He swipes at me, once, twice, slicing through my shirt.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a sizzling cast iron skillet. I grab it by the handle and launch it at his head. I don't much care for the sound of searing skin, but the crack of the hard metal against his skull is satisfying as fuck.

There's only one left now, the one who's been firing at us. Seething, he trains his sights on Arin, his finger hovering over the trigger.

“Stay out of this, you fucking bitch!”

I can't remember what happens next. The rest of the world fades; Arin is the only one I can concentrate on. She's a beacon, impossible to look away from. My body is tired and heavy, but I rush toward her anyway, shielding her just as the thunderous bang of another gunshot reaches my ear. Pain explodes through my body, the bullet lodging itself into the front of my shoulder.

Much to my relief, Arin is unharmed. Traumatized probably, but there isn't a mark on her.

I hear the *click, click, click* of an empty gun. The fucker's out of bullets.

Now it's time to run.

I take Arin's hand again and pull her toward the back exit. We practically fall out of the building onto the busy streets of New York, the overwhelming sound of traffic and people disorienting me. The warm trickle down my back and the

smell of iron in my nose isn't a good sign. I really hope the bullet didn't hit anything important. Bleeding out today would be a massive inconvenience.

“Oh my God, Dom, we need to get you to the hospital!”

“No,” I rasp. “No hospital.”

“But you've been shot!”

As much as I appreciate Arin's concern, going to the hospital simply isn't an option. Arin probably doesn't know that when it comes to gunshot wounds, medical staff are obligated to call the police. And if the police are there, they're going to start asking questions. And if they start asking questions... Let's just say I'd rather end up dead than revealing anything about the Family or our operations.

When Elio called and told me our laundromats near 27th Street had been taken out, I knew something big was going down. Those businesses are close to the edge of Renato's territory, making them an easy target to claim for himself. I had Elio wait with the car, but now he's nowhere in sight. The last thing he told me was he spotted Renato's men approaching, but now I'm worried he's also being pursued.

“Come on,” I tell her, holding her hand tightly.

“Where are we going?”

“I need to get you out of here. We're taking the subway.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? Dom, the hospital is —”

I turn and grasp her by the shoulders, looking her directly in the eye. “Marina, listen to me very carefully because I'm only going to say this once. We're going to take the subway and I'm going to see you safely home. After that, I want you to remain indoors until I can confirm everything's safe. I won't have you questioning me on this.”

She presses her lips into a thin line, her frosty grey eyes full of fear, confusion, and a touch of anger as well. Now that Renato's men have seen Arin's face, I've effectively put a target on her back. If they're stupid enough to come after her to get to me, they've got another think coming.

After a brief second, Arin nods.

“Let’s go,” I tell her, leading the way.

The subway train is crowded today, but nobody pays me and my bloody shirt any attention. This is New York, after all. There’s far freakier shit to gawk at than a man in rough shape. People give me and Arin a wide berth, their eyes glued to their phones. I do get an occasional look, but they’re quick to mind their own business.

I lose track of how many stops we pass, but Arin’s thankfully keeping count. I struggle to stand up right, the pain in my back blooming up to the base of my neck. Even though we’re out of immediate danger, my heart won’t stop pounding. The sounds of gunfire echoes around inside my skull, reawakening the dreaded memories of the day I lost my brother.

I was able to protect Arin, but I couldn’t do the same for Tommaso.

No matter what I try, I can’t get the image of his bloody face out of my head or the way his broken body felt in my arms. My hands shake and my breaths tighten, the ache in my chest unbearable.

This is exactly why I wanted to keep my distance from her, but I couldn’t stay away. There’s no fighting this inexplicable pull towards her. I’m a moth and she’s a flame, one that was almost snuffed out because I was careless enough to let my guard down.

“This is our stop,” Arin whispers.

I’m vaguely aware of the way she’s looking at me, her hand braced on my hip like I’m about to topple over any second now. The poor woman is scared half to death, but it’s sweet that her concern is solely on me.

She sticks close as we climb the stairs to exit the train station. I’m not sure if I’m pulling her toward me, or if she’s clinging to my arm of her own volition. Either way, the press of her body is a massive comfort. We make our way down the

street as fast as we can until we reach a rundown apartment building that's no doubt seen better days.

My lip curls when I see the graffitied walls, boarded up windows, and flickering stoop light. I'm not sure if the pain is making me delirious, but I can't stop thinking about how Arin deserves more than this. She deserves a nice apartment in a safe neighborhood, not this dump of a place to call home.

By some miracle, I have enough energy to climb the steps to her apartment on the third floor. I must be losing a lot of blood, because I don't even put up a fight when Arin sits me down on her corduroy couch. She slips off my jacket and undoes the buttons of my shirt, carefully peeling away the red-soaked fabric.

"Stay here," she says, scurrying down the hall to look for something.

My fingers are going numb. I hope to God I'm not going to suffer permanent nerve damage. I rifle through my pants pocket until I find my phone, texting Elio Arin's address.

If you're alive, come pick me up.

Bring painkillers.

Arin returns with a damp cloth, standing close and gingerly wiping at my wound, washing away the blood that's trickled down my back. As she does, I look at our surroundings. Her place is cramped, but very homey. Her furniture is mismatched, but it comes across more charming than disorganized. The walls are covered in framed pictures, there are various books and magazines piled in high stacks on the numerous shelves and coffee tables. Large spools of fabric are gathered in one corner of the living room, Arin's work life spilling into her personal one.

A bountiful collection of toys, pastel throw blankets, and baby shoes near the door are evidence a child lives here as well. I catch a glimpse of a big Huggies diaper box shoved into the bottom of the hallway closet, along with burping cloths and bibs. But the more I look around, the more I notice something strange.

In almost all the pictures, Arin and the girl, Felicia, are together. At the zoo, swimming together at the public pool, together at the carnival getting their faces painted. The more I look at them together, the weirder I feel. They look... really alike. And the fact that there are next to no pictures of Felicia and Arin's roommate, Lana, makes me more suspicious.

Arin clicks her tongue. "I think the bullet's still lodged in there. I have a bit of first aid training, but I'd rather not risk getting it out myself."

"Leave it," I say, watching her carefully. "Elio's coming to stitch me up, and then I'll be out of your hair."

She worries her bottom lip with her teeth, applying a bit of pressure to staunch the bleeding. "You were lying to me before," she says. Her tone is soft, but her accusation rings loud and clear.

I grind my teeth, studying her carefully. "You lied to me, too."

Arin swallows. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Slowly, I reach for the picture frame propped up on the side table next to me. It's of Arin holding the little girl, kissing her cheeks while Felicia laughs brightly at the camera. The guilt written all over Arin's face is answer enough.

"She's your daughter," I say as calmly as possible. "How old is she?" A part of me already knows the answer.

Arin sucks in a breath through clenched teeth. "Four years and three months."

I stand, too overwhelmed to speak. Four years and three months... If I factor in the nine months it takes to carry a child, then that means... "She's mine?"

She nods slowly, tears welling up in her eyes. "Yes. God help me, yes."

CHAPTER 14



ARIN

“**W**ere you ever going to tell me?”

“I don’t know. I tried at dinner, but... And I didn’t know if I could trust you or not. But now...”

“But *what?*”

“Now that I know my baby girl is the daughter of a *mobster*, I’m inclined to knock you the fuck out so you forget all about it!”

Dominic stares at me like I’ve just slapped him across the face. If I’m being honest, I’m feeling just as raw and blindsided. All the signs were there. Why didn’t I trust my gut? I was foolish to take him at his word.

“Looks like we’re both liars,” I grumble bitterly under my breath.

“Where is she now?” he asks, speaking far more gently than I’ve ever heard him.

“Why?”

“Because they know what you look like now.”

“*Who?*”

Dominic tenses. “I can’t tell you.”

“For Christ’s sake, you can, and you *will*.”

“You’re not one of us, Marina. I can’t tell you about our business, or I risk being put to death.”

I flinch, fear spiking through me. He really *is* dangerous. “I’m not telling you a thing.”

“Don’t be stubborn. I’m trying to protect you.”

“Protect me?” I echo, incredulous. “By dragging me into a shootout and bleeding all over my couch?”

“I’ll have it replaced.”

“That’s not the point!”

“You harmed Renato’s men.”

“I was defending myself,” I argue, gesturing wildly with my arms. “They started it!”

“They’re not going to care if they started it or not. The fact of the matter is that you handed their asses to them, and that’s a slight they will take *very* personally.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying they’ll stop at nothing to find you now. They need to turn you into an example.”

Cold, ugly dread sweeps through me, chilling me all the way down to the marrow. “Turn me into an example? You can’t be serious.”

“I know this is a lot to take in, Marina, but you have to believe me when I say I’m on your side. I tried very hard to keep you out of my affairs.”

“*That’s* why you wouldn’t give me the loan,” I realize aloud. “Because you didn’t want me to be in the pocket of your... don?”

“No, my capo.”

“What’s the difference?”

“I can’t tell you.”

I groan in frustration. I’m two seconds away from pulling my hair out by the roots. “And those assholes who were hassling me outside your office. Are they, like, made men? Is that what you people call them in the Mafia?”

“No, they’re associates.”

“You don’t make any damn sense.”

Dominic takes a step forward. I take a step back. “You and your daughter are in grave danger if I leave you unprotected,” he says firmly. “I need to move you somewhere deep within our territory.”

“Wait a second. You want me to *move*?”

“You’ll be safer there where I can have my men keep an eye on you.”

“Absolutely fucking not!” I snap. “I can’t just get up and leave. What about my roommate? I’d have to find a new daycare to take Felicia. What about rent? The only reason I can afford this place is because I’m splitting the bill with Lana, and it’s rent controlled.”

“I’ll take care of all that.”

“Don’t I have a say in any of this?”

“No,” he says harshly. “You don’t.”

I’m just about to give him the tongue lashing of a lifetime when three sharp knocks suddenly sound at the door. I yelp, my heart shooting straight into my throat. Are we under attack? Are Dominic’s enemies here to finish the job? No, that makes no sense. Why would they announce their presence if that were the case?

“It’s me!” a man’s voice shouts from the other side of the hall. I haven’t known him for very long, but I recognize Elio’s voice.

Despite being in obvious pain, Dominic answers. “About fucking time you showed up,” he grumbles.

Elio flashes a charming smile, shrugging casually. He’s got a hefty first aid kit in one hand. “I came as fast as I could. Those assholes tailed me for twenty city blocks before I was finally able to lose them. How are you holding up?”

“Fine,” Dominic says, even though he doesn’t *sound* fine.

“Do you want me to stitch you up?”

“After you left a nasty scar the last time? Fuck no. I’ll do it myself.” Dominic snatches the first aid kit and turns on his heel. “I want you to call an emergency meeting with the other capos. And get me Lorenzo on the line.”

“Sure thing, boss,” Elio answer dutifully. “Anything else?”

“Have some of the boys move Arin and her daughter into my place —”

“Hey!” I interject. “You can’t just make that decision for me.”

“I already did,” Dominic replies coolly, not bothering to ask for permission as he enters my small bathroom at the very end of the hall. “Get it done, Elio,” he calls over his shoulder before locking himself inside.

I’m fuming. Where the hell does he get off telling me what to do? The only reason I’m in this mess is *because* of him. If Dominic really is adamant about protecting me, then the smart thing to do is leave Felicia and me the hell alone. Now that I know he’s some top-dog mobster, there’s no way I’d be comfortable letting him into my daughter’s life let alone *move in* with him.

“This is ridiculous,” I mutter bitterly. “He’s lost his damn mind.”

Elio offers me a sympathetic smile. “He means well. Try to go easy on him.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Go easy on him? Are you fucking kidding me?”

He scratches sheepishly behind his ear. “These last few months have been really hard on him. He lost his brother last month, and now with everything that’s going on—”

“Wait,” I say with a frown. “Dominic has a brother?”

“Had,” Elio corrects.

“What happened?”

“I’ve already said way too much.”

I grasp him gently by the arm. “Please, I have to know.”

Elio pauses. I can practically hear the gears turning inside his head. I wonder if he's weighing the consequences for telling me the truth.

"Tommaso was his kid brother," he explains finally. "He'd just finished college with plans of shipping off to medical school in the fall."

"He wasn't a part of the Mob?" I ask.

"No. Dom wouldn't let him join."

"Why not?"

"Because once you swear your life to this lifestyle, the only way out is death. Dominic didn't want that for his little brother. Say what you want about Dom's mean mug, but deep down he's a good man. At the end of the day, he only wants what's best for the people that matter to him."

My stomach rolls. I can practically hear the admiration and respect in Elio's tone. "So... what happened?" I press on, my curiosity burning a hole in my lungs.

Elio lets out a heavy breath. "They were out and about. Went to lunch. On their way back, they were ambushed. There was a shootout in broad daylight."

I bring a hand up to my mouth in utter dismay. "Don't tell me..."

All he has to do is shake his head. It's answer enough.

"I know this is probably hard to believe," he continues, "but Dominic is one of the greatest men I've ever had the privilege of knowing. He's a dickhead most of the time, but I promise he's one of the good ones. To you, he might have lost his mind. To him, he's doing what he must to protect you."

Down the hall, Dominic grunts.

"I should probably go check on him," Elio says. "He'd rather bleed out than let anyone help him, that stubborn fucking mule."

"Let me," I offer, stepping forward before Elio has a chance to move.

My body moves on its own, drawn to the sound of his voice. I don't bother knocking, though now I realize I probably should have. Dominic's hunched over the sink, his shirt off and crumpled on the floor. There isn't as much blood as I thought there'd be — he must have cleaned up the majority of it — but the air still smells heavily of salt and iron.

I shiver when I spot the bullet at the bottom of the sink basin.

He's done a shoddy job of stitching himself up, but at least the wound's closed. Now he's struggling to cover the area up with gauze, his stamina draining too quickly to reach across his body.

"Let me," I offer, stepping forward to take the gauze from him.

Dominic watches me silently, an injured animal trapped in a corner. It feels like a triumph when he relaxes against my touch, his pained expression melting into something fond, grateful. Being this close to him sends a shiver down my spine and goosebumps trailing down my arms. The sight of his taut muscles and tattooed skin leaves my mouth impossibly dry.

This man... He's power personified.

And he's letting me take care of him.

If I'm being perfectly honest, I *am* terrified. Terrified of the implications of being involved with a mobster, terrified of dragging my daughter into a complicated situation. But the more I think about it, the more I start to understand that I'm not terrified of *him*.

Dominic has never done anything to hurt me. In fact, he's actively tried to protect me. Do I wish he'd told me the truth from the get-go? Of course, but I can't blame him for wanting to keep that information from me. If our positions were reversed, wouldn't I try to keep our worlds separate for as long as possible?

I peer at him, studying the hard features of his face. I've always admired that sharp jawline and those full lips, but his dark gaze cause my heart to race. He's a scary, dangerous man,

but I'm not the least bit afraid of him. For some reason, I know being by his side is the safest place I can be.

"Felicia's at daycare," I tell him softly. "I need to be there to pick her up."

Dominic nods. "Take Elio with you."

"Okay. But let me make one thing clear."

"What is it?"

"I'll agree to moving in with you, but if anything happens to my daughter, I *will* kill you myself."

Dominic takes my hand and presses my palm against his chest. It feels very much like we're sealing a vow. "I expect nothing less, dolcezza."

CHAPTER 15



ARIN

“Wow!” Felicia gasps in delight as she pads into the living room of Dominic’s apartment.

I silently marvel, too. This place is *massive*! I don’t even want to think about how much a place like this goes for. I’d probably have to make and sell a hundred quinceañera dresses to cover a single month here.

My little girl rushes over to the black leather couch in the living room and climbs onto the cushions, jumping up and down in her excitement. “Mommy! Mommy, look!”

“You shouldn’t do that, sweetie,” I warn her gently. “You’ll ruin the furniture.”

Beside me, Elio laughs. “Don’t worry about it, Arin. Dominic can always buy a new one. Let the girl have fun.” I can’t help but smile. Felicia looks like she’s having the time of her life.

“Damn, girl,” Lana says, looking around with wide eyes. “You really hit the jackpot, huh?”

She hands me one of the moving boxes labeled ‘*TOYS*.’ True to his word, Dominic took care of all the fine details. He ordered his men to pack all my things while Dominic personally spoke to our landlord, not only paying for my half of the remaining lease, but Lana’s as well. Thanks to his generosity, she’ll be able to live there for another year without having to worry about rent.

“What did you say he does again?” she asks with a wry smile.

“Um... Loans and stuff?”

“Damn. I need to get me one of those. Do you know if he has any single friends?”

I laugh. “I didn’t realize you were interested in dating right now.”

“I’m not, but if I can score myself a sugar daddy...”

My face flushes with heat. “Dominic’s not my sugar daddy.”

Lana rolls her eyes. “At least fifteen years older, rich as fuck, *and* your baby daddy. I fail to see how I’m off the mark.” She looks around. “Where even is the guy?”

Chewing on the inside of my cheek, I take in my surroundings. Dominic has been notably absent since I returned with Felicia from daycare. I wonder if he’s making himself scarce on purpose. It’s obvious there’s only so much Mob business he can divulge, but given the serious matter of the targeted shooting, he’s probably got too much on his plate right now to help with the move.

Elio picks Felicia up and places her on his shoulders. “Do you want to see your new room, principessa?”

She throws her hands up. “Yeah!”

Elio winks at me. “Consider me your official tour guide.”

“What about the rest of our stuff?” I ask.

“Don’t worry. The boys have been tasked with the heavy lifting. I believe Dominic’s exact words were ‘*treat her like a damn queen.*’”

My heart skips a beat. “He didn’t say that.”

“No, he didn’t,” he says with an easy chuckle. “But his meaning was loud and clear. Come on, this way.”

The apartment is so big it’s divided into north, south, east, and west wings. We aren’t quite on the top floor, but we’re still high enough for a gorgeous view overlooking Central Park. Elio shows us Felicia’s new room first. This is the first time in her young life that she’s had a room all to herself.

Dominic's apparently had the whole place stuffed full of all sorts of toys, clothes, and a new bedroom set befitting royalty. Felicia's mouth hangs open in awe. There's a light pink canopy hanging over her bed, a wardrobe full of new dresses, and a child's art set and easel arranged in the corner.

"This is mine?" she asks, wandering over to the bin full of newly purchased dolls.

Elio nods. "Dominic said if it's not to your liking, all you have to do is tell me. I'll send the boys out shopping again."

I shake my head. "No, this is more than enough. Thank you, Elio."

"No need to thank me, Arin. Thank *him*."

"Auntie Lana!" Felicia squeals, her arms full of new toys. "Come play with me!"

Lana rubs my shoulder. "Go check out your room. I'll keep an eye on her."

Elio sweeps his arm out toward the door on the other side of the hall. "Right this way."

When I step into my room, the air whooshes out of my lungs. It's almost triple the size of my old bedroom, complete with a four-post mahogany bed, silk sheets, an expensive Persian rug over polished marble floors, and a walk-in closet the size of my old kitchen. Dominic's already filled it to the brim with new clothes, dresses and sweaters and pants hanging from wooden hangers. I gravitate toward the clothes, unable to fight the tingling excitement swimming through my veins.

I reach out, sucking in a breath when I feel the fabric. This is high quality stuff. Silks and cashmere and genuine leather. They still have their tags on. Gucci, Prada, Louis Vuitton, Dior. The collection goes on and on, but I'm too shocked to take another step.

"Is he serious?" I ask breathlessly. "Did he really buy all this for me?"

"That's not all," Elio says with a smirk.

I'm about to lose it. "What do you mean *that's not all*?"

“Dominic had me arrange a special room for you. Do you see that small handle on the back wall of your closet?”

I turn and find the handle in question. It blends in well with the shelf, hidden behind a pair of Christian Louboutin heels. Reaching out slowly, I turn the handle and hear the heavy metal click of a mechanism unlocking.

The wall swings forward, revealing—

A workshop.

On the other side of my walk-in closet is another massive room. It's incredibly spacious with lots of natural light courtesy of the floor-to-ceiling windows along the north-facing wall. There are several large worktables lined up in rows on the opposite side of the room, carrying all sorts of draping tools, fabric pressing equipment, a big bin of thread, fabrics, and cutting mats. There's at least five different dress forms in different sizes in the corner, along with a drafting table where I can bring all my ideas to life.

My brain blanks. This is all so...

“Amazing,” I gasp. “This is a whole-ass fashion studio. Did Dominic really tell you to put this together?”

“He told me to spare no expense. I hope you like it.”

“Like it? I *love* it.”

Elio sighs dramatically. “Thank God. Dominic would have killed me otherwise.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek. “You don't mean that, do you?”

“Of course not.”

I meander over to the new sewing machine sitting on one of the workstations. It's a Singer 9960, a computerized sewing and embroidery machine with almost six hundred built-in stitch patterns and one-step buttonhole styles. This bad boy retails for just shy of a thousand dollars — something I've dreamed of one day owning but could never even begin to afford.

And Dominic *gave* it to me.

“When’s Dominic going to be back?” I ask. “I need to thank him.”

Elio scratches behind his ear. “Honestly? I’m not sure. Things are, uh... kinda tense right now.”

“Because of the shooting?”

“That, among other things. Sorry, there’s only so much I can tell you. Them’s the rules.”

I nod slowly. “I understand. Just... He’s going to be alright, right?”

Elio smiles. He has a very calming, assuring presence. “Dom’s as tough as nails. There’s no need to worry. Besides, if those fuckers come back and try to finish what they started, they’ll have to get through me.”

For some reason, this makes me smile. “You really care about him, huh?”

“Dom’s the big brother I never had. I’d do anything for him.” He turns, gesturing vaguely at the studio space. “And he’ll do anything for those he cares for.”

The thought gives me pause. Does Dominic care for me? Or is he doing this because he feels obligated? There’s no denying the electricity between us, but have we known each other long enough to care?

“Mommy!” Felicia calls from the other room. “Mommy, come play!”

“I’m coming, sweetie!” Before I can leave, however, Elio steps in front of me. I look up at him, confused. “Is something wrong?”

“I meant what I said before, Arin. I’d do anything for Dom.”

“O—kay?” I say slowly.

He dips in close, speaking in a low tone. “I need to know I can trust you. He’s generous to those he deems loyal, but are you? Loyal?”

Something in the air suddenly shifts. I'm no longer speaking to cheerful, goofball Elio. Now I'm face to face with Dom's right-hand man. His sudden about face is jarring, but I'm not intimidated.

"I would never hurt him," I answer carefully.

"That's not the same as pledging your loyalty."

I swallow hard. I don't know what to say. "I didn't realize that swearing my undying allegiance was a part of the move-in package," I retort dryly.

And just like that, Elio takes a step back, slipping back into an easy smile. He shrugs nonchalantly. "No, I suppose it's not. I just want you to know that if you do anything to hurt him, there *will* be consequences."

I put my hands on my hips. "Well, it's a good thing I don't ever plan on doing that."

Elio chuckles. "I'm glad to hear it."

He leaves first, humming a playful tune, while I remain in place, ignoring the cold twist in my gut. Elio may be on Dominic's side, but I need to be careful. Felicia and I might be safe under Dominic's protection, but it's clear there's more than one shark in these waters.

CHAPTER 16



DOMINIC

“I’m glad you’re still with us,” Lorenzo says hoarsely. He’s got a cigarette pinched between his lips, blowing smoke out through his nostrils. Even though his webcam quality is shit, I can still make out the glint of the fat gold chains around his neck and the greasiness of his thinning hair.

The power of modern technology means we don’t have to meet in one location. It’s smarter and safer this way. I can’t count how many times the cops have raided in-person meetings and thrown our big players behind bars in one fell swoop. It’s taken a bit of convincing, especially with some of the older capos who are set in their ways, but the advantages of hosting a call are as plain as day.

“I’ve spoken to Renato,” Bianchi, a capo whose territory encompasses the Bronx, informs us as he takes a big swig of beer. “He says he wasn’t the one who called the attack.”

“Bullshit,” I hiss. “His men specifically said Renato wanted me brought in alive.”

“Calm yourself, Costello,” Russo, one of the capos in charge of the northern districts, says to me. “We’ll get to the bottom of this, but we can’t have you flying off the handle.”

“Renato’s men attacked my man in broad daylight,” Lorenzo snarls. “Not to mention made a move on my laundromats. If this isn’t a declaration of war, I don’t know what is.”

“There has to be an explanation,” Di Paola, yet another capo, says reasonably. “Perhaps a few of Renato’s men have

gone rogue?”

Lorenzo growls. “If that’s the case, Renato doesn’t deserve his fucking rank. What kind of caporegime can’t control his men?”

“We need to sort this out before we have a full-out war on our hands,” Bianchi says. “The last thing we need right now is in-fighting. The Russians and the Irish have been waiting for their chance to strike. If they sense a weakness in our alliance, they’ll no doubt use it as an opportunity to claim our territory.”

“I want Renato’s head on a fucking pike!” Lorenzo bellows.

Russo clicks his tongue. “You know, none of this would have happened if you weren’t spending all your time in Atlantic City.”

“The fuck did you say?”

“You’ve left your right-hand man completely exposed.”

“Dominic can handle himself. Ain’t that right, Dom?”

I press my lips into a thin line, staring at the desktop screen. I nod once, but I don’t say anything. This meeting is getting us nowhere. Lorenzo might be my captain, but he’s always been too much of a hothead to be a proper leader. His sharp tongue and quick temper have landed us in hot water more than once, but I’m in no position to argue with him.

While the capos argue amongst themselves about how to handle the situation, my mind drifts. I wonder if Arin and Felicia are settled in. Elio’s been texting me occasionally with updates, but I haven’t been able to check my phone since the meeting started. Hopefully Arin and her daughter find everything to their liking.

Our daughter.

I still can’t believe it. It all happened so fast. One second, I’m a carefree bachelor, and the next I’ve got a four-year-old child I didn’t know about. My mother’s probably going to lose her mind when she realizes she finally has a grandchild.

I clench my hands. I don't know the first thing about being a father. I don't have a nurturing bone in my body. Corralling and ordering a team of thirty-some associates doesn't count as being fatherly, either. I can't exactly treat a little girl the same way I treat the men under my command. Those skills simply aren't transferable.

If anything happens to my daughter, I will kill you myself.

The corner of my lip lifts at the memory of my little spitfire. I don't know if Arin knows this but seeing her all fired up like that really turns me on. Hopefully I'll be able to control myself now that we're living under one roof. It's hard enough keeping my hands off her, but now that she's right down the hall from me, this is going to prove distracting as hell.

"We'll reconvene tomorrow evening," one of the capos says. "We need more information before we jump to conclusions."

Lorenzo's face is bright red, the vein at his temple bulging out of his skull. "Now wait just a fucking second—"

One by one, the capos hang up until it's only Lorenzo and me left on the call.

"Those fucking assholes," he spits, lighting up yet another cigarette. It's his fifth one in under twenty minutes. "You can see what they're trying to do, can't you? They're trying to push me out."

I remain perfectly still. "I don't think that's true, sir."

"Of course it's true! None of them listen to me. None of them show me the respect I deserve." My captain takes a long drag, smoke rushing past his lips. "None of them want to make a move against Renato because they know how close he is with the sottocapo. They won't jump on him until they have hard proof."

"They might have a point," I say.

Lorenzo's nostrils flare. "Are you fucking kidding me, Costello? His men attacked you and your woman. We need to take action, not sit around and wait for the bastardo to take us out."

I grit my teeth. Lorenzo doesn't mention Arin by name, but I don't like that he knows about her. Ignoring the burning sensation in my chest, I say, "With all due respect, sir, retaliation will cost us a lot of men. If Renato really is trying to make a move on your territory, it'd be wiser for the sottocapo to sort him out."

My capo snorts. "We'll be dust before Sal decides to get off his fat ass to do something. No, Costello. We're not going to sit around and wait for Renato to walk all over us."

A cold ball of steel weighs heavily in the pit of my stomach. "What do you want to do?"

"We're going to hit him back," he says. "He's got those warehouses down by the harbor."

"You want to claim them for yourself?"

"No. I want you to take a team down there and *destroy* them."

I shake my head. "Renato has millions of dollars' worth of weapons stashed there."

"Exactly," Lorenzo cackles. "If he thinks he can fuck with me, he has another think coming. He won't be able to survive that kind of financial loss. Once he's taken the hit, he won't have the resources or the backing to keep coming after us. It'll take him out of the running *and* out of Sal's favor."

"What if they find out it was us?" I ask, struggling to sit still.

This isn't good. I can't disobey a direct order from my captain, regardless of whether or not his plan is suicidal. Renato's a greedy son of a bitch, but he's no slouch. The man's got a loyal base of associates, control of the harbor, and a quarter of the police force in his pocket. Even if I were to put together a big enough team to take the warehouses by force, we'd be looking at a staggering number of casualties.

"They're not gonna find out," Lorenzo says, as if it's truly that simple. "Take care of it by the end of the week."

"Sir, with all due respect—"

“Do it, Costello. That’s an order.”

The call ends.

“Well, fuck,” I grumble.



It’s well past one in the morning by the time I return home. Johnny, who’s been posted on guard duty, stands to full attention. His arm is in a hefty cast, a few scrapes on his face from his own shootout, but apart from that, he seems to be making a speedy recovery.

“Welcome home, signor,” he says.

“Report.”

“It’s been quiet,” Johnny informs me. “Elio ordered them some pizzas around five. The little one was in bed by seven thirty. Ms. Wilson’s friend, Lana, left around nine. Elio left not long after.”

I nod. “Good. How are you holding up?”

Johnny smiles. “I’m well, sir.”

“Don’t hesitate to ask for relief if you need it. A couple of the boys are downstairs keeping watch at the main entrance.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you for your concern.”

I pat him once on his good arm before stepping past him. He’s not in good enough shape to be working his usual collection rounds, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to bench him. Now that Arin and Felicia are here, I figure Johnny might appreciate being placed on guard duty. It certainly beats sitting around with nothing to do. Men like us aren’t built to do that.

My apartment is silent and cold, the only light coming from the dim silver glow of the moon through the crack in the curtains. Evidence of their earlier pizza party can be found in my kitchen, several cardboard boxes stacked high on the kitchen counter. There are a few errant toys strewn about in

the living room and two sets of footprints on my leather couch. It's pretty obvious who they belong to.

I swear to God I'm going to kill Elio one day.

My skin prickles. It's strange, knowing I'm no longer the only one who calls this place home. Carefully, I stride down the hall towards the child's room.

No, not *the child*. Felicia.

My *daughter*.

For a moment, I debate whether I should peek inside. She's probably fast asleep, but curiosity simmers in my chest. I open the door a crack but remain on my side of the hall. There's a star-shaped night light on, filling the room with the soft warm glow of white. Felicia is fast asleep, bundled up in her new sheets.

The longer I stare, the more amazed I become. She has my nose, my lips, my dark hair. It's baffling that I didn't realize sooner. Felicia has the face of an angel, snoring softly as she dreams. I can't describe the sensation stirring in my stomach, nor the pull in my heart as I watch her sleep. She's just so... *small*. Small and adorable and precious.

My throat tightens, anxiety clawing at my spine. I brought her and her mother here to protect them, but what if I can't?

I push the thoughts from my mind, closing the door to leave Felicia to her dreams.

Arin's room is right across the hall. Knowing she's just on the other side sends me spiraling. She's probably asleep, too. I shouldn't disturb her.

And yet.

I've been fighting this craving for days. Ever since I tasted her lips, found myself between her pretty legs, I've been hungry to have her all over again. No matter how hard I try to stay away, I come right back to her. My fingers itch to touch her, my skin burns to have her touch *me*.

I open her door slowly and take a step inside.

Her bed is empty.

Before I have the chance to worry, I hear the rhythmic thrum of a sewing machine. There's a light on just past her walk-in closet, the door to her safe room turned fashion studio slightly ajar.

I find her busy at work, sewing two pieces of cloth together. She's only been here a day, but she's made full use of the space like she's been here for years. Fresh designs drawn by hand are taped to the wall. Scraps of fabric lie about in organized piles, a new dress already taking shape on one of the dress forms I had Elio purchase for her. I told him to spare no expense when it came to creating this space for Arin, and I'm glad he followed through.

She's mesmerizing to watch, in a world of her own. I don't think she even knows what time it is. Arin's got a pair of headphones in, listening to music on her phone as she hops off her stool and skips over to her dress form, pinning fabric in place. It's shaping up nicely, a gorgeous bustier decorated with black lace and strategically placed straps. When I notice the matching see-through skirt that's wrapped around the base of the mannequin, it occurs to me that she's working on a lingerie set.

"Put it on for me," I say.

Arin yelps, jumping in surprise. "Oh my God, don't scare me like that!"

I tilt my chin toward the lingerie. "I want to see you in it."

She licks her lips, her cheeks turning a cute dusting of pink. "Dominic..."

I pull over a chair and take a seat, the front of my pants already getting tight at the thought of Arin getting all dressed up for me. "Please?" I ask, barely recognizing how gruff I sound.

At first, I think she's going to refuse my request, but then I see the fire in her eyes. There's excitement behind those frosty grays, along with a dark hunger that matches my own.

“Since you asked so nicely,” she says with a wicked grin.
“Turn around, signor. Let me put on a show for you.”

CHAPTER 17



ARIN

I knew he'd come.

Call it intuition or a sixth sense, but I knew. That's why I started to make this lingerie set to my exact measurements, special just for him. I slip out of my clothes and put on the bustier and see-through mini skirt, relishing how soft the lace feels against my sensitive skin. Knowing that he's waiting for me, eager to see me in an outfit I made for his eyes only has me unbelievably wet.

He wants to look at me, a realization that excites me to no end.

I let my hair down and catch a glimpse of my reflection in the window. It's dark outside, but I can make out the outline of my silhouette in the glass. I've never felt more beautiful. The lace hugs my curves, accentuating my waist while showing off the peaks of my breasts. The sheer fabric reveals just enough of my nipples without giving everything away, and the skirt flows easily over the dip of my hips and the curve of my ass.

Taking a deep breath, I step forward.

"Okay, you can turn around."

His reaction is better than I ever could have expected. Dominic stares at me like I'm a holy experience, his pupils wide, his lips parted just so. He sucks in a sharp breath like he's forgotten how his lungs work. I take the tent in his pants as a compliment.

I'm worried I might ruin the poor man.

Dominic moves like he's about to stand, but I shake my head. "Stay there. Sit on your hands."

"Are you kidding me?" he asks, voice straining. "You know, not a lot of people can get away with telling me what to do."

I smirk, taking a slow stride toward him. "You'd better get used to it."

I watch him shiver, his eyes sweeping over me from head to toe. Dominic looks like he's two seconds away from eating me alive. A huge wave of satisfaction washes over me when, despite his perceived indignation, Dominic does in fact sit on his hands. It's in this exact moment that I choose to climb onto his lap, straddling him with my breasts pressed against his face.

Dominic moans, his hips bucking against me. "You're going to be the death of me, dolcezza."

"Like what you see?"

"Very much."

"I don't know," I say demurely, nipping at his luscious bottom lip with the graze of my teeth. "That doesn't sound very convincing."

He growls, leaning forward to follow the heat of my lips. I lean back just enough to keep him away. "You want to know how much I like you in lingerie?" he asks, breathing hard. "I like it so much that I want to devour you whole. I like it so much that it's the only thing I want you to wear from now on. Morning, noon, and night. I want you waiting in my bed all covered in lace, ready and waiting for me after the end of each workday so I can tear it right off you."

I can no longer ignore the wet heat pooling between my legs, my pussy aching for his touch. "Maybe I'll make a collection just for you. You'd have special permission to ruin the merchandise."

"Tell me, fashion designer, how should I go about ripping this off you if I can't use my hands?"

I tap the small clasp on the front of my bustier. “You’d use your teeth, obviously.”

“And your lack of panties?”

“By design,” I say coyly. “I figured you’d appreciate ease of access.”

“Fuck,” he hisses, lunging forward to kiss me like a starved man.

He’s a phenomenal kisser, but this is something else entirely. It’s an unfiltered passion, an animalistic need. He wraps his arms around me and breathes me in, leaving me no time to think. I cling to him as Dominic lifts me, setting me down on the edge of the nearest desk. With one big palm against my shoulder, he presses me back until I’m lying flat on the surface, his hungry gaze studying every inch of my body.

For a man with such obvious strength, he’s surprisingly gentle as he drags his hands over my skin. His fingers roam over my body, tracing the sides of my neck, the dip of my collar bone, before moving down to gently squeeze my breasts. Dominic dips down, pressing a line of heated kisses against my chest before making his way down to the clasp I pointed out earlier. The heat of his breath against my skin makes me shiver as he takes the clasp between his teeth. He pulls, releasing the thin bustier from my chest, exposing me completely.

Dominic wastes no time, mouthing at my breasts and sucking on my nipples, growling with an almost territorial look in his eyes. My hands fly to his hair, my eyes fluttering closed as I memorize the sensation of his greedy mouth leaving marks against my flesh. There’s an element of something frantic in the way he touches me, like there’s a chance we might die if we part for even a second.

“Dom,” I rasp, my heart beating loud in my ear. “Dom, please—”

“Begging me already, dolcezza?”

I squeeze him between my knees, legs on either side of his hips. “I can’t wait anymore.”

He nods silently, dropping to his knees as he spreads my legs wide. Dominic dips under the sheer fabric of my skirt and drags his tongue up my wet folds. My hips buck, a gasp caught in my throat as he moves in without a second thought, teasing my aching clit with the tip of his tongue.

Climax hits me hard and fast. It's so intense I see stars across my vision. With a trembling hand, I brush my fingers through his hair, entranced with the way his eyes remain locked with mine.

"I want you inside me," I plead. "Please, Dom, I don't want you to hold back."

He rises, breathing hard as he undoes the front of his pants and pulls himself free. I lick my lips, pussy clenching at the mere sight of his throbbing cock. He stands between my parted legs and aligns himself with my entrance.

"I'll pull out," he promises.

"Stop talking and—"

He plunges deep inside me, the stretch a beautiful mix of pleasure and pain. His pace is deliciously fast and hard, the snap of his hips making my body rock against the desk. I desperately cling to his shirt, pulling him down to kiss him with every ounce of my strength. Dominic meets me with just as much ferocity, our tongues wrestling for dominance as our bodies meld together.

The tight coil of heat deep within my core blooms, growing overwhelmingly hot and bright. I whimper against his lips as pleasure claims me once again, whiting my mind as ecstasy floods through my veins.

"That's it," he growls. "Just like that. Fuck, so nice and tight for me."

"Dom, God, that was—"

"Oh? You think I'm done with you?" He kisses the corner of my mouth. "I have five years to make up for."

I moan languidly. Oh, dear God, this is going to be a delightfully long night.

Dominic swiftly pulls out, leaving me to writhe against the sudden lack of his warmth. In the blink of an eye, he flips me over, my hips hinged over the edge of the desk. He lifts my skirt and grabs my ass in his hands, growling to himself.

“Beautiful,” he grumbles.

I huff in frustration. “You really like to make me wait, huh?”

A swift clap against my ass makes me yelp, his hand hovering just an inch over my tingling skin. “It’s time I finally gave you that lesson in patience.”

“What—”

Smack.

Dominic spansks my ass again, the sting a little sharper this time. I wouldn’t describe it as painful, only a shock, though I’m very tempted to push my luck to see how far he’ll go.

I wiggle my ass defiantly. “Is that really all you’ve got?”

“It isn’t wise to test me, dolcezza.”

“Why? Are you afraid I might break?”

“I’m never afraid.”

“Then quit spanking me and *spank* me.”

There’s a devilish glint in his eye. “You little minx.” *Smack.* “I get it now. You like it rough, don’t you?” *Smack.* “Fuck, look how nice and pink your ass is. You can see my fucking handprint.”

I squirm against his touch, my pussy wet and ready for him. “Dom—”

Dominic buries his cock inside me without warning, knocking the air from my lungs. He pistons in and out of me, his hands on either side of my waist, pinning me down against the desk as he fucks me senseless. The new angle is the definition of divine, the head of his cock hitting me in just the right spot.

“Oh, *fuck*,” I mewl. My feet aren’t even touching the ground anymore, my body suspended between him and the desk. “Fuck, Dominic, right there!”

His hand tangles with my hair, tugging my head back so he can kiss the crook of my neck. “Quiet, *dolcezza*. You’ll wake our child.”

I whimper when he says this. *Our* child. It sounds so right, so good. I don’t have too much time to dwell on the thought, though. The hand on my waist slips down and reaches around front, his fingers drawing tight circles against my clit.

I come in an instant, my body seizing as pleasure grips me tight.

He doesn’t stop.

Instead of easing up, he continues his feral pace, snaking his arms around my body. Dominic breathes in the scent of my hair, his deep voice directly next to my ear.

“One more, *dolcezza*.”

“Are you—*oh*—fucking crazy?”

“You were the one asking for trouble. I’m here to deliver.”

My heart won’t stop pounding. A thin layer of sweat covers my brow. “I-I don’t think I can.”

“You will,” he says casually, like it’s a given. “And this time, Marina, you’re going to thank me when you come.”

“Dom, I—”

“What. Do. You. Say?”

“Thank you!” I blurt out as a massive tidal wave of pleasure slams right into me.

I can’t make up from down, left from right. The only thing that keeps me grounded is his earthy scent and the weight of his warm body. He finishes himself off with his hand, panting against the crook of my neck. A sudden exhaustion seeps into my bones, pure satisfaction tingling in the tips of my fingers and toes.

I'm only vaguely aware of Dominic's strong arms lifting me, holding me against his chest as he carries me to my bedroom. I can barely keep my eyes open when he places me on my bed, carefully draping the soft silk sheets over my body before climbing in with me. I'm already drifting off when he presses a kiss to my forehead, murmuring softly in my ear.

“Dormi bene, cuore mio.”

CHAPTER 18



ARIN

I awake to the smell of sweet pancakes, rich coffee, and sizzling bacon. After pulling on a basic boxy shirt and a pair of pink pajama pants, I traipse down the hall, listening to my daughter's bubbly laughter.

"More!" Felicia demands as Elio pours a more than generous helping of maple syrup over her gigantic stack of chocolate chip pancakes.

"I think she has more than enough," I chide, waltzing over to give my daughter a kiss on the top of her head.

Dominic is seated on the other side of the table, looking frustratingly handsome as always, but also a bit uncomfortable. It's hard to ignore the distance he's placed between himself and our daughter, purposefully or not.

He rises from his seat and steps toward me, leaning down to give my cheek a quick peck. There's a little bit of awkwardness, but only because everything is so new. This is the first time the three of us are all in the same room together. Not quite a family, but maybe getting there?

Of course, his career track still has me questioning if this whole thing is even a good idea.

"I have to get to the office," he tells me.

"So early? It's not even eight."

"You sound disappointed."

I grin up at him. "Then I think you need to get your hearing checked."

Dominic gifts me with the smallest of smirks before he grabs his suit jacket from off the back of the dining room chair. “Elio will escort you and Felicia to her new daycare.”

“Her new daycare?” I echo. “Wait, I haven’t even checked the place out yet. I need to make sure they’re a good fit for her. What if she doesn’t get along with any of the caregivers?”

“This is a trusted location used by many of my colleagues,” he says robotically.

“Your colleagues have kids?”

“As a matter of fact, many of them do.” Elio answers. “My people are kind of known for their big families. I have seven brothers, myself. They’ve blessed me with a million nieces and nephews. I’m hoping to raise a house full of children one day as well. Just need to land myself a lucky lady.”

Dominic puts on his jacket, smoothing the lapels. “I pity the poor woman who agrees to take you as a husband.”

Elio laughs. “What are you talking about? I’d be an amazing husband.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek, a flicker of curiosity licking the nape of my neck. There’s no denying our age difference. A part of me wonders if at any point Dominic wanted a big family of his own. Was that why he was so adamant about having us live with him after he learned about Felicia? Does he maybe want more children?

My face flushes with heat. I’m getting *way* ahead of myself. I can’t even begin to put a label on what we are. What if I’m only a fling to him? Am I even ready to consider settling down — and with a mobster, no less? Good grief, this is such a mess.

Dominic’s brows pull together as he reaches to feel my cheek. “You’re looking a little warm. Are you feeling alright?”

“Totally fine,” I reply smoothly, moving away to take a seat next to my little girl. She’s massacring her pancakes one by one. “If you trust the daycare, then I guess that’s good enough for me.”

“I’m glad you trust my judgment.”

“When will you be home tonight?”

His face hardens. “I can’t say for certain.”

This time, I genuinely am disappointed. A part of me really wants to spend more time with him, and not just on a sexual level either. I want to get to know the father of my child, but his demanding job isn’t exactly making that easy. Early mornings and late nights... I wonder if this is how it’s always going to be with him.

“I need to stop by my shop,” I say. “To pick up a few things. I’m almost finished with your suits, too.”

Dominic nods. “As long as you take Elio with you, you’re free to do whatever you wish.”

Elio throws me a cheeky salute. “Consider me your personal bodyguard.”

From her booster seat at the table, Felicia giggles, copying Elio’s gesture. Her hands are covered in melted chocolate chips. “More pancakes, please!”

I laugh softly, wiping my daughter’s hands with a nearby napkin before picking her up in my arms. “You can have more after you tell Dom to have a good day.”

Felicia beams up at him, not a hint of fear or hesitation in her sweet face. “Have a good day!” she cheers, reaching out to grasp at his lapel.

Dominic stiffens. His look of discomfort returns. I don’t know understand it. Is he not sure how to be around Felicia? On a base level, I suppose I can’t blame him. Dominic’s been thrust into the role of fatherhood in the blink of an eye. I just hope this adjustment period doesn’t take too long.

He takes her little hand and gives Felicia’s fingers a light squeeze.

“Thank you, principessa,” he says before he turns and leaves.

Felicia is unfazed, but I can't say the same for myself. I place her back in her seat and give her half of a second helping of pancakes. Elio joins me at the kitchen sink, casually leaning against the edge of the counter.

“What the hell was that?” I mumble.

“Don't read too much into it.”

“How can I not? He insisted we come here. The last thing I want is for them to not get along. This is exactly what I was afraid of. What if he doesn't...”

“What?” Elio presses. “What if he doesn't like his own daughter?”

I swallow, my throat terribly dry. “It'd break my heart.”

“Don't worry, Arin. I've known Dominic for a long time. It's hard to see, but it's pretty clear he already loves her dearly.”

“Could've fooled me.”

“Think for a moment,” he says, not unkindly. “In our world, it doesn't pay to wear our hearts on our sleeves. The man is showing affection the only way he knows how.” Elio gestures vaguely to the space around us. “A big home, all the toys and food and clothes she could ever ask for... If you're expecting Dominic to be the touchy-feely sort of guy, I've got bad news for you.”

I consider his words carefully as I watch Felicia polish off her breakfast. Now that I know what he does for a living, I can't exactly imagine Dominic going around giving hugs and kisses. Maybe Elio has a point. There's more than one way to show affection, and it seems Dominic prefers more materialistic means. He's a provider — someone who'll make sure Felicia and I will want for nothing.

That doesn't mean I can't yearn for more.

Elio glances at his wristwatch. “We'd better get going. Traffic's about to get rough.”

“Sounds good. Felicia, please don't wipe your hands on your hair. The syrup's going to make it all sticky.”

My baby girl laughs mischievously, but the sound's so beautiful I'm not even the slightest bit mad.



I don't stay at the shop for very long. I'm only here to grab a few of my designs and some material, as well as to post a note on the window that I'll be temporarily closed until I can get myself situated at my new location. There's a lot going on right now, but I can't put my dreams of my grand debut at New York Fashion Week on hold. With the studio Dominic's gifted me, I'll be in an even better position to prepare for my launch.

Elio remains at the front of the shop while I clean off my work desk, throwing as much as I can in a large tote bag. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot the business card that Miriam Singh gave me the other day at the restaurant. Things have been too hectic to reach out, but now that I have a moment to myself, today's as good a time as any.

She picks up on the second dial tone.

"Miriam Singh, Gold Star Agency, how can I help you?"

"Miriam? It's Arin Wilson. Dominic's, uh, friend. We met the other day at Nobu?"

"Oh, of course! I'm still thinking about those designs you showed me."

"You are?"

"They were truly breathtaking. I'm really glad you called, actually. I'm about to head into a meeting, but do you think we could meet later for drinks? I'd love to see more of your designs."

My heart skips a beat. This meeting could literally change my life. "I'd love to meet."

"Excellent. I'll text you the address. There's this wonderful bar I've been meaning to check out. Say around two-o'clock?"

“I’ll be there.” When the call ends, I’m practically leaping across the shop floor. “Elio! Elio, guess what!”

He quickly tucks his phone away in his pocket. He smiles easily. “Did you just win the lottery?”

“Pretty much,” I say, practically vibrating out of my skin. “I have a meeting with a very important fashion agent. I need to land a spot on her client roster. If I can manage that, I’ll finally be able to start putting together my first show.”

“Hey, that’s great! Where’s the meeting? I’ll have to escort you there, but I can stay out of the way.”

My phone pings. Miriam texted the address in question. I give him my phone to inspect. “Can you drive me here? We won’t need to be there for a while, so I’ll use the time to take pictures of all my pieces.”

Elio’s brow quirks. “The Lilac Fountain?”

“Yeah. It’s a bar in SoHo. That won’t be a problem, right?”

His easy smile returns in the blink of an eye. “No, no problem at all.”

CHAPTER 19



DOMINIC

“**T**hat fucker has all of SoHo,” Lorenzo hisses around the fat cigar stuck between his lips. “Renato’s getting greedy. He already has prime real estate. The man’s ego is something else.”

My capo paces around his office, grumbling bitterly to himself. He’s been in a foul mood ever since he landed earlier this morning, effectively cutting his ill-timed vacation short. Lorenzo whips around, furious eyes almost bulging out of their sockets as he points an accusatory finger at Milo.

“Why weren’t you keeping better tabs on his mens’ movements?” my capo snaps.

Milo shifts his weight from foot to foot, though he doesn’t look particularly worried. As Lorenzo’s third in command, he’s experienced his fair share of tongue lashings. Having Lorenzo spit all over you while in a rage is basically a rite of passage.

“Our patrols reported nothing suspicious,” Milo explains easily. “They’ve been hitting us when we least expect it. It’s like they know exactly when and where we’ll be. I’m worried we might have a leak.”

A flicker of annoyance makes my lip curl. “You can’t be serious. You think there’s a mole amongst our ranks?”

“It makes sense, doesn’t it? These shootings aren’t by chance. They’ve all been targeted. You and your brother, a group of your men, you and that little plaything of yours—”

I snatch him by the collar. “Careful,” I hiss.

Milo smirks. “I *knew* it. There were rumors floating around, but I didn’t believe them. I can’t believe you, of all people, have a woman. Where have you kept her tucked away all this time?”

My stomach churns. This fucker. Milo and I play for the same side, but this weasel has a history of resorting to sabotage. I haven’t forgotten the look on Arin’s face all those years ago when she walked off that plane in tears. I never found out what Milo said to her, but it was obviously horrendous enough to send her running. I refuse to let him anywhere near her again.

“Enough!” Lorenzo shouts. “I won’t argue that these attacks aren’t targeted. I think it’s pretty obvious who Renato is after, Costello.”

I grind my teeth. “Why would Renato be after me? I’ve never slighted the man.”

“He knows what an asset you are to me,” my capo says, sighing heavily as he takes a seat in his office chair. “You run my territory efficiently, and you’re my most loyal man. Renato knows that if he takes you out of the picture, I’d be left exposed.”

Beside me, Milo mutters something inaudible under his breath. He’s never been shy about how much he loathes Lorenzo’s preferential treatment.

“We need to put Renato in his place,” Lorenzo continues. “How are your plans to destroy his warehouse coming along?”

I release a slow, controlled breath. “I’m... working on it, sir.”

Lorenzo nods. “Get it done. Use Milo’s contacts. We need to make an example out of that bastard. Nobody fucks with me and gets away with it. Now, get the fuck out of my office.”

I leave as commanded, silently fuming as I stride down the narrow hall. It’s never been more obvious. My presence is the common denominator in all the attacks, but I don’t think Lorenzo’s hypothesis is right. It’s true that I pretty much run his entire racket, but it wouldn’t make sense for another capo

to come after me. I've only met Renato in person once, and only for a few minutes. If he really wants to hurt Lorenzo, it'd be easier to go after his businesses, not his number two.

No, this feels much more personal.

"Wait!" Milo shouts after me.

I keep walking.

He jogs to catch up to me, throwing a casual arm over my shoulder. "So, when are we going in?"

"The fuck are you talking about?"

"The warehouse. If Lorenzo wants you to make a move, you're going to need all the backup you can get. What's the plan? I can have my demolition boys hook us up with some explosives."

"You're not coming."

Milo snorts. "Why the hell not? You heard the boss. You need my contacts and resources if you're going to pull this off."

"I have plenty of resources of my own." I push him off me. "You're the last person I'd ever ask for help."

"Stubborn bastard. Can't you see what a great opportunity this is?"

"You think *in-fighting* is a great opportunity?" I seethe. "We need to figure out a way to get Lorenzo to reconsider. We need to patch things up with Renato and get his men off our backs."

"Come *on*," Milo whines. He might be two years my senior, but sometimes he can be an annoying child. "Think bigger, Dom. Bigger."

I frown. "Get to the point or get out of my face."

"This is our chance to oust Lorenzo."

It's a slap to the face. Cold dread washes over me, white hot rage boiling in my chest. I shove Milo against the wall,

pinning my forearm across his throat. “What you’re suggesting is treason,” I snarl. “Do you *want* to die?”

“What?” he challenges, wheezing for breath. “Are you going to kill me?”

“Yes, and I’ll enjoy every last second.”

“I wouldn’t,” Milo chokes. His face is starting to turn purple.

“Give me one good reason why I should let you live?”

“Because I know who killed your brother.”

I release him at once, stunned. “Tomasso?” I breathe. “How...”

Milo massages his throat, coughing violently. A sheen of sweat covers his brow, his hair mussed from our brief and one-sided altercation. “I’ve been piecing things together,” he croaks. “I kept asking myself, who’d benefit the most from your death?”

“You’re definitely top of the list,” I snipe, on the defensive.

“Oh, please. I may hate your guts, but I don’t envy your workload. If you died, I’d have to take care of Lorenzo’s incompetent ass.”

“You really need to stop running your mouth in front of me.”

“What? We both know it’s true. Lorenzo’s glory days are over. If it weren’t for you, his entire territory would fall overnight. Everybody knows you’re the one running things around here.”

I sneer. “Who’s everybody?”

Milo stands upright, smoothing his wrinkled shirt. “Everybody. Your associates, other soldiers, neighboring capos. The sottocapo. Lorenzo’s a laughingstock, Dom. A has-been. You command far more respect and loyalty.”

“Stop it.”

“It could all be yours and he knows it. That’s why he’s been ordering hits against you.”

I’m at a loss for words. This isn’t right. It can’t be...

My phone pings. It’s a text message from Elio.

Arin has a meeting with Miriam Singh. We’re in SoHo, a place called The Lilac Fountain. Want me to bring you some mozza sticks?

My face falls.

SoHo? That’s right in the middle of Renato’s territory.

Alarm bells blare inside my skull. How could Elio take Arin there? What the hell is he thinking, walking straight into the lion’s den? He should know that’s way too far outside of our jurisdiction.

“Fuck,” I hiss, shoving my phone back in my pocket.

This is too much.

Between Lorenzo wanting me to carry out his vendetta, Milo manipulating me into overthrowing our own captain, and Arin being caught in the middle of war she knows nothing about, it’s a miracle I even have the energy to remain standing. At this point, I’m running on pure adrenaline.

I need to deal with one problem at a time.

Right now, I need to get to Arin before shit has the chance to hit the fan.

“This isn’t over,” I snap at Milo before shoving right past him.

“Be careful, Dom,” he shouts after me. “I’d watch my back if I were you.”

Any other day, I’d ignore him. Milo’s always had it out for me. What if he’s lying? But if he is, would he really go this far? He knows what we do to traitors. We don’t take betrayal lightly. Anyone caught working with the police or cooperating with the other syndicates in New York are met with swift and merciless punishment. But as irritating as Milo is, he isn’t stupid. His moves are calculated, his risks weighed. He’d

never suggest something as ludicrous as gunning for Lorenzo's seat at the table unless he knew he had winning odds.

I don't know what's more terrifying. The fact that my boss might be trying to kill me, or that I'm actually taking Milo seriously. There's no time to rack my brain about it, though. Every second I waste is another second Arin remains exposed. I need to get her out of there.

No matter what the cost.

CHAPTER 20



ARIN

“Amazing! Beautiful! Gorgeous!”

I’m pretty sure I’m in love with Miriam, and we’re only two drinks into our casual meeting. She continues to browse through the pictures in my phone, zooming in to admire all the small details of my work. I can tell she has an eye for fashion because she pays attention to things regular folks wouldn’t even know to look for.

“Your stitch work is wonderful,” she compliments. “And look at this intricate beading!”

“Oh, stop,” I say, blushing profusely. “You’re too kind.”

“You know, I can think of a couple of A-listers who’d absolutely love your work.” Miriam smiles at me. “I want to take you on as a client.”

A thrill shoots through me. “Are you serious?”

“You’ve got talent, Arin. And I really like what your brand is all about. Sustainability, inclusivity, confidence... And to think you’re doing all this while being a single mom? It’s inspiring. I can definitely use that to market you to the masses. Everybody loves an underdog.”

“Thank you so much,” I say softly. I can barely sit still. It’s not every day that my work is praised like this. The fact that it’s all coming from an industry professional is the cherry on top.

“So, what do you say?” Miriam asks me. “I can forward you all the paperwork later tonight, if you’re interested.”

“I’m definitely interested. Absolutely, yes!”

“Wonderful.” She takes a sip of her cocktail before reaching into her purse to pull out her own phone. “Now, I really like that you want to launch during fashion week, but have you thought about where you want your venue to be? Do you have a guest list in mind? The sooner we send out invitations, the better. Oh, and we’re also going to have to host a casting session to find models for the catwalk. Do you have a list of make-up and hair stylists you want to work with? I’ll have to reach out to the press, too. The more photographers we have at the event, the higher the chances you’ll be featured in upcoming magazine spreads.”

My head spins. “God, that’s so much to think about. I’ve been so focused on making the clothes that I haven’t given it much thought.”

Miriam chuckles lightly. “That’s okay. We’ve got plenty of time. And now that I’m your agent, I’ll take care of most of the heavy lifting.”

I breathe a little easier. “Thank you, Miriam. Seriously. This has been a dream of mine since I was a little girl.” I smile down at my drink. “I really want to make my daughter proud. I’ve always had this silly dream of bringing her into a big store on Fifth Avenue and telling her Mommy owns that.”

“Then let’s make it happen,” Miriam says with a big smile. She clinks her glass against mine. “To our partnership and your guaranteed success.”

“Cheers to that.”

Miriam checks her phone. “Oh, I have to go. I’ve got to run a few things by my clients at Gucci. I’ll forward you those documents to sign, okay? Give it a look over and let me know if you have any questions.”

“Will do.”

She gives me a friendly hug before leaving, tossing a quick wave over her shoulder as she steps out of the bar.

I settle into my seat, smiling like a madwoman. My skin is buzzing, and it isn’t even because of the white wine I’ve been

sipping. I can't believe I'm working with a woman who works with people at Gucci. I'm really playing in the big leagues now.

I quickly glance at the time on my phone. It's almost three, which means I have to pick Felicia up from daycare very soon. Looking around, I try to find Elio so I can flag him down. He told me he'd grab a spot by the bar, but I don't see him anywhere. Maybe he went to the bathroom or something?

Five minutes pass. Elio doesn't return. I'm starting to think he might have left, but that doesn't make sense. As ridiculous as I thought it was, he seemed pretty committed to his role as my bodyguard.

I slip out of my seat and wander over to the bar, catching the bartender's attention.

"How can I help you, miss?"

"Um, the man who was sitting here... Dirty blonde in the black suit? Do you happen to know where he went? He's kind of my ride."

The bartender shrugs. "I'm pretty sure he left twenty minutes ago."

I frown. Something isn't adding up. Dominic gave him orders to escort me everywhere. He wouldn't just leave me here.

"Oh, well," I mumble. "Would you mind telling me where the nearest station is?"

"Sure, it's—"

"Marina!"

I turn just in time to see Dominic barreling in through the front doors. His hair is a windswept mess, his chest rising and falling quickly with labored breaths.

"Dom? What happened? Did you... *run* here?"

It takes him seven long strides to close the distance between us. He takes my hand and pulls me toward him, wrapping a protective arm around my waist.

“Where’s Elio?” he pants.

“I don’t know,” I admit. “I was in the middle of my meeting, so I wasn’t paying too much attention. The bartender said he left a little while ago.”

“He left you *alone*?” Dominic’s nostrils flare. He sounds downright furious.

“I’m sure it was a misunderstanding—”

He throws a cautious look over his shoulder, glaring at everyone who dares to make eye contact. His body is rigid, hard as stone and just as immovable.

“What’s going on?” I ask. “You’re freaking me out.”

“We’re leaving. *Now*.”

“Actually, you’re not going anywhere,” the bartender says gruffly.

My heart twists in my chest when I feel the press of cold, hard metal against my exposed throat. I don’t have time to register being yanked from Dominic’s arms. The bartender grips my hair painfully, knife biting into my skin. In a flash, several of the bar’s patrons make their move, ganging up on Dominic like an army of ants taking down a threat three times their size. They swarm him, pinning him to the bar floor.

“Dominic,” I plead, voice breaking. “Dominic, what’s going on?”

“Quiet,” the bartender hisses in my ear. “Do as we say, and nobody gets hurt, alright?”

“Let her go!” Dominic roars, fighting his captors. They have his arms twisted behind his back, two of the men kneeling on the backs of his calves to pin him in place.

“Signor Renato would like a word with you,” the bartender continues. “If you resist, I’ll be forced to kill you just like I did your man.”

I gasp, trembling so hard I think my legs might give out. “What did you do to Elio?”

“Nothing much. Slipped a little something into his drink before dragging him out back. The idiot put up a good fight, I’ll give him that much. I wouldn’t have slit his throat if he’d cooperated.”

I sob, terror shredding through me. “Elio’s dead?”

“You bastard!” Dominic shouts. “You’re going to pay for this. For all of it!”

“Our capo just wants to talk, Signor Costello. All I ask for is your compliance. I’d rather not kill this woman.”

I’m so consumed with fear that my brain blanks. My body is numb. Right now, pain is the least of my worries. I don’t know what’s going on, but there’s no way I’m going to forgive these people for what they’ve done. Killing Elio, hurting Dominic...

I’ve reached my limit.

Tapping into a rage I didn’t know I was capable of, I move quickly, driving my elbow back into the man’s gut. He reels back, wincing in pain. I use this brief window of distraction to pry the knife out of his hand, mercilessly driving my knee into his groin. No matter how helpless I feel, I refuse to give up without a fight. If I do nothing, this man might hurt me or worse. So, I might as well give him everything I’ve got.

Behind me, Dominic releases a mighty bellow. With power I didn’t think possible to possess, he throws his enemies to the ground with haymaker kicks and punches. We act so suddenly, so brazenly, that none of our foes realize what’s going on before we’re racing out the door.

“After them!” someone shouts.

Dominic holds my hand tight as we run together, escaping into the busy New York Streets.

“What about Elio?” I ask frantically. “We can’t just leave him there. We have to make sure he’s okay!”

I receive no response as we keep on running. We run until my lungs are on fire and my legs start to cramp, but we don’t

stop until we're officially out of SoHo and in the middle of the West Village.

The coast is clear.

For now.

Dominic reaches for his phone and dials a number. "Come on, Johnny. Pick up, pick up, pick up." I take it as a bad sign when he pulls the device away with a sneer.

I study his back, a dark wet patch seeping through his jacket. I dare to reach out, carefully grazing my fingers over his shoulder. There's a sticky lump lodged in the back of my throat. When my fingertips come away soaked in red, I know without a shadow of a doubt that his stitches have popped.

"You need to tell me what's going on, Dominic," I demand. "Who are these people who keep attacking us? Did that man really kill Elio?"

Dominic turns, his anger apparent in the tightness of his shoulders and the hard line of his lips. "What the hell were you thinking? Why would you go there?"

"I had a meeting with Miriam. She wanted to get drinks and talk business."

"And Elio didn't stop you?"

"Why would he?"

Dominic grits his teeth. "Nothing."

"No," I snap. "Not *nothing*. Don't you dare say it's nothing. This is officially the second time in as many days that someone's attempted to kill me. You owe me an explanation."

"I can't tell you, Arin."

"Fuck your code!" I exclaim. "I don't give a damn if you're some bigshot Mafia man—"

"Jesus Christ, lower your voice."

"Like hell I will! You dragged me into this mess. I refuse to be kept in the dark. If you don't start telling me what the

hell's going on, I'm leaving with my daughter and never coming back.”

Dominic's face falls at this, his discomfort palpable. He's silent for a long time before he finally says, “Fine. I'll tell you. But not here. Let's pick up Felicia and take you both home.”

“And then you'll tell me everything?”

He nods, though he looks pained. “Everything.”

CHAPTER 21



DOMINIC

I've committed a cardinal sin by revealing what I know, but Arin's threat of taking our daughter and once again slipping from my grasp scared me awake. I just found them. How could I stand to lose them so soon after?

Judging by the look of horror on Arin's face, I might lose them anyway.

"This is crazy," she whispers.

"I have everything under control."

"Do you? Really? Because from where I'm standing, it looks like everybody has it out for you. Renato, your own boss... And now Elio's dead—"

"We don't know that."

"That man said he slit his throat."

"Until we find his body, nothing's set in stone. The bastard could have been bluffing."

Arin sobs into her hands, her shoulders shaking. She's seated on the couch; the only light on is the side table lamp. Felicia's fast asleep in her room, none the wiser.

I've got Johnny and the rest of the associates under my command keeping a diligent watch of the perimeter, on high alert. Not only do I have Renato to worry about, but if what Milo said was true, my own captain is plotting to stab me in the back. I don't know who to trust and that has put me on edge.

That's why I can't even begin to imagine what's going through Arin's head right now.

I crouch before her and place a gentle hand on her knee. "You can't repeat what I've told you to anyone."

"Why would I? I'd only be putting them in danger, too." She shivers. "Do you think Miriam was in on it, too? I didn't question her when she asked to meet at the bar..."

I shake my head. "No, I don't think she's in on it. Her background checks out clean. It could have been a coincidence, but..."

Arin frowns. "But what?"

"Elio should have known better. He should have known the bar was located deep within Renato's territory."

"Do you think he's in on it?" she asks, her tone unsure.

The thought never occurred to me. Elio might be a giant pain in my ass and a clown who rarely takes anything seriously, but he's arguably one of my closest friends and trusted confidants. He's been with me through thick and thin. We've had each other's backs for as long as I can remember. But I'd argue the same about Lorenzo and me. Before Milo put the doubts in my head, I would have sacrificed myself for the man without hesitation.

Could it be that Elio made a fatal mistake? Or is there a chance Elio had plans of betraying me, too? The line between friend and foe is blurring. I don't like it one bit. It's clear loyalty means jack shit anymore. The only thing I know for certain is that I have to keep Arin and Felicia safe. No matter the cost.

"I'm going to move you and Felicia to a secure location out of state."

Arin glances up at me, her bottom lip trembling. "What?"

"If I'm right, and I really hope I'm not, things are going to get worse. In order to keep you safe, I need you as far from New York as possible."

"But what about you?"

“I need to stay. To end this one way or another.”

Arin shakes her head. “No, that’s... You can’t. What if something happens to you?”

“Nothing’s going to happen to me, I promise.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she insists. “You made such a big deal about us moving in with you, and now you’re pushing us away?”

“For your safety.”

“That’s bull and you know it,” she says, the fiery look in her eyes downright breathtaking. “We have to be smart about this, Dominic. If you send us away, there’s no telling how many people might come after Felicia and me. I’ve been lucky these last few fights, but I’m no fighter. I can’t defend us, and I don’t know which one of your men to trust. Staying here with you is our safest option.”

I turn her words over in my head. “You’re starting to sound a lot like a soldata.”

“No, I’m sounding like a concerned mother who’s had it up to *here*.” She gestures with her hand, lifting her palm way above her head. “I’m not going to lie, Dom. I’m scared. Terrified.”

I lean forward and cut her off with a kiss, her words stirring in my chest. This poor woman. This poor, brilliant, unbelievably brave woman. I should have listened to the logical side of my brain and kept as far away from her as possible, but I just couldn’t stay away. Now she’s here in my care with our little girl, and that isn’t a responsibility I’ll ever take lightly. It was a mistake dragging her into my life, but one I won’t allow myself to regret.

Arin kisses me back, combing her fingers through my hair. It’s a tender kiss, one of comfort and longing. “Please don’t let anything happen to us,” she pleads against my lips. Her body trembles beneath my touch. “Please.”

It’s at this moment that something locks into place. It’s possessive, territorial, protective. It was fate meeting her all those years ago, and it was fate when she stumbled into my

office. The powers that be have given me a second chance, and I'd be a fool to let it go to waste.

"You're mine to protect, *dolcezza*," I murmur against her mouth. "You and our little girl. I'll keep you both safe."

"Promise?"

"On my life, Arin. On my life."

"Good, now *kiss* me."

Our lips crash together in a frenzy, our hands urgently roaming each other's bodies. It happens all at once and in a blur. I take her shirt off. She makes quick work of my belt. I take a seat on the couch and let her crawl onto my lap, straddling my thighs. She's not wearing anything particularly fancy underneath, but I don't care. It's not the way it looks on her that I like so much, but the way she radiates confidence. There's nothing sexier to me than a woman who *knows* she's got it going on and isn't afraid to tease me senseless.

I reach around and unclasp her bra, moving in quickly to mouth out her breasts. Arin's head falls back, exposing the pale skin of her neck. Renato's man luckily didn't leave any marks on her beautiful skin. If he had, I would have torn him in two with my bare hands.

Nobody hurts my woman. The only person who gets to be rough with her is *me*, and only because she asks so nicely.

"We have to be quiet," she says around a breathy moan. "We can't wake Felicia."

"*You* have to be quiet," I reply. "*I'm* going to do everything I can to make you scream."

"Dom—"

Reaching between our bodies, I pull my throbbing cock free from my pants. I kiss the corner of her mouth sweetly before I smirk. "Go on. Show me what your pretty pussy can do."

With a nod, Arin carefully lowers herself on my shaft, allowing me to sink deeper and deeper inside her. She's

incredibly wet, the delicious heat of her walls squeezing me as she starts to rock her hips back and forth.

“That’s it,” I moan. I brush my thumb over her swollen clit, sucking a hard mark against the crook of her neck. “That’s it, Arin. Milk my cock harder. I’m going to make you feel so fucking good.”

She clasps her own hand over her mouth to keep from crying out, her moans muffled against her palm. She tries and fails to keep her voice under control, but I’m determined to see her come undone.

“Let me hear that beautiful voice, cuore mio.”

“Ah, *fuck*,” she mewls. Her face is twisted in a beautiful mix of pleasure and pain. “I’m so—”

She doesn’t finish her sentence, her climax so powerful that her pussy pulses around my shaft, gripping me tighter. She trembles as ecstasy courses through her veins, heat radiating off her skin.

I don’t give her a chance to breathe, spinning us around so her back is flat against the couch. I’m on top of her now, still connected and ready to make her see stars. Gripping her hard at the waist, I thrust into her roughly, adoring how her mouth falls open into a silent scream of pleasure.

“D-Dom, right—”

“Here, *dolcezza*?” I ask, searching for the spot that will make her sing. I know I’ve found it when her eyes roll back, her brows knitted together.

“*God*,” she chokes.

“No God here,” I tease. “Just me.”

She comes again, her legs trembling and her breath hitching. Her pussy clenches around me, giving me just the friction I need to drive myself over the edge with her. I’m tempted to finish inside her, but an errant thought plants itself in the back of my mind.

What would it be like to give her another child?

I wasn't there to help her when she was pregnant with Felicia. An immense guilt has been weighing me down ever since learning about the existence of my daughter, though I'm sure nobody could blame me. It was our rotten luck we got separated before I could do the right thing and support Arin along the way.

But what if I got a second chance?

I haven't forgotten about Elio's conversation about having a big family. My mother's here every other week to pressure me into finding a wife, after all. It's a thought that lingers on the back burner, something I ponder about but can never find the time to truly explore. I'd love a big family one day, with lots of kids running around and massive Christmas mornings.

But what does Arin want? Could I convince her to try again?

"Pull out," she rasps. "Please pull out."

I do because I'm not about to force my wishes on her. She's been through enough. Raising Felicia all by herself, experiencing a life-or-death situation not once but twice in the few weeks she's known me. There are too many uncertainties in the air, too many enemies lurking around every corner. The last thing I want right now is to have yet another innocent life involved in my mess.

I spill into my hand with a grunt, my body suddenly weary and satisfied. I lean forward to kiss her lovingly, adoring the way her hair sticks to her face and her cheeks are flushed a deep pink.

"Join me in the shower," I say.

"Is that a suggestion or an order?" she asks playfully.

"Depends. Which will have a favorable response?"

Arin sits up, wearing a dopey smile. "I think you know."

"An order, then."

She rises with me, taking my hand. "Lead the way."

CHAPTER 22



ARIN

Dominic doesn't go to work the next day, or the day after that, or even the day after that. I don't have any complaints. After the shit we've been through, his presence is more than welcome.

Felicia and I are in the kitchen preparing a few snacks. While I wash some grapes in the sink, my daughter dumps an entire box of crackers onto a plate. Dominic and Johnny stand by the entrance, speaking in low tones. If I strain, I can just barely make out what they're saying.

"He wants to know why you haven't stopped by the office," Johnny says anxiously. "He wants answers."

"Believe me, so do I."

"What should I tell him?"

"Tell Lorenzo I'm working on his warehouse plans. He'll know what it means."

"And you think that'll keep him off your back?"

Dominic's jaw ticks. I've learned how to read him a little better over the last couple of days. Whenever his jaw works like that, it means he isn't sure at all.

"It'll do for now," is his blunt answer. "Any word on Elio?"

Johnny shakes his head. "No sign of him. We've tried conducting a search, but we can't get close enough to Renato's territory without raising the alarm. I'm worried they might actually have killed him."

A chill races down my spine.

This is all so surreal. Just a few days ago, Elio was standing in this very kitchen, cracking jokes and spending time with Felicia. And now he's...

"If they did get him, he wouldn't have gone down without a fight. There has to be evidence somewhere. Keep looking."

Johnny shifts uncomfortably from foot to foot. "Believe me, sir, we're trying. But Lorenzo doesn't want us to keep looking. He says Elio's as good as gone."

My stomach churns. I might be pretending to ignore their conversation, but I'm actually super invested. According to Dominic's source, Lorenzo is trying to ice his right-hand man and use it as an excuse to start an all-out war with a rival racket. If that's true, it makes sense to take out Dominic's own right-hand man. Slowly but surely, Dominic is being isolated — a chess piece surrounded on all sides by opponents ready to attack. All it would take is one mistake, one misstep, and Dominic will have nowhere to turn.

"Here!" Felicia says cheerfully, skipping over to Dominic with her plate full of crackers and grapes. "Sharing is caring," she announces proudly.

"We'll talk more about this later," after smiling at her, Dominic says hastily to Johnny. "Keep an eye out. Stay alert."

"Yes, signor," he replies before making a hasty exit.

"What does that mean?" Felicia asks, balancing her plate on top of her head.

I hurry on over and take it from her before she makes a mess, setting it on the entryway table. "It means '*sir*' in Italian."

"What's Italian?"

"It's another language, sweetie."

"Another language?" my daughter gawks. "How many are there?"

"Lots," I say.

She points at Dominic. “I want to learn!”

Laughing lightly, I pick my daughter up and hold her out to Dominic. “You have to ask nicely, Felicia.” Dominic noticeably stiffens. He doesn’t reach out to take her. “Would you mind?” I ask him. “I left the sink running.”

He swallows, hesitantly lifting Felicia under the arms. He holds her away from his body, awkward in every way imaginable. “Uh... I guess. I’m not really a teacher.”

I snort. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like? I’m holding the child.”

“Yeah, like she’s a bag of poop.” Felicia giggles at the word poop. “That’s not how you hold a kid.”

Dominic takes a deep breath, worry etched into the features of his face. “She’s just... so small.”

I realize I’ve been wrong this entire time. I initially took his aloofness to mean he wasn’t connecting with Felicia, but now it’s obvious he simply doesn’t want to hurt her. He’s a big bad mafioso, someone trained in the art of extortion, money laundering, loan sharking... caring for children isn’t exactly one of his specialties.

“Hold her like this, silly,” I say, readjusting his hold so Felicia can sit more comfortably on his forearm. “There, isn’t that better?”

Dominic is still stiff, but he looks nowhere near as awkward. “I suppose.”

I watch them in amusement. There’s something about a big man holding a tiny child that makes me feel all gooey inside. I return to the kitchen and turn off the tap before I accidentally flood the whole apartment, leaving Felicia in her father’s care.

She isn’t aware of who Dominic is yet, and I’m not too sure how to go about telling her. She’s so young and has the attention span of a goldfish; the news might not take hold the way I expect it to.

Felicia rests her cheek against Dominic’s shoulder, sucking on her thumb while clutching his shirt with her other hand.

She always gets sleepy after she's had a couple of snacks.

"Wanna watch *Paw Patrol*," she mumbles tiredly.

I smile. "Okay, sweetie. How about you go sit on the couch?"

She shakes her head. "Wanna stay here."

I can't help but laugh. Children are always so wonderfully indecisive. I glance at Dominic, admiring the undeniable fondness in his eyes. "I guess she wants you to join her."

"Must be," he mumbles softly before carrying her to the living room without complaint.

"Mommy, come too!"

"Alright, sweetie. I'm coming."

Dominic sits down on the cushion and turns on the TV for her, Felicia sitting comfortably in his lap while holding on to his hand like she's afraid he'll leave. I take the spot next to them, but I'm quickly pulled in close when Dominic slings an arm over my shoulder like we've done this a million times before.

I don't know whether to laugh or cry tears of joy. Being together like this... I didn't know how much I wanted it until this very moment. They look good together, the tough wiseguy and his mini-me daughter. It's pretty obvious Dominic doesn't care for Ryder and his awesome pups, but he endures episode after episode until Felicia is out like a light, snoring against his chest and drooling on his Armani shirt.

Once he's sure she's fast asleep, Dominic says, "We need to talk."

I pick up the remote and lower the volume on the TV. "That sounds ominous, but then I guess this whole situation kind of *is*."

"I want you to consider putting your fashion show on hold."

Chewing on the inside of my cheek, I muster up the courage to ask, "Why?"

“I know this is something you’ve been greatly looking forward to—”

“Yes, for years.”

“—but the attack the other day at the bar has proven to me how easily my enemies can get to you. You asked the other day if Miriam might have been in on the attack; my sources tell me that’s not the case. It was merely a coincidence.”

“Why am I sensing a *but* coming?”

“*But*,” he says, “it’s evident that I don’t know who to trust. Until I can figure out what’s going on, I’m the only one I trust to ensure you and our little one’s safety.”

“Are you... saying you’re going to be my bodyguard?”

“If you want the job done right and all that,” he says casually.

I read his expression carefully. He’s dead serious. “Dom... I can’t give up my dream.”

“I’m not asking you to give up. I’m merely asking you to postpone it.”

While I understand his logic, my disappointment is immeasurable. Just when I thought things were lining up for me, shit just had to go wrong. Still, Dominic’s right. I’d rather live to see another day. There will always be another New York Fashion Week, always another chance to share my talents with the world. The only reason I was pushing so hard to launch my label and find success was because I wanted to provide for my daughter. I’m obviously still determined to work hard to achieve my goals, but with Dominic in the picture, maybe I don’t have to work myself to the bone.

I may be stubborn, but I’m not going to put on a fashion show at the risk of being targeted. It’s time to pivot my plans, take a pause, maybe focus on building bonds as a family. Granny Ruth always used to say that when one door closes, another one opens. I’d be a fool to keep charging ahead when all the signs clearly point toward danger.

“I understand,” I murmur softly, ignoring the sting in my chest. I’ll just have to get over this for now. “I’ll call Miriam and tell her there’s been a change of plans.”

“I’m sorry, Arin,” he says earnestly, the softness in his gaze making my heart swell. “It’s all my fault. I swear to you, I’ll sort everything out as soon as I can.”

I turn a little in my seat to face him better. “Let me help you.”

He looks at me like I’ve grown a second head. “I appreciate the offer, dolcezza, but this isn’t something you’re equipped to handle.”

“And you *are*?”

“Careful,” he chides lightly. “You’ll bruise my ego.”

“There has to be *something* I can do to help. You know you can trust me, right?”

He pauses like he’s actually considering it. “Yes. I know I can trust you.”

“So let me help. There’s no way you can do this alone. You’ve seen me in fights. I can hold my own.”

Dominic regards me with an expression I’ve never seen him wear before. It’s a mix of amusement and... pride?

“I know, Arin. But the best thing you can do to help me right now is to stay here with Felicia where I know you’ll be safe. You’ve been caught in the crossfire more than once. I refuse to let it happen a third time.”

My shoulders deflate, but I can’t say I’m surprised by his answer. Still, I can’t ignore the restless energy stirring within me. It’s not in my nature to sit around and wait for things to come to pass. If there’s one thing I’ve always been, it’s a go-getter. It doesn’t seem right or fair to sit on the sidelines while Dominic fights alone. I can understand why he doesn’t want me on the frontlines, but surely there are other ways I can lend him a helping hand. He needs allies, now more than ever. But what can I possibly bring to the table?

An idea pops into my head.

“Will you be alright if I leave you alone with her for a few minutes?” I ask him, carefully combing Felicia’s hair away from her sleeping face.

“I’ll manage,” he replies. “Where are you off to?”

“Just to the studio to call Miriam. I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

“There’s no hurry,” he assures, patting Felicia tenderly on the back.

Suppressing an internal giggle of delight, I hurry down the hall toward my bedroom. Once I enter my work studio, I pull out my phone. Calling Miriam is still on my agenda, but there’s another call I need to make first. I’ve got my fabric supplier’s number memorized at this point, so it only takes a few seconds for me to punch in the numbers.

My supplier answers on the second ring tone. “Charlie’s Fabric Emporium, Charlie speaking.”

“Hey, Charlie? It’s me.”

“Arin!” he greets cheerfully. “I feel like it’s been ages since I heard from you. How’ve you been?”

It’s a loaded question, but I decide a polite lie is better than the ugly truth. “Not too bad, thanks. Listen, I need to put in an order.”

“Of course. Should I send the usual? We just so happen to be having a sale on tulle.”

I walk over to the three mannequins hosting the custom suits Dominic ordered from me not that long ago. I still haven’t finished them. He still needs to try them on so I can make adjustments and ensure everything fits just right, but even in their incomplete state, they look stunning.

“Actually, I have something very special in mind.”

“Oh? Do tell. Working on a new project?”

“I guess you could say that.” I graze my fingers over the soft inner lining and smile to myself. “I want to put in an order for Kevlar.”

CHAPTER 23



DOMINIC

I am not a man who runs and hides. This momentary retreat is simply a chance to regroup, recharge. The way I see it, there are too many moving pieces to keep track of. Maybe if I were younger and brasher, I'd storm ahead with my guns blazing, thirsty for retribution. Nobody gets away with harming my family. As a proud man, I cannot let this slide.

For now, however, taking a step back is a necessary move to get a better view of the playing board. I need to strategize, and with my right-hand man missing and likely dead, I can't afford to make any stupid moves. If Milo is to be trusted — and that is a very big *if* — then I'll be fighting a war on two fronts: one against Renato and one against my own captain.

Before I can act, I need proof. Until then, I'll wait.

I can't remember the last time I spent this much time at my apartment. Running Lorenzo's territory meant I'd be home to shower and sleep, but nothing more. That man had me constantly on the go, ensuring his kingdom ran like clockwork. I think back to Milo's words.

It could all be yours and he knows it.

That's why he's been ordering hits against you.

I'm in the kitchen, debating whether it's too early to pour myself a scotch. I'm playing a mental game of chess, except all the pieces move on their own accord and they all have their own personal motivations guiding their actions. It's stressful as hell. Surely nobody will judge me if I need a drink at four in the afternoon.

Can Milo really be trusted? The man's been a snake for as long as I've known him. Why would Elio make such a fatal mistake? He knows as well as I do that SoHo is off-limits to us right now. Where in the world did Lorenzo get the idea that I'd ever betray him for his territory? I've given him nothing but my undying loyalty and devotion these past fifteen years...

"Up!"

I turn to find Felicia next to me, tugging on my pant leg. It's taken a bit of getting used to, but I'm finally starting to feel at ease around her. Getting to see my daughter's bright smile, hear her darling laugh, count those cute freckles on her nose and cheeks brings me so much joy that I sometimes don't know what to do with myself.

I crouch down and chuckle lightly. "What are you doing, principessa?"

"Mommy and me are playing hide 'n' seek." She stretches her hands up over her head. "Up, please!"

"Oh, I see. Are you trying to get me to help you?"

Felicia nods. "Up, up, up!"

"I'm not sure that's allowed."

She bats her long eyelashes at me and pouts her lips. "Meanie!"

I chuckle. She reminds me so much of Arin it makes my heart melt. I sigh and pick her up, unable to deny her any longer. Felicia clutches my shirt and points toward the west wing of the apartment. "Run, run!" she orders.

Somewhere down the hall, I can hear Arin counting loudly and slowly to ten. She's at five, which means we're running out of time.

"Hang on tight, little one. Stay nice and quiet."

Felicia puts her index finger to her lips as a vow of silence.

I don't take her very far and pick a pretty obvious spot in the hallway linen closet, the door left open a crack to give Arin a clue. A few seconds later, soft footsteps pad across the floor.

Felicia has a hard time keeping her giggles in when Arin calls out, “Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

Arin finds us without any trouble, Felicia bursting into a fit of laughter when her mother opens the door all the way. As beautiful as the sound of Felicia’s joy is to my ears, Arin’s dazzling smile is what captures my attention. She takes her little girl and presses a flurry of kisses to Felicia’s face, blowing raspberries against her cheeks.

“Mommy! Mommy, tickles!”

“Very clever, getting Dom to help you. I almost didn’t know where you went!”

“My turn to count!” Felicia proclaims. “One... Two...”

Arin giggles, setting Felicia down. “Wait a second. Don’t start counting, we’re not ready yet.”

I arch a brow. “We?”

Without another word, Arin takes my hand and pulls me with her while Felicia continues to count, hiding her little eyes behind her palms.

“Come on,” Arin says. “Let’s hide.”

“But I have things to—”

“Aww, don’t be a chicken. Hurry!”

We duck behind the couch together, strategically positioned so we can keep an eye on Felicia while still giving her a bit of a search. Arin’s thoroughly invested in the game, practically climbing over me to stay out of sight. When she peeks over the cushions, her breasts brush up against my face, the sweet scent of her skin filling my nose.

I wonder if she’s doing this on purpose.

“How did I get roped into this?” I mumble. “I’m a grown man, Arin. I don’t play hide and seek.”

“Oh, shush,” she says playfully. “Look how happy she is.”

I’ll admit there’s something wonderful about playing with our daughter. I can’t remember the last time I felt this at ease.

For years it's been crunching numbers, collecting payments, negotiating business handoffs, protecting financial interests, constantly at Lorenzo's every beck and call. This is... nice. Domestic. A taste of what I've missed out on.

A taste of what my future has in store.

I press my lips to Arin's chest, just between the valley of her breasts. I reach up and grasp her gently by the waist, nipping at the fabric of her shirt. Arin glances down at me, her cheeks flushed.

"Seriously? You're doing this now?" she whispers.

"Oh, shush," I throw her response right back to her. My hands lower to her hips, encouraging her to move against me.

"D-Dominic—"

"Come to my room tonight," I tell her, palming her pussy over her jeans. "Wear something pretty."

"Stop it. Felicia's coming."

I remove my hands but lift an eyebrow. "Is that a yes, dolcezza?"

"Yes, now keep quiet or else—"

"Found you!" Felicia squeals, jumping into Arin's arms.

We're a certified dogpile turned ticklefest, but I can't say I mind. I'm quickly realizing that getting to hold these two close is the absolute best feeling. They've only been living with me for a week, but if anything ever happened to either of them, I'd set the whole world ablaze.

All the more reason to resolve my problems. Quickly.

Felicia jumps around the perimeter of the coffee table, an untamable ball of energy. "Your turn!" she declares, pointing one of her little fingers at me. "You have to count to ten. Mommy and me are gonna hide—"

There are three sharp knocks at the door, followed by the sound of muffled voices. Arin shoots me an anxious look. Getting up quickly, I head to the door. I've had Johnny stationed on door duty every day this week, and he knows not

to let any uninvited guests in without my prior knowledge. When I get closer, I recognize the voices. One of them is my associate, and the other...

My mother bursts in like she owns the room, fury in her eyes. “Dominic Alessandro Theodore Costello! Why is this numpty at your door telling me I cannot enter? What’s all this about you getting shot at and nobody informing me? And what’s this I hear about a woman moving in to—Oh!” She eyes little Felicia, the biggest of smiles stretching across her face. “And who might this little darling be?”

I clear my throat, waving Johnny away. “This is Felicia, and her mother, Marina Wilson.”

My mother’s face lights up like the Fourth of July. “Marina?” she echoes. “As in Marina, the girl from five years ago? The one you obsessively searched for? The woman who you proclaimed was the love of your—”

“You’re being dramatic, Mother,” I cut her off quickly. It’s true I spent a great deal of my free time looking for her when I returned from my trip to Italy, but I don’t recall ever saying something like that.

Arin walks over, smiling bashfully. “Hi, lovely to meet you. Just call me Arin.”

“And you may call me Isabella,” Mother says, shaking Arin’s hand. “So, you’re the woman I’ve heard so much about.”

Arin’s face goes from a light pink to a bright red. “You... have?”

“I happen to make rumors my business now that I’m retired. When I heard my boy was shacking up with a young woman, I knew it had to be serious.” Mother smacks me across the arm. “When were you going to tell me, cuore mio? Were you going to keep this lovely little bird a secret all to yourself?”

I grit my teeth. It’s one thing for rumors to be floating around. I can’t have Arin and Felicia’s safety compromised. The fact that these rumors have gotten back to my own mother

is a problem in and of itself. “I was definitely *trying*,” I grumble.

My mother glances between me and Felicia, and then between Felicia and Arin. She squints at the three of us, going back and forth until her expression shifts, a realization dawning on her. I can practically smell the gears burning inside her skull.

“You two... Which means she’s...” There’s a question in her eyes, unsaid but loud and clear.

I nod. “Felicia is your granddaughter.”

“Oh!” Mother gasps, tearing up as she drops to her knees to hug Felicia. “Mia nipotina!”

The little girl hugs my mother back, simply happy to be getting so much affection and attention. “You smell nice,” she mumbles happily, rubbing her hands over the fur lining of my mother’s expensive coat. If it were anyone else, I’m pretty sure Ma would swat their hand away. She appears to take it in stride, too overjoyed to care.

“You should have told me sooner, Dominic,” she chastises, but her smile remains in place. “I would have brought over my famous homemade tiramisu.”

“What’s that?” Felicia asks.

“It’s dessert, sweetie,” Arin answers softly.

“I like dessert!”

“Everybody does,” I say.

“Would you like to stay for dinner, Isabella?” Arin asks. “I was going to make burgers.”

“I’d love to!” Ma exclaims before I have a chance to interject.

“Wonderful. I’ll get the table set. Felicia, go wash your hands please.”

“Okay, Mommy!”

The moment we're alone, Mother smacks me across the arm again. "Were you ever going to tell me?"

"There was never a good enough time," I answer with a wince. There are only two things I fear most: God's wrath, and my mother's ring-clad backhands.

"You and I are going to have a nice, long talk after dinner," she warns. "And not just about your secret family. My sources tell me there's trouble brewing."

"Are your sources saying the same as my sources?"

"If it's that Lorenzo's a disloyal son of a bitch, then yes."

I pinch the bridge of my nose, praying the dull ache behind my eyes dissipates. "Please tell me you have something concrete."

"I'll do you one better," my mother says, reaching into her purse to pull out a thick yellow envelope. "You'll want to give those documents a good read."

Curious, I open the envelope and slip the pages out. They're printed on crisp paper, the ink still fresh. It's page upon page of private correspondence, all from Lorenzo himself to Renato.

Help me get rid of my problem and half my territory is yours.

Consider it done.

My jaw drops open. Lorenzo isn't fighting against Renato. That's just a cover. They've been working together this entire time.

"Where did you get this?" I ask.

"Have you forgotten who I am? I may be retired, cuore mio, but I still have plenty of influence. A handful of people who are close to both Renato and Lorenzo are ultimately loyal to *me*."

"Are you sure these are legit?"

"Straight from their own servers," she confirms. "All of them timestamped and IP address-verified."

Anger churns in the pit of my stomach.

“Dom?” Arin calls sweetly from the kitchen. “Dinner’s ready.”

“We’ll be right there,” I reply, keeping my tone as level as possible.

What the fuck am I supposed to do now?

CHAPTER 24



DOMINIC

It's hard to enjoy my meal when I feel this sick and disgusted. Does Lorenzo really see me as such a threat that he'd be willing to work with another capo to get rid of me? His message history is proof enough.

I need him gone. Before he suspects anything.

Working on it.

We had eyes on him at Nobu. His woman got in the way.

How did you fuck this up?

Gun them both down. How hard is that?

His right hand tipped him off. Need him out of the picture.

Then do it.

Another hit? That's going to cost you.

Name your price.

Your gambling den on Main.

You greedy fucker. Fine. Just get it done.

The tips of my fingers are numb. My heart beats so loudly I can't hear the conversation at the table. I'm vaguely aware that the ladies are all chattering away, but I can't pick out the sounds, too lost in my own tunnel vision.

I might have stood a chance against Lorenzo alone, but *two* capos? I'm as good as dead. They have all the resources, the connections, the manpower and the firepower. I thought I

could strategize my way out of this, but these messages are as incriminating as it gets.

If Lorenzo wants a bloodbath, I'll give him a bloodbath.

Nothing like plotting a coup over dinner with the family.

"Tell me, Arin," mother says politely, "where did you grow up?"

"Here and there," Arin replies vaguely. "My parents passed away when I was very young, so I lived with my Grannie Ruth. She traveled a lot, so I went wherever she went. Seattle for a little while, Omaha for a few years, and then finally to New York."

"And where is she now?"

"Passed on, I'm afraid."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Oh, it's alright. She lived a good, long life. What about you?"

"Grew up in Sicily," my mother says proudly. "Born and raised. Dominic, too, before we moved to New York with his father. Tomasso was born in the States."

I shoot Arin a glance. I've told her next to nothing about my younger brother, yet she says, "I'm really sorry for your loss. I can't imagine what it must have felt like."

Mother's smile is tinted heavily with sadness. She reaches to her side to play with her granddaughter's hair. "Having a child taken from you... It's unthinkable."

The mood becomes sullen, a heavy silence lingering over us at the dining table. Between worrying about my conniving capo, mourning the death of my brother, and fearing for Arin and Felicia's safety, I'm officially checked out.

"I should probably get going," Mother announces, dabbing her mouth with the corner of her napkin. "Thank you very much for dinner. I'll have to have you three over for dinner at my home soon."

Arin smiles. “That sounds wonderful. We look forward to it.”

I see my mother to the door. Before she leaves, she dips in close. “I’m not going to give you a hard time for keeping those two a secret from me—”

“It wasn’t intentional.”

“—but I *will* give you shit about keeping them here with everything that’s going on.”

“I’ve already tried convincing her to leave.”

“Then try harder.” Mother pulls on her coat, still speaking in a hushed whisper. “You remember my winter home, don’t you?”

I nod. “We spent all of our Christmases there after Dad passed.”

“I can take them there,” she offers. “It’s off the grid, a good distance away from the city. Nobody knows about its location except you and me.”

I can’t argue with her reasoning. It’s becoming more and more apparent with every passing day that New York is about to become a battleground. The odds are stacked against me, and when shit finally hits the fan, I want Arin and Felicia as far away as possible.

“I promised she could stay with me.”

“This is one promise you’ll have to break. I know you’re a man of your word, but honor means nothing once you’ve lost it all.”

“I’ll talk to her again,” I insist.

My mother nods, pats me on the cheek. “Do it soon. Act before your enemies have a chance to react. That’s the only way to give yourself an advantage.” With her sage advice given, she leaves, giving poor Johnny a bitter huff before strutting away.

“I’m sorry, boss,” he apologizes. “I didn’t know who she was.”

I wave dismissively. “Don’t worry about it. She’s always been a force to be reckoned with.”

“Is there anything else I can do for you tonight, sir?”

“You’re good, Johnny.”

“Have a good night, sir.”

I close the door and return to the dining room, only to find that Arin and Felicia have vacated their seats. The table’s been cleared of dirty dishes, the sound of running water coming from the kitchen. Arin’s pulled up a chair for Felicia to stand on, our little one diligently drying the dishes her mother’s rinsed clean.

Arin notices me out of the corner of her eye. “Don’t just stand there. Come help us. You can re-dry everything Felicia dries.”

Taking orders doesn’t come naturally to me, but when it’s Arin, I can’t say that I mind. I roll up the sleeves of my shirt and take my place next to Felicia’s chair, picking up a clean kitchen cloth to polish whatever she’s failed to properly dry—which ends up being a lot. At least she’s trying her best.

“You’re being kind of quiet,” Arin mumbles as she washes her hands.

I shrug, too lost in my own head. “Lots to think about.”

“What did Isabella say to you?”

“It’s nothing to worry about, dolcezza.”

Arin presses her lips into a thin line, clearly dissatisfied with my answer. She dries off her hands and picks Felicia up, irritation lingering on her face when she says, “Okay, sweetie. Time for bed. Let’s get those teeth brushed.”

Before Arin has the chance to walk away, Felicia breaks out into a whining fit. “Don’t wanna!”

“Sweetie, you need to get some rest.”

“No!” Felicia pouts, beginning to sob. She reaches out to me with her little hands, leaning so far over that I have no choice but to pick her up or Arin might drop her.

“Principessa,” I say firmly, but gently. “Your mother’s right. It’s time for bed.”

“Wanna keep playing...”

“We can keep playing in the morning,” I tell her gently. “All the games you want.”

Felicia snuffles. “O-kay.”

Arin smiles warmly. “Would you like Dom to tuck you in?”

Our little one nods, wiping her eyes dry as clumsily as she did the plates. I know there’s a million and one things that I have to take care of—forces to gather, traitorous capos to put in their place—but all I want right now is the chance to be with my daughter. I’ve never tucked a child into bed before, never had to tell a toddler a bedtime story or give them a kiss on the forehead good night. It’s somehow far more daunting a task than declaring war with the Mob that I once would have given my life for.

And yet I do it, hopefully with flying colors. When Felicia is fast asleep, my chest swells with the warm feeling of accomplishment and adoration. I would never describe myself as a soft man. Far from it. I’m all things cold and hard and unmoving. But little Felicia is helping me see that might not always be the case. Somewhere deep within my core, I can sense a shift, some unknown part of me unlocking.

It suddenly occurs to me that I don’t care what happens to me as long as Felicia and Arin get to live long, healthy, and happy lives. Lorenzo is a fool to come after me now that I’ve found something I love and cherish far more than the Family.

My *own* family.

Arin takes my hand and guides me out into the hall, shutting the door to Felicia’s bedroom. She peers up at me, those frosty grey eyes studying me so intently it’s like my own personal spotlight. She cups my face in her hands, so tender and sweet I feel like I don’t deserve the attention.

“What’s going on?” she whispers. “Tell me what’s bothering you. Don’t you dare say it’s nothing, either.”

I take her hands in my own and kiss the backs of her fingers. “Things are... getting complicated. I might be going to war sooner than I thought.”

“What can I do to help?”

“We’ve been over this, Arin. There’s nothing you can do.”

She licks her lips, her brows furrowed into something almost resembling determination. “I want to show you something,” she says, leading me toward her room.

Arin leads me to her studio, which I can only describe as being an organized mess. Scraps of fabric lie on every available surface, beautiful sketches are pinned to the walls, and several outfits close to completion hang from their mannequins. She brings me over to inspect the four suits I ordered from her all those weeks ago, each one of them a wondrous display of her talent.

“What do you think?” she asks.

“They’re perfect, Arin. Thank you.”

“Feel the inside lining.”

I do as she asks and reach out, running my fingers along the inside of the suit jacket. It’s stiffer than I expected it to be, the texture hard against my fingertips. “What is it?” I ask, curious.

“Kevlar.”

I glance at her, surprised. “Are you serious?”

“Did you know you can buy Kevlar by the yard? It’s definitely on the pricier side, but since I have to put my launch on hold, I figure I could use the money you gave me to invest in better material.”

To say I’m stunned is an understatement. Arin casually walks forward, inspecting her work. “Now, it’s not thick enough to protect you from a bullet. You’d need an actual vest for that, which I can definitely make, but that’ll take time. And it probably won’t withstand a direct stab wound, though it’ll keep the knife from going too deep, as well as deflect any swipes coming your way.”

“You made this... for me?”

She nods. “I can’t stop thinking about it. You were hurt because you were trying to protect me.”

“I’d do it again, if I had to.”

“That’s what I’m worried about,” she mumbles, her eyes suddenly glossy with the threat of tears. “I know who you are, and I know what you have to do, but that doesn’t stop me from worrying.”

I circle my arms around her and pull her into a tight hug, pressing light kisses to the top of her head. She doesn’t have to tell me she cares about me. Her actions speak louder than words.

“Thank you, Arin. They’re perfect.”

“Promise me you’ll wear them, okay? This is the only thing I can do for you.”

“That’s not true. You do so much for me, Arin. Having you here, raising our daughter... You’re my motivation to come out of this alive.”

“You better give them hell.”

“I promise you, I will.”

She tilts her head up and brushes her lips against mine, the look she gives me full of hope and anguish. I deepen the kiss, sliding my tongue over hers to savor her taste. Arin clings to me like a lifeline, moaning softly as hunger claims us at the same time. When she pulls away, there’s a dark glint in her eyes.

“Let’s play hide and seek,” she murmurs against my lips. “Will you count to sixty for me?”

I smirk. “What are you plotting?”

“You’ll see. Start counting.”

CHAPTER 25



ARIN

He knows exactly where to find me, lying against the soft sheets of his bed in nothing except the see-through ruby red lace set I made special just for him. We're both ravenous by the time he shrugs off his clothes, unable to keep our hands off one another.

"Come here, amore," he says, voice husky and low.

He pulls me toward him as his only object of desire. Dominic makes an appreciative sound, part growl and part hum as he allows his eyes to sweep over my body. Possessive and territorial, yet that's the least intimidating thing about him. What I find overwhelming is the softness in his gaze, like I'm something precious and irreplaceable.

What we have is more intense than love—closer to worship. There's no need to say anything because everything we have to say is in the way we look at each other. Two halves of an unlikely whole, sometimes it feels like we were always destined to be.

He kisses me like it's the first time and the last, like a starved man placed in front of an endless buffet. Dominic's large hands roam my body, peeling away lace like he's unwrapping a gift on Christmas morning, the contents too fragile and sacred to mishandle.

He presses a flutter of light kisses against the crook of my neck while I rake my fingers through his thick hair. We fit together so perfectly, molding to each other's shapes with ease. Dominic's touch ignites my skin, soft fire trailing

wherever his fingers dance across my body. I hold him close, the throbbing heat between my legs impossible to ignore any longer.

“Please,” I rasp. “Dominic, I need you.”

He reaches down to the apex of my thighs, stroking his fingers over my folds. “I can tell, cuore mio. Come here and sit on my face.”

My cheeks flush with warmth. “W-what?”

“Did I stutter? Come, sit on my face.”

He settles on his back with his head against a pillow as I crawl into position, carefully parting my thighs so my knees are on either side of his head. I hold on to the headboard for stability, the butterflies in my stomach fluttering like crazy.

“Are you sure this is okay?” I ask. “I’m not too heavy, am I?”

He doesn’t bother responding with words. Instead, Dominic enthusiastically grabs me by the thighs and pulls me down to his mouth, moaning as he works me over with his wicked tongue. He teases me senseless, my knees shaking as bursts of pleasure sweep through my veins. All I can do is throw my head back and moan, the climax hitting me so hard and fast I almost lose my balance.

Dominic redoubles his efforts, sucking on my sensitive clit in the hopes of having me unravel all over again. It’s almost too much; every single one of my nerve endings is on fire. But I trust him. I trust him more than anyone else in the world. Dominic can have whatever he wants. My body, my pleasure, *everything*.

He brings me right back to the edge where ecstasy meets insanity. My breathing is rapid and shallow, my heart hammers in my ear, and I grip the headboard for dear life as I plead, “Dominic, please, slow down! You have to slow down or I’m going to—”

He doesn’t listen to me, but I’m glad he doesn’t. A brilliant warmth erupts deep within my core, sparks of pleasure arcing through my veins. There isn’t a single inch of my body that

doesn't crave more, overwhelming pleasure whitening out my mind.

Dominic lifts me off his face with ease, licking his lips with a devious grin. "Sounds like you enjoyed yourself. Do you need a little break?"

I nod slowly, struggling to catch my breath.

He chuckles. "Too fucking bad."

He moves like a viper, strong arms wrapping around me. I feel like a doll in his care, physically light and willing to submit to his every whim. Before I know it, he's on top of me, kissing me like it's the only thing either of us knows how to do.

Dominic presses into me, his throbbing cock stretching my walls as he buries himself deeper and deeper. It's almost enough to knock the air from my lungs, the tiny sound that escapes me immediately swallowed by his hungry lips. It isn't long before he starts rocking his hips, snapping into me at a cadence that's both fast and strong. When the head of his cock sweeps over my sweet spot, I nearly lose my mind.

"Dom," I whimper. "Right there! Please, right *there*."

"Screaming for me already, dolcezza? You really know how to drive me crazy."

"You're so big," I moan. "It's too much."

"No, my soldata. It's just right. We're perfect for one another, don't you see? Look how well you take my cock. This pussy was made for me."

"Yes," I rasp. "Yes, just for you."

"God, you feel so good. Do you have any idea what you do to me? I really want to—"

I gasp against his shoulder. "What?"

He kisses the corner of my mouth. "It's nothing."

Hooking my legs over his hips, I grasp a handful of his hair and look him directly in the eye. "Tell me, Dominic. What do you want? Let me give it to you."

Dominic licks his lips. “I want to finish inside you.”

His admission awakens something in me. I’m suddenly wet and aching all over again, my walls quivering around his shaft. The implications here are serious, but it’s also everything I want.

“Do it,” I murmur against his lips, circling his neck with my arms. “Come inside me, Dominic.”

“You mean that?”

I kiss him tenderly. “Put another baby in me.”

He lets out a feral growl as his hips piston in and out of me with renewed vigor. “I’ll give you as many babies as you want, cuore mio. Just tell me how many.”

Pleasure builds within my core, so powerful and overwhelming I can barely string a proper sentence together. “As many as you want. Please, Dominic, I need you to fill me up.”

“You won’t be alone this time,” he vows. “I’ll be there for you, Arin.”

“I know you will.”

“Fuck, you feel so good. I want to see you dripping with my cum.”

“Dominic, I’m—Oh, *God*, I’m so close.”

“At the same time, amore. Don’t hold back. That’s it, fucking take it.”

We shatter together, the air heavy with the smell of sex and sweat. We hold onto each other for a long time, breathing each other in as our hearts find a steady beat. Dominic kisses me so sweetly I can’t help but stare at him and wonder how lucky I was to find him again.

“In the morning, I’ll have Johnny teach you some basic self-defense moves,” he murmurs against my forehead. “I’ll make good on my promise to keep you here with me, but we need to play it safe.”

I nod, my eyes drooping with exhaustion. “I’m looking forward to it.”

He draws absentminded circles against my back with the tip of his finger. “How did you know about my brother?” he asks after a long while.

“Elio told me. I’m sorry. I probably should have waited to hear it from you.”

Dominic shakes his head. “It’s fine. You would have found out about Tomasso sooner or later.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m really sorry. I can’t imagine what you went through.”

“His death will be avenged soon enough.”

I peek at him through my lashes. “You sound like you have a plan.”

“Yes. One you’re going to be a part of.”

Curiosity gets the better of me. “Are you serious?”

“Those Kevlar suits of yours... How many do you think you can make in a day?”

I crunch the numbers in my head. “Well, since I already have your measurements, I can probably get through one a day.”

Dominic shakes his head. “Not for me, for my men.”

I hold my breath. “What are you planning?”

“We’ve been hiding long enough. It’s time to take the fight to their doorstep.”

“That sounds dangerous.”

“It will be. That’s why I need to go in prepared.”

“Is there really no other way?” I ask, my heart drumming loudly in my chest.

“I’m afraid not. The only way this stops is if I die—” My blood freezes when he says this, the thought too terrible to bear. “—or if I kill Lorenzo and Renato first.”

Chewing on the inside of my cheek, the *what ifs* take over my brain.

What if Dominic isn't successful? What if he ends up dead?

What if he *succeeds*?

It's pretty clear these attacks won't stop. I won't pretend to know Lorenzo's motivations, but if he's after Dominic, the man leaves me no choice but to hate him. When—not if—Dominic makes it out of this alive, will he still have to dedicate himself to the Mafia? It feels foolish to dream of a future far away from all this nonsense, but I can't stop seeing it.

A house in the suburbs complete with a white picket fence, a big yard full of green grass where our children can run around, a cul-de-sac where Dominic can teach the kids how to ride their bikes... It feels more like a fairytale than reality.

I guess we're just going to have to focus on solving one problem at a time.

"I can do it," I say. "Just tell me how many I need to make."

"I'll compile a list for you. I'm planning to gather my most loyal men. There aren't going to be too many. Five at most. I need to keep the circle as small as possible to avoid the risk of moles."

"And then what?"

Dominic presses his lips into a thin line. "I'm going to hit Lorenzo where it hurts. Nobody knows Lorenzo's racket like I do. All I have to do is burn it to the ground."

CHAPTER 26



ARIN

The apartment becomes a fortress of sorts. A command center. Men I've never met come and go, arriving for their fittings before promptly leaving without a word. I'm not particularly worried, though. If Dominic trusts them enough to be a part of his inner circle, then I trust them, too. Things are moving far too quickly and urgently around here to spare any time for doubt.

I work around the clock, creating suits with Kevlar linings from scratch. It feels good to use my hands again, the rhythmic sound of my sewing machine a comforting metronome helping me keep up with the pace. The more suits I make, the faster I get. Before I know it, I'm churning out special orders like I'm a factory instead of a one-woman show.

"Mommy?" Felicia calls out from the play area I've set up in the corner, the same way I did in my small dress shop.

"Yes, sweetie?"

"Wanna snack?"

I glance at the time. It's been a while since we had lunch, and knowing my daughter, she'll throw a tantrum if she doesn't have something to tide her over for dinner.

"Let me guess," I say with a smile. "Do you want pudding?"

Her face lights up as she bounces up and down with joy. "Yay!"

I laugh, standing and stretching before holding my hand out to her. “Okay, sweetie. But you have to be quiet, okay? Dom’s in a meeting.”

When I briefly leave my studio with Felicia in tow, I find Dominic in the middle of yet another meeting with five other men. I recognize Johnny because he’s been on guard duty the past couple of weeks, but the rest of them I’m unable to put a name to. It’s only upon further consideration that I realize the guy standing opposite Dominic looks strangely familiar, though I can’t quite figure out why. What is it about his gapped front teeth that unsettles me?

“We need to hit him all at once,” Dominic says. “That way we’ll leave him no time to recover.”

“Are you sure you want to do it in the middle of the night, though?” the familiar man asks. His voice... Where have I heard it before?

“I want to minimize the risk of civilian casualties. This is between Lorenzo and me. No sense in involving innocents. That’s how Lorenzo likes to do things, but I’m different.”

“Plus,” Johnny notes, “it’s less likely we’ll have a run-in with his loyalists. Not that he has very many to begin with.”

“We’ve only got one shot at this,” Dominic says. “The second we follow through with the plan, Lorenzo and Renato will be on high alert. We move at midnight.”

The familiar man exhales, scratching behind his ear. “This is crazy, Dom.”

“It’s *necessary*,” he corrects.

“Are you sure this is how you—” Gap Tooth stops, noticing me and Felicia. There’s a glimmer of mutual recognition in his gaze. “Wait a second... Do I know you?”

That’s when it hits me.

Five years ago, there was another man on the plane. He had assumed I was a prostitute Dominic had hired for the trip. He freaked me out so much that I left in a hurry, unwilling to subject myself to his atrocious behavior.

My stomach churns. I don't like the look on his face. Everything about him screams treachery and deceit. So what the hell is he doing here? Is this asshole seriously a part of Dominic's inner circle?

Dominic notices my discomfort. "Arin?"

I shake my head. "Please, continue. I just wanted to grab Felicia a snack."

"Don't let us stop you," Gap Tooth says with a grin. "We're in *your* home, after all."

His tone gives me the creeps, goosebumps crawling down my arms and the back of my neck. I don't like this. I don't like this one bit, but I'm not sure if I can say anything. My gut is telling me this guy's trouble, but surely Dominic has his reasons for bringing him here.

I move quickly, grabbing Felicia a pudding pack from the pantry before quickly retreating to our side of the apartment. I lead my daughter to her room, swallowing my fear. Am I overreacting? Why am I on the verge of a full-blown panic attack?

"Arin?" I yelp at the sound of Dominic's voice. He enters Felicia's room, concern written all over his face. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," I lie, forcing myself to smile. "Totally fine. Everything's good."

He steps forward and places his hands on my shoulders. "That's not going to fly with me and you know it, dolcezza. What did Milo do to you?"

Milo. That's right. Milo... I remember now. After all these years, the sound of it still makes my skin crawl.

"He..." I glance at Felicia. She's too distracted by her chocolate pudding to pay us any mind. "He was the reason I left before. On the plane."

Dominic's jaw ticks. "What did he do? If he laid a hand on you, I'll—"

I shake my head quickly. “He didn’t touch me, Dom. He just... said some really creepy stuff. It freaked me out, so I left.”

His face hardens. “What did he say?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Are you lying to me again?”

“Look, it’s not a big deal.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek, knowing if I tell Dominic what Milo said to me, there might be bloodshed in the living room. “What’s he doing here?”

“Milo’s the one who tipped me off about Lorenzo.”

I swallow at the sticky lump lodged in the back of my throat. I can’t shake this feeling that having Milo here is a massive mistake. I could be overthinking. My first impression of him definitely left a sour taste on my tongue. This is bigger than that, though. Call it a mother’s instinct, but that man is *bad* news.

“I don’t like him,” I whisper. “I don’t *trust* him.”

“To be honest, neither do I.”

I blink up at him, confused and alarmed. “Then what is he doing here?”

“Milo and I are the farthest thing from friends, but right now, we’re on the same side. I need as many allies as I can get, even temporary ones.” Dominic cups my face and presses a kiss to the tip of my nose. “He’s not to be trusted, but I promise you, you can trust him enough to have him in our home.”

Our home.

God, that has such a lovely ring to it.

I take a deep breath, though it comes out shaky and thin. “Alright. If you say so.”

“Our meeting is almost over. I’ll let you know when they’ve all gone.”

“I couldn’t help but overhear. You’re making your move tonight?”

He nods. “I don’t want you to worry.”

“You do realize that only makes me worry more, right?”

Dominic smirks, kissing me softly on the lips. “I’ve got everything under control. After tonight, Lorenzo and Renato will be too busy fighting each other to bother dealing with me. That’s when I swoop in for the kill.”

CHAPTER 27



DOMINIC

There are six of us, so we divide into two teams of three.

Nico, Tony, and Peter head to SoHo while Johnny, Milo, and I make our way deep into the Downtown Eastside—Lorenzo’s territory, but not for much longer.

It’s true what they say. New York City never sleeps. Even though it’s a few minutes past midnight, the streets are still bustling with activity. There are late-night club goers, nurses working the nightshift, people up to no good. I suppose I fall into that last category. Plenty of lights are still on, and the sound of traffic never goes away. However, it’s less crowded now than during the day. We have to do this now or never.

We walk straight up to Lorenzo’s loan office. Johnny keeps an eye out while Milo douses the side of the building with gasoline. I stand just off to the side, ready to strike a match.

“I gotta hand it to you,” Milo says, laughing as he works. “I never thought you’d go through with this. Figured you’d just up and leave New York, not set your place of work on fire.”

“This is his most profitable business,” I explain casually. “The only way to hurt a man like him is to go after their wallet. The moment he stops producing is the moment he has to answer to the Family.”

“Damn, you really are a cutthroat. I thought you were just Lorenzo’s lapdog through and through.”

“Shut up and hurry,” I snap. “We’ve got to hit all seven of Lorenzo’s businesses.”

Milo steps back, admiring his handwork. “That oughta do it.”

“Stand back.”

I strike the match, listening to the hiss and burn as the flame flickers to life. I toss the matchstick down, the fire catching in an instant. It crawls up the exterior wall, burning with ferocious and mesmerizing might. I’m tempted to watch this place go up in smoke, but there’s still too much for us to destroy.

Within minutes, all of Lorenzo’s precious records will be nothing but ash. Anyone who’s ever owed him a penny will be free and clear now that their contracts are about to be destroyed. With nothing to hold over his customer’s heads, Lorenzo will have no leverage against them. This is a massive financial loss.

And I’ve still got plans for more destruction.

My intricate knowledge of Lorenzo’s territory means I know exactly which of his businesses to torch. We work efficiently and with impunity, moving on before we’re spotted either by a random pedestrian or patrol officer.

His gambling dens, the businesses he’s been extorting for decades, the laundromat and nail parlors he’s been using as a front for money laundering... All gone within a matter of hours. By the time we’re finished, the smell of gasoline and burning wood has seared itself inside my nostrils, the heavy feel of dirt and grime weighing on my skin. Sirens blare in the distance, a cacophony of sound.

And *fuck* does this feel good.

Who knew destruction could be so cathartic?

Every time I set a building ablaze, I think about my brother. I think about Elio. I think about all the time and dedication I gave Lorenzo only to be tossed aside because I was too competent. In hindsight, it’s incredibly telling of Lorenzo’s lack of confidence. He’d rather have me killed than improve his own capabilities.

Let's see who he comes crying to once he realizes his empire has crumbled overnight.

"It's done," Johnny informs me when he gets off the phone with the other team. "The fire department's working overtime, but it's done. Neither Renato nor Lorenzo has anything left."

Milo clicks his tongue. "The higher-ups are going to be *pissed*."

I toss the remnants of my matchbook onto the ground. It bears the symbol of The Lilac Fountain Bar in SoHo, a dead giveaway for Lorenzo to stew over.

The chess pieces are finally moving where I want them to, and I'm about to capture the king.



The call goes out at five in the morning. A summons. In-person, too, which means shit's as serious as it gets.

Hundreds of us are gathered together in a spacious conference room. Our capos sit at the front, the sottocapo at the helm.

Lorenzo and Renato are not in attendance.

Our sottocapo goes by no other name than Gabriele. He takes a long drag from his cigar, fat gold rings adorning his sausage-like fingers. His hair is thinning and grey, the few remaining strands caked in grease. He's in his late sixties, though nobody knows for sure his real age. The man is a mystery, preferring to rule from the shadows. Public appearances are rare, which is a sign in and of itself that things are about to get ugly.

"Such a sad day," he drawls, voice surprisingly high for a man of his rotund stature. "I'm sure you've all heard by now about the pitiful conflict amid our ranks."

Nobody responds. Nobody dares.

"I suppose every family has their problem child," he goes on. "I didn't expect that we'd have *two*."

Gabriele snaps his fingers. Two hooded figures are dragged out by the scruff of their collars. Even with his face obscured, I know one of them is Lorenzo. Blood stains his shirt, he has scrapes on his arms and sweat dripping from his neck.

I almost feel bad for the man until I remember the bastard's been trying to kill me for no other reason than jealousy and out of fear of being replaced. My sympathy went out the window the moment I read his message logs. This plot of his has been in the making for months, but it ends here.

The men are forced to their knees in front of our entire faction, their hoods abruptly removed. Lorenzo's sporting a nasty black eye and broken nose. If I squint, I'm fairly sure I can see two of his front teeth have been knocked out.

"We are a family," Gabriele stresses. "We look out for one another. Nothing is more important than our sacred bond. The men you see here before you have forgotten that and have chosen to wage war on each other for their own personal gain."

"Signore, *please*," Lorenzo begs. He sounds pathetic. "This isn't what it looks like."

"Do you think I'm a fool?" our sottocapo snaps. "We found evidence at the scenes of the crime. Your business card was found at The Lilac Fountain, and the Lilac Fountains' matchbooks were found outside your loan office."

"Signore, why would I torch Renato's business and leave evidence behind to implicate myself? That makes no sense!"

"Because you have an ego, Lorenzo. Both of you do. You wanted the other to know who was responsible, but you failed to realize that I've had enough of your antics. You forced me to get involved."

"That's not—"

"It's no secret the two of you have had it out for each other for years. I've been letting your petty squabbles slide, but now you've gone too far. Your reckless behavior has not only brought an immense amount of police attention but has cost

the Family millions. This cannot go unpunished. Now, tell me which of your lackeys helped you pull this stunt off.”

Lorenzo squirms. “Nobody helped me because I didn’t do anything.”

“No? Not even your right-hand man?” Gabriele looks directly at me, a challenge in his eyes.

“I wasn’t aware of his plans, signore,” I speak calmly. “I was at home all night with my family.”

“I can vouch for him,” Johnny says, taking a step forward. “A bunch of us were over at his place for poker night. He let me crash on his couch.”

“Us, as well,” Nico, Tony, and Peter vouch.

“Me, too,” Milo adds. His alibi is the one that seals the deal. It’s no secret that the two of us don’t get along. If a weaselly bastard like Milo is putting himself in my corner, it must mean I’m telling the truth.

After a moment of contemplation, Gabriele nods. Satisfied.

All according to plan.

“Your men have a lot of faith in you,” Gabriele says calmly. “And I’ve heard many good things. Rumor has it you’re the one behind the scenes running Lorenzo’s territory.”

“It’s true, signore,” Milo says. “Lorenzo spends all his time in Atlantic City. Dominic keeps everything running smoothly. Until everything got torched, that is.”

Lorenzo spits, his eyes red and bulging with fury. “You son of a bitch! Why are you vouching for him?”

“I’m calling it like it is,” Milo says with a casual shrug. “Dominic always puts the Family’s interests first. You only care about yourself.”

“I’m going to fucking kill you!”

“Enough!” Gabriele seethes. He snaps two of his chubby fingers. “Dispose of this filth.”

The sottocapo's men drag Lorenzo and Renato away. They kick and they scream around the gags quickly stuffed into their mouths, their howling growing quieter and quieter as they're taken away. An anxious murmur sweeps through the room. We all know what's going to happen to them.

"What's going to happen to their territory?" someone at the back of the room asks.

"I'm more than happy to take over," one of the other capos up front says proudly.

"Of course you would be," snaps another, giving the first a derisive snort.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's all a little convenient, isn't it? Your two biggest competitors are taken out of the game, and suddenly you're ready to take over their territory? It's kind of suspicious, no?"

"What are you implying?"

"You could have set this whole thing up!"

An argument erupts, loud voices shouting over the next. Gabriele calls for order, but the conversations are too heated and chaotic. This is going according to plan, too. They're all so busy pointing the finger at one another that they don't even suspect my men and me. I've finally got my payback *and* I'm free and clear.

This is shaping up nicely.

Milo nudges my arm with his elbow. "Now's the time."

I nod. I know exactly what he means. Stepping forward, I clear my throat and say, "Allow me to be a temporary replacement. Until the Family decides who will take over the territories, let me run the businesses. I'll have things up and running to prepare for a smooth transition of power."

One of the capos sneers. "A little opportunistic, don't you think? Your boss isn't even cold in the ground yet, and you're already moving in to take over the reins."

“I have no interest in replacing him,” I state clearly. “At the end of the day, the Family’s interests are all I care about. A power vacuum will cause more harm than good. What if the Irish or the Russians realize there’s land for the taking? I know the territory well and I know how it functions. Place me as temporary head of Renato and Lorenzo’s rackets until a new capo is selected, at which point I will happily step aside.”

I’m lying, of course, but I do a good job of pretending to be earnest. No one is better suited for this position than me, but I can’t look too eager. That would only raise their suspicions. Once the higher-ups see what a tight ship I run, they’ll be begging me to keep the position forever.

I’m going to be a capo. I’ll finally have the say, the power, the money to do whatever I see fit. I’ll be able to protect Arin and Felicia, give them everything their hearts could ever desire and more.

And nobody is going to get in my way.

Gabriele arches a thick brow, appearing to mull things over. “Very well,” he says finally. “Until we can come to an agreement as to what to do with these territories, Dominic Costello will be in charge for the interim. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, signore,” the room says in unison.

I breathe a sigh of relief. That could have gone wrong in a million different ways, yet here I am. I’m thankful for my squeaky-clean reputation; otherwise, this plan wouldn’t have worked. They think me an honorable man, devoted entirely to our cause. None of them would ever suspect I’d have an ulterior motive. That’s their undoing.

I have to admit—*Capo Costello* has a nice ring to it.

CHAPTER 28



ARIN

From the moment he steps out the door, I don't sleep a wink. It's been seven hours and I haven't heard a word from him. No calls, no texts. At this point, I'd even accept a freaking carrier pigeon. I pace back and forth in the living room, nibbling on my nails and pulling on my hair until the ends start to fray.

Is Dominic okay? Is he safe? What's taking so long?

My heart stutters, my breath catching in my throat. My nerves can't take it anymore. The stakes are too high. Every time I hear a distant siren, he's the first thing I think about. What if something went wrong? Or, God forbid, what if he's dead in an alley somewhere?

The sound of the front door swinging open nearly gives me a heart attack.

Dominic steps in. There isn't a scratch on him.

And he's *smiling*.

I don't think I've ever seen anything more beautiful. It's every ounce charming and handsome and brilliant, filling the entire room with the warmth of a thousand suns. My heart skips a beat, joy and relief washing over me in one fell swoop. My body reacts before my brain does, my feet carrying me over to him quickly. When I leap into his arms, he catches me with a sweet, adoring laugh.

"We did it," he whispers against my ear. "Everything's going to be okay."

I greet him with a flurry of kisses, circling his neck with my arms and wrapping my legs around his hips. He picks me up with ease, holding me as close as possible. The air around us shifts, electricity crackling against our skin. A sudden, overwhelming hunger claims us both, spurred on by the adrenaline pumping through my veins. I have to have him, here and now. I'm sure Dominic is tired, but he feels it too, this undeniable pull between us.

We don't get very far, practically stumbling over each other as we make our way to the couch. There's no time to get to the bedroom. Our movements are frantic, desperate. He takes off my shirt while I pry off his suit jacket. I make a fine mess of his hair when I rake my fingers through it. I nibble on his bottom lip, sucking hard enough that his mouth comes away with a soft pop.

I'm not wearing any of my fancy lingerie, but the look in Dominic's eyes tells me he doesn't mind one bit. He slips off my bra and panties, mouthing at my bare skin like it's the only thing that will bring him solace. I let my hands roam over his body, stripping him out of his shirt and pants, my fingers tracing over the hard edges of his defined muscles. I make my way down to tease the length of his growing erection, my pussy already wet and throbbing to feel him inside me.

Dominic turns me so my back is flush against his front. He grasps my chin and turns my head to the side, devouring my mouth because he knows it belongs to him and him alone.

One of his big hands slides around front to tease my breasts, pinching my hard nipples as he breathes in the scent of my hair. "Mine," he growls, so low and deep his voice vibrates straight through my bones. His fingers make their way down even further, rolling over my clit and sliding between my wet folds. "Mine," he mutters again. He bends me over the back of the couch, kicking my legs apart with his feet. "All mine."

He plunges his cock deep inside me, my walls stretching to accommodate his size. He knows my body well at this point, aiming the head of his cock at my sweet spot with every thrust. Dominic has his hands in my hair, his chest pressed against my back. I am coming undone in a matter of minutes, the orgasm

so intense it takes all of my concentration not to scream my pleasure. He drives me to the edge over and over again, each time unleashing stars across my vision.

Dominic finishes with a grunt, spilling his seed inside me. It isn't long before I can feel the wetness seeping down my legs, my whole body sore like I've just run a marathon. He kisses me sweetly on the cheek, almost like an apology for letting loose.

"Let me take care of you, dolcezza," he says, scooping me up like I weigh nothing at all.

He carries me bridal style to his bedroom, placing me on the sheets with the utmost care. The moment my head hits the pillow, my eyes start to droop. Exhaustion blankets me, tugging at the back of my brain to try and pull me under. I'm vaguely aware of Dominic moving about. He disappears for a moment, retreating to his ensuite bathroom only to return a few minutes later with a warm cloth. He lovingly cleans me, tucks me in, and even kisses me tenderly on the lips.

"Felicia will be up soon," I mumble. It's a half-hearted protest, but I'm just too tired to get up.

"I'll take care of her today," he says softly. "You stay in bed and rest."

I'm fast asleep by the time he finishes his sentence.



I awake around one in the afternoon to the sound of several men talking. Dominic's voice is distinct, but the other's... They're all new and foreign to me. I quietly slip out of Dominic's bed and pull on one of his shirts. It's so big on me that it comes down to my knees, and I have to roll up the sleeves to have use of my hands. As quiet as a mouse, I sneak out into the hall.

"Any resistance from Renato's men?" Dominic asks.

"No, signore. So far, they're taking news of the transition very well. They're awaiting your orders."

“Our main priority is rebuilding. We’ve got several contractors on our payroll. See to it that they’re paid promptly. I want everything repaired and up and running by the end of the week.”

“The end of the week?” I recognize this voice. Milo. “Someone’s being a little ambitious, don’t you think?”

“Mind your tone,” I hear Johnny snap. “You’re talking to a capo now.”

My heart freezes. A capo? Dominic got a promotion? Was this his plan from the start?

“See that it’s done,” Dominic says firmly. “And I want you all to keep an eye out for Elio. I don’t buy for a second that Renato’s men managed to get their hands on him. There should have been some trace of him left. I want you to track down every rumor, every possible eyewitness account. I need to know what happened to him.”

“Yes, signore.”

“You’re all dismissed.”

The sound of shuffling feet against the polished tile floors tells me it’s safe to come out from hiding. I round the corner, my eyes falling on Dominic and Felicia, who’s fast asleep against his shoulder.

As cute as they are together, a flicker of worry rolls in the pit of my stomach. “I don’t want you having those meetings in front of her.”

Dominic smiles, walking over to kiss me on the forehead. “She’s fast asleep, dolcezza. It’s not a big deal.”

The feeling of worry melts into irritation. “Not a big deal? You have no idea what she could be absorbing. I’d really appreciate it if you’d host your meetings elsewhere, or at least where she isn’t right in the middle of things.”

“She may as well get used to it, Arin. This is her world now.”

I frown, taking my daughter from him. Felicia nuzzles against the crook of my neck, snoozing without a care. “I

never agreed to that.”

Dominic doesn't look irritated, necessarily, but it's close. “The simple fact that I am her father means she will be treated with all the respect due to a child born into this life. The same goes for you as my—”

“As your what?” I challenge. “Your girlfriend? Your mistress?”

“As my woman.”

My chest stings. That isn't good enough, but... do I really want more? Would a sane person even want this? I'm not saying I want to get married, but the thought has occurred to me before. Where are things going between us? Yes, Dominic is the father of my child, and there's no denying our connection...

But he's a criminal. I've seen firsthand how danger follows him at every turn. Can I really continue to be with him knowing that I willingly put Felicia in such a precarious situation? What if someone targets us? What happens if, one day, Dominic doesn't return home because one of his enemies got to him?

“So, what?” I ask. “You're a capo now?”

“As of seven this morning, yes.”

“And what does that mean for us?”

“Nothing changes, Arin. I will continue to provide for you and our little one. I vow to keep you safe, happy, and healthy, just as I've done up until now.”

“Nothing changes,” I echo, as if repeating it will somehow make me feel better.

Sometimes I can't believe it. I'm in bed with a mobster, a soldier turned *capo*. I reflect on why that scares me so much. He's still the same man, but everything feels different. The more I think about it, the more I feel helpless. Dominic is climbing the ranks, and in any other career track, I'd be over the moon for him. Except a promotion for him means more

than just an increase in responsibility. It also means a bigger target on his back.

It's the fear of losing him, I realize, that makes me so uneasy.

Because I care about him. I *love* him. And if anything were to happen to him, I don't know what I'd do. I've given my heart to a mobster, and if that isn't the most foolish thing a person can do, then I don't know what is.

Dominic caresses my cheek, his expression softening. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course I do."

"Then believe me when I say I have everything under control."

I nod slowly, even if it's a struggle. "Okay."

He presses a kiss to my hair and smiles gently. "Tell you what. I'll do everything I can to keep our worlds as separate as possible. I won't hold meetings in our home anymore, and I'll keep you and Felicia as far away from my work affairs as I can. When we're here together, it's just the three of us. She doesn't ever have to know. She can grow up like every other normal child, and you can have an equally normal life."

"Do you really think that's possible?"

"I'd do anything to try to make it happen."

It sounds too good to be true, but I so desperately want to believe it's possible. It's like living a double life, going about my day willingly ignorant to the reality of who Dominic is and what he does. But I can't stand the thought of leaving him, either. I don't know if there's a way out of this where I don't come out unscathed. For now, the only way to protect my heart is to take him at his word and pray harm never befalls him.

Dominic kisses my cheek. "Get dressed. I have a surprise for you."

"What is it?"

“I can’t tell you. That’d ruin the surprise. It’s nothing nefarious, I swear.” He takes Felicia back, holding her against his chest. It makes me unbelievably happy to see him getting more and more comfortable with carrying her. “Go ahead and get changed,” he says. “I promise you won’t regret it.”

CHAPTER 29



ARIN

I'm confused when he has Johnny drive us to SoHo. "I thought you said this place was off limits."

Dominic is on his phone, texting someone. He hasn't put that damn thing down since this morning. I wonder if it has to do with his sudden promotion. Felicia sits between us in her car seat, distractedly flipping through an illustrated children's book about a cow and its barnyard friends.

"Have a little patience," he says, not looking up from his screen. "It'll be worth the wait."

When I feel the car roll to a stop, I glance out the window to a big shop front. We're in a particularly nice part of the neighborhood, full of all sorts of upscale shops. Johnny is the first to get out, dressed in one of the special Kevlar-lined suits that I designed, and circles the front of the car to open the door for me. Behind us, I notice a black SUV. Several well-dressed men get out of their vehicle as well, also wearing the suits I painstakingly stitched together by hand.

"They're with us," Johnny says with an understanding smile. "Your own personal protection detail."

I lift Felicia out of the car, holding her close to me. She's totally unfazed by their presence. I, on the other hand, can't ignore the weird sinking feeling stewing in my gut. Something in the air has shifted, but I can't quite put my finger on what.

"This is it," Dominic says, gesturing to the shop front.

The big windows are covered on the inside with opaque brown paper, but even without peeking inside, I know this

place must cost a fortune to rent commercially. The exterior is painted a lovely deep evergreen, and there's plenty of space above the French double doors to install a big, beautiful sign.

My mouth drops open when Dominic reaches into his pocket, steps up to the doors, and unlocks them. We step inside together. A few of Dominic's colleagues come in with us, but a few stay outside to keep guard.

The place smells of fresh paint and sawdust. It's well-lit and will probably be even more so once the windows are cleared of paper. The floors are a polished white tile and the walls an elegant cream.

"It's yours," Dominic tells me with a grin.

It takes a second for my brain to compute what he's saying. "Excuse me?"

"I know it's not quite Fifth Avenue, but I think it's a significant improvement over your previous location."

All I can do is marvel. "This is... for me? But how?"

"Let's just say the building's come under new management." He sounds wholly smug, and I'm not a fan.

"So you're bribing me?" I ask him tersely.

He looks shocked for a moment before responding. "No, Arin. I think you are immensely talented and I want to help you realize your dream. Will you let me do that?"

My initial unease quickly melts and gives way to my uncontrollable excitement. I can hardly believe it. This place is Chanel, Gucci, and Dior levels of chic. I can already imagine where I'm going to install shelves to display select dresses—at full retail price—as well as where I want to arrange a seating area for shoppers to relax as I pamper them with a bespoke fitting.

The dressing rooms will be somewhere in the back, and they won't be made out of those ugly metal stalls like the contractors got confused about where to put the bathroom, either. Everything is going to be well-lit and beautifully

displayed, and maybe I'll be able to hire a couple of employees to help me ring customers up and—

“I love it,” I breathe, my heart promising to skip right out of my chest. “I love it. Thank you so much.”

The smile he gives me sends a delightful shiver down my spine.

“So, tell me,” he says warmly. “What name do I give them for the sign?”

I've thought about this moment for years, spending endless nights trying to come up with the perfect name for my fashion label. All the greats resorted simply to using their last names, synonymous with their style, their success, their brand. But *Wilson* doesn't have as much kick as I'd like. It doesn't feel as glamorous or as sophisticated as Versace, Balenciaga, or Prada.

An idea pops into my head. If my last name won't do, perhaps my first will.

“Marina,” I tell him with a smile. “Just Marina.”

Dominic nods in approval. “Perfect.”

“You think so?”

“Definitely less clunky than *Marina's Lil' Dress Shoppe*. I'll have the boys put in the order.”

Felicia looks around, moderately fascinated with our new location, though I have a feeling I won't be able to keep her attention for much longer. I'm sure there are a million other things an energetic four-year-old would rather be doing. She plays with a lock of my hair, squirming a bit in my hold. I set her down on her feet but hold on to her hand.

“Mommy, where are we?”

“This is my new store, sweetie.” I smile wide when I glance at Dominic. “Your Daddy gave it to me. Isn't that wonderful?”

“Daddy,” my daughter echoes, looking at him.

I'll never forget the look on Dominic's face. It's a combination of pride, pure joy, and so much love that I'm genuinely afraid he might pass out.

"Are you really my daddy?" Felicia asks.

Dominic gets down on his knee to meet her at eye level. "I am, principessa."

We both stare at our daughter to see her reaction, and I nearly laugh out loud when she shrugs her little shoulders and says a nonchalant, "Okay."

"I'm going to call Miriam the second we get home," I say. "Hopefully she'll still take me on as a client."

"She will," he says firmly.

"Thank you, Dom. For all of this. It's really amaz—"

His phone rings loudly, cutting me off. "Sorry," he grumbles. "I have to take this. Feel free to check out the rest of the store." Dominic leaves promptly, a few suited men following him.

I give Johnny a quick glance. "Any idea who he's talking to?"

"I'm not at liberty to say," he replies with a sympathetic shrug.

A flicker of annoyance licks at the back of my neck. Right. Of course. It's Mob business or whatever. I'm a part of Dominic's life, but at the same time, not a part of it. Not entirely. I might never be.

I tell myself I'm being silly, that this strange knot twisting in the pit of my stomach will pass. It's just a phone call. Dominic has always been a busy man. I shouldn't allow myself to get this upset, especially not when he's done something so amazing for me. Besides, I'm about to be very busy myself now that my path forward seems free and clear of any obstacles.

As I look around, an electric excitement fills me from head to toe. This is it. My dreams are finally going to become a reality.

CHAPTER 30



ARIN

The second I sign my contract with Miriam, things move at break-neck speeds. Most of the time, I'm as lost as a dinghy caught in a massive monsoon. Thank God Miriam has my back.

"Okay, babe. I'm gonna go quick, so stop me if you need me to repeat myself," she says as we walk and talk.

I feel like we're always walking and talking whenever I visit her at her downtown office location. Poor Johnny has to chase us around at all times, surprisingly inept at keeping pace with us despite the fact that we're wearing stiletto heels.

"I'm going to get your website set up by tonight, along with various social media accounts. It's important that we set up your internet presence as soon as possible to give your brand an even greater air of legitimacy."

I nod along, mentally keeping notes. We're on our way to a go-see in a rented studio a few blocks away from Central Park. Sometimes I have to pinch myself to remind myself I'm not dreaming. I'm going to a go-see as a *client*. Models are going to be wearing *my* designs, walking up and down in a straight line to show off their walks to try and impress *me*.

I better be careful not to let this all go to my head.

"I'm in the process of renting a venue," Miriam says. "It's on the smaller side, but I wanted to see what you thought about putting a massive mirror behind the runway?"

"It'll give the illusion that the runway is twice as long," I realize aloud, excitement filling me.

“Precisely. Like a *Palais De Versailles* situation.”

“Love it. I’m on board.”

“Now, how many models do you think you’ll need?”

“Well, I’ve got a collection of a hundred pieces,” I inform her. “I don’t think we have the budget nor the space to hire a hundred individual models.”

Miriam shakes her head, chuckling. “We don’t.”

“Okay, then how about we hire twenty-five. They can do quick changes in the back four times and that’ll rotate through my collection.”

“Love, love, *love* it,” she says, her thumbs speedily taking notes on her phone.

We finally arrive at the studio in question. On the outside, the building appears unsuspecting and plain. It’s nothing but grey concrete and frosted windows, making it hard to see inside. Once inside, however, it’s a different story. It’s incredibly well-lit with tall ceilings and polished hardwood floors. The large room is sectioned off into two spaces, a holding area for the models and an actual work area just past a row of moveable clothing racks full of my dresses.

The moment I walk into the room, the air shifts. All eyes are on me. At least two hundred different women are here, all gorgeous and tall and... thin.

There’s nothing wrong with being a skinny model, but I expressly told Miriam that my line is intended for people of all shapes and body sizes and skin tones. Unfortunately, it looks like New York’s finest modeling agencies have only sent me their tallest, thinnest, and fairest.

“Um, I think we have a problem,” I whisper to Miriam as we take our seats behind a fold out table. My look book has already been laid out for me, several pens and papers for taking notes at the ready.

“What’s wrong?” she asks me, quickly settling into her own chair.

“I was hoping for a little more diversity when it came to the models,” I say, making sure to keep my voice low. “Don’t get me wrong, they’re all very pretty, but...”

“I totally get your meaning,” Miriam says, nibbling on the endcap of her pen. “I was very specific in my casting call, but many models have already been booked out in advance to prepare for Fashion Week. These are the ones who could come on such short notice.”

I grimace. “I was afraid of that.”

“Don’t worry, Arin. We’ve got plenty of time. I’ll send another note to casting and tell them to broaden their search substantially. For now, though, let’s see how many of these models will work for your vision.”

“Okay, I can work with that.” I turn a little to look at Johnny. He’s been standing this entire time. “Do you want to take a seat?”

“I’m alright, Ms. Wilson. Gotta stay, uh... alert and stuff. Boss’s orders.”

“Alert and stuff? Johnny, just take a seat, okay? This might take a while. If a model tries to stab me with her heel or something, *then* you can do what you gotta do.”

Johnny shifts his weight from foot to foot, pausing for a moment to consider. It doesn’t take him very long to relent, occupying the seat behind us.

“I’ll call the first girl in,” Miriam says with a smile.

There’s a method to all the madness. Every woman that comes in has roughly seven minutes allotted to them. They come in wearing big smiles and offering polite greetings. They give their name, their height, and the agency they’re with. Then Miriam asks them to show us their walk.

It takes a moment for me to get used to it. The walking. Because it’s not *really* walking. Nobody in their right mind would be caught in the streets of New York strutting their stuff like this, yet in the world of high fashion, it makes so much sense.

Some girls are absolutely mesmerizing, the easy sway of their hips and their relaxed posture and their expressions that scream ‘*Yeah, I’m real fucking gorgeous so keep your eyes on me.*’ The pose at the end of the walk before smoothly turning to sashay away fascinate me.

And then there are the trainwrecks. Most of them are newbies and doing their darndest not to snap their ankles in six-inch heels. Some flail, some trip. One poor woman falls flat on her ass. I feel downright awful for her, but she has enough grace to laugh it off. She’s got a lovely personality, and while she isn’t quite what I’m looking for, I genuinely hope she has a successful career.

By the end of the day, I’ve selected ten of the twenty-five models I’m looking to hire. Deep down, I’m anxious. Hopefully I can hire everyone I need well before the actual show. I need to account for fittings and adjustments, not to mention rehearsal time. All in all, we’re making good progress.

And one of the loudest thoughts in my brain is how excited I am to tell Dominic all about it.

By the time I get home, Lana is in the middle of cleaning Felicia up after dinner. I swoop in to give my daughter a big kiss before giving my best friend a hug.

“Thank you for agreeing to watch her,” I say.

“Are you kidding? I’d rather be her full-time babysitter than wait on tables all day for chump change. Your man’s already paid me for the entire month.” She bumps her hip against mine. “You’re one lucky duck, Arin.”

“I *feel* lucky.”

“How’d it go today?”

I can feel myself on the edge of word-vomiting, but I don’t care. “It was *amazing*. I had some of the models try on my dresses and it was probably the most magical thing I’ve ever witnessed.”

Lana laughs as she wipes Felicia's hands with a washcloth. "You see your dresses all the time."

"I know, but it's different getting to see them actually *on* someone. Like how an author feels seeing their books in a store, or a director seeing their movie up on the silver screen. It's just more... Tangible? Real?"

"I'm glad, babe," Lana says with a genuine smile. "Seriously, I'm proud of you."

"Thanks. Do you need someone to give you a ride home?"

She glances at Johnny, who's stationed himself at the front door. He never enters farther than the main hallway, as per Dominic's instructions. I'm glad he's taking the work/personal life separation so seriously.

Lana shakes her head, her lips pressed into a thin line. I can tell she has a lot of questions, but she doesn't ask anything. She gives me one final hug before heading out. "I'll see you both tomorrow, okay? Take care of yourselves."

I don't know why it feels like a warning, but it does. "See you tomorrow," I say softly as she leaves.

"Mommy!" Felicia giggles as I pick her up. "When's Daddy home? Wanna story?"

I look at Johnny. "You mean he isn't back yet?"

"Apologies, Ms. Wilson," he says, hands clasped before him respectfully. "It seems that Signore Costello is stuck in a meeting. Would you like me to relay a message?"

I shake my head despite the sting of disappointment in my chest. "No, I'm... I'm sure he's got a lot on his plate right now."

Johnny nods politely. "I'll be right outside if you need me."

Despite how tired I am, I go through the usual process of getting Felicia ready for bed. I help her take a bath, brush her teeth, and change her into her cute cat-themed pajamas. The story she chooses tonight is a classic: Goldilocks and the Three Bears.

“They’re like us,” she comments, pointing at the illustrated picture of the bear family going for their walk. “Papa Bear, Mama Bear, and Baby Bear.”

I smile gently, noticing how right she is, except... Except *our* Papa Bear isn’t here right now, too busy with work. I’m not going to lie, it’s upsetting. I thought Dominic would be around to spend a little more time with us. I yearn for us to be together as a whole family, but I have a weird sinking feeling that I might be asking for too much. Am I being selfish? I know I can’t have one hundred percent of his attention, but surely, he could at least be home for dinner, right?

After Felicia falls asleep, I head into my bedroom and browse through my closet. I’m feeling restless tonight. As I sift through all the outfits Dominic so graciously purchased for me, my thoughts begin to drift. I wonder what he’d say if he saw me in the pink Chanel day dress on my hanger, or maybe the tight Versace number next to it. Or maybe...

If I wore next to nothing at all.

An idea pops into my head. Maybe Dominic not getting home until later is a blessing in disguise. At least this way, I’ll be able to surprise him when he returns.

Slipping quietly into my studio, I browse through the private collection of lingerie that I’ve been working on in my free time. They’re considerably faster to make compared to dresses—there’s a lot less fabric to deal with—but no less complicated. There’s something incredibly enjoyable about experimenting with cuts and different types of accents.

Obviously, putting them on is what makes them *super* fun.

When I spot one particular barely-there number made of red velvet, I let out a wicked little giggle. Dominic will lose his damn mind when he sees me in this. I pick it off the rack and skip off to my bedroom, quickly changing. It’s soft against my skin, but awfully drafty. Sometimes you have to brave being a little cold if you want to reach a level of peak sexy.

I throw on my bathrobe before sneaking out, tiptoeing down the hall to Dominic’s bedroom. I lay down on his bed,

squeezing my knees together at the thought of him coming home to find me like this—a meal ready to be devoured.

Now all I have to do is wait for my man to come home and make him regret taking so long.

CHAPTER 31



DOMINIC

It's almost midnight. I've made one of Renato's old gambling dens—one of the few we didn't burn down to its foundation—my new base of operations. The construction crew was swift to gut the place, renovating everything to my exact specifications. It's centrally located between both Renato and Lorenzo's old territories, which gives me better control of all happenings within my newly founded kingdom.

"They found a body," Milo informs me.

I forgot the bastard doesn't bother with knocking, but I'm too on edge to call him out on it. "Where? Do you think it's Elio?"

Milo hands me his phone where an image is already pulled up. It's grainy and poorly lit, but it's obviously of a cadaver resting on a cold examination table in the morgue. I'll admit that some of the body's features are strikingly similar to Elio's—same nose, same hair, same square jaw—but...

"That's not him," I say.

"How can you tell?"

"Head's too small."

Milo rolls his eyes. "Are you fucking serious? Is this your idea of a joke?"

"When have I ever given the impression that I care for comedy? I need you to keep looking."

"I'm telling you, it's *him*."

I grind my teeth, pausing for a moment. Am I in denial? Elio was a giant pain in my ass, but he was also a dear friend. The thought of him actually being gone is too difficult for my brain to understand. I'm not ready to grieve again. Fuck, I don't think I ever stopped grieving after Tomasso was killed. There's a good chance that my refusal to believe Elio's been murdered is my brain's way of protecting me from the shock.

I swallow hard at the sticky lump in the back of my throat. "Get me a positive ID," I say. "I'm not going to write him off until then."

Milo clicks his tongue. Even though he's on the other side of my office, I can smell his smug arrogance stinking up my air. "No wonder they're all so loyal to you. If I ever go missing, will you send out the search party for me, too?"

I glare at him. I've always hated this guy, but he knows my answer. He's one of us, a part of a bigger whole. Of course I'd search for him if he went missing. "I don't play favorites."

Milo puts a hand over his heart and gives me a cheeky grin. "I'm flattered."

"Now, get out of here. Don't come back until you've found Elio."

"Dead or alive?"

"Preferably the latter."

"Will do, *boss*." His tone makes it sound like an insult. I pay him no mind. Sometimes the only way to deal with yapping dogs is to ignore them until they wear themselves out.

When he leaves, all the stress I've been carrying suddenly doubles down to crush my shoulders into my chest. To say I'm exhausted is an understatement. I'm so bone tired that I'm two blinks away from passing out where I stand. Lorenzo's racket was easy enough to rearrange and consolidate, but Renato's books were a mess. I wouldn't be surprised to find out his accountants had been skimming off the top because that's just how disorganized his numbers were.

All I want is to go home, fix myself a scotch, kiss my daughter, and hold Arin in my arms. The sooner I get all this

sorted, the better.

Johnny is stationed outside my apartment door on security detail. Good.

He's also falling asleep on the job, his head bobbing as he tries to keep his eyes awake. Not so good.

"Report," I say.

Johnny snaps to attention with a snort. "Wh—uh... All clear, signore. We arrived home after her go-see event around five."

"How'd it go?"

"Boring as hell, signore."

"Not for you. For *her*."

"Oh. I think she had fun. Definitely seemed like she was in her element. Still lots of work to do, but I'm sure Ms. Wilson can manage."

"Good. Did you notice anything suspicious? Any tails?"

"No, signore. I had the auxiliary team sweep through the area before her arrival. It's been very quiet."

That's what I was worried about.

No news is supposed to be good news, but ever since the takeover, I've been dealing with a strange feeling brewing in the pit of my stomach.

It was easy throwing Lorenzo under the bus.

Too easy.

I fully expected resistance, maybe a few border skirmishes here or there. Apart from needing to adjust to my new position of authority, it's been relatively smooth sailing. No one has questioned my command or my motives. Even the higher-ups I now report to have basically been radio silent.

There hasn't even been an inkling of news from the Russians or the Irish trying to weasel their way into the area.

While uneventfulness is something I wish to strive for, this is a level of peace that makes me uncomfortable. It means trouble is percolating just beneath the surface, waiting for the moment to strike. At least, that's what the nagging voice in the back of my head tells me. I need to be prepared, on my toes. I'm waiting for the hammer to fall, but I don't know when or how hard it will happen. Maybe I'm being paranoid, but I'd much rather be paranoid than dead.

I nod. "Well done today. You're dismissed."

"Thank you, signore."

The apartment is completely still. None of the lights are on. I don't even hear the rhythmic beat of Arin's sewing machine coming from her room, which tells me she's probably asleep. I'm tempted to give both my daughter and my woman a kiss good night, but I'm tired as hell and I wouldn't want to disturb their beauty rest. Instead, I kick off my shoes at the door, loosen my tie, and head straight for my bedroom.

The moment I lay eyes on her, all the blood rushes from my head to my cock.

I'm suddenly *very* awake.

Unfortunately, Arin isn't.

She looks like a present wrapped in what I can only describe as ribbon around the curve of her breasts and between her thighs. Her long hair pools around her head like a halo, her chest rising and falling slowly as she sleeps.

I shrug off my jacket and shirt before climbing into bed with her, my hands on either side of her hips as I hold myself just above. She smells divine, like vanilla and coconut, the silky softness of her skin beneath my fingers utterly satisfying.

I drink in the sight of her, fighting the urge to part her thighs and fuck her awake. I know she wouldn't have any qualms about it. She's in *my* bed after all, presenting herself as the gift that she is. Why else would she be here if not to be fucked by her man?

But I like the way she looks when she sleeps. So beautiful and radiant and at ease, surrounded on all sides by my blankets

like she's made herself a little nest. I want her to be like this always, protected and safe and warm.

My cock throbs, straining against the confines of my pants. I really need to relieve some of the pressure, but I'm even more desperate to taste her on my tongue. I press light kisses to her cheeks, moving as carefully as possible to place myself between her legs. Making quick work of my belt and zipper, I pull myself free with a sigh.

"The things you do to me," I mumble against her lips. "It isn't fair at all."

Arin stirs, her eyes cracking open a sliver. "Dom?"

"Go back to sleep, dolcezza. I just need to take the edge off."

She reaches down between our bodies, grazing her fingers over the length of my cock. "Let me help you," she mumbles. "Do you like what you see?"

"Very much," I admit as she strokes me slowly. "So fucking much."

"What took you so long?"

"I'm a stupid, stupid man."

Arin pouts her lips, slowly rolling over onto her stomach.

There's no back to her little ensemble. I have a perfect view of her nude flesh and peachy ass. A growl rushes from my lungs as I settle my cock between her cheeks, grinding against her with a huff.

"Fuck, mi amore. You're really something else."

"Fuck me, Dom. I want you to fill me up."

"Oh, is that so?"

She nods, peeking at me over her shoulder. "I want you to feel your cum dripping down my legs." Arin wiggles her ass against me. "Please, *signore*. Fuck me and make me yours."

My cock throbs at her filthy words. "Dear God, you're going to kill me."

“Maybe later,” she teases. “For keeping me waiting.”

“Consider my lesson learned.”

Arin whines as she backs up into me. “Hurry up already.”

I’m barely hanging on as it is, so I’m quick to circle an arm around her waist. I push her legs apart with my knees and sink deep and slowly into her delicious wet heat. Her pussy grips me tight, clenching around me as she moans against my pillow. My chest is pressed flush against her back, not an inch of space wasted.

We’re a tangle of arms and legs, moving together in pursuit of heated pleasure. It’s wonderfully rough and sinfully sweet, hard thrusts punctuated by tender kisses.

“So nice and tight,” I growl against her ear. “Fuck, mi amore. Jesus Christ, I’m fucking obsessed with you.”

“*D-Dominic—*”

“Don’t hold back, Arin. Give me everything. Let me feel you come on my cock.”

The way she shatters around me makes me want to put her back together all over again. The sounds of her languid moans and breathy whimpers are music to my ears. My own climax hits me just as hard, an explosive heat bursting inside me as I empty into her.

As I scoop Arin up in my arms and hold her close, a sudden realization dawns on me. It isn’t a tangible thing, but a feeling. Her importance in my life is too great to put into words.

She is everything—*everything*.

If I have to work myself to the bone to make her happy, let it be so.

CHAPTER 32



ARIN

Much to my disappointment, Dominic is already gone by the time I wake up. Last night had been an absolute pleasure, but I feel a little lonely now that he's gone. I can't tell if I'm being selfish for wanting him to be around more, but apart from dragging him out of his office and forcing him to take a day off, there's really nothing I can do.

He gets up before I do in the mornings and doesn't arrive until I've gone to sleep. Entire days pass where I don't get to see him. And if I do, it's in passing or in some peripheral way, like spotting his shoes at the door and his jacket slung over the back of the couch. Sometimes the only way to know Dominic still even lives here is the scent of his cologne lingering in the air.

It's such a terrible feeling—living under one roof while feeling like complete strangers.

But the only thing I can really do right now is throw myself into my work.

September rolls around, bringing with it milder weather and more frequent rainstorms. Local businesses are already breaking out the pumpkin-spiced lattes and fall color palettes even though we're still a ways away from October. I actually really enjoy the autumn months because it means I can start wearing my turtlenecks and knit sweaters, as well as dress Felicia in those cute yellow Wellington boots to keep her feet dry.

The first Friday of the month is one I've been looking forward to for a very long time. Today's the day that Miriam takes me to see the venue she's chosen to set up for my fashion show. It's a momentous occasion, so I decide to bring Lana and Felicia along to see how everything's coming together.

My little girl skips out onto the runway, marveling at all the bright lights suspended overhead. "Mommy, look!"

"I see you, sweetie. Be careful not to fall off the edge."

Beside me, Lana whistles. "Damn, babe. This is really freaking cool! How many guests did you say are coming?"

"Roughly three hundred," Miriam says, checking her iPad for notes. "It's a jam-packed show. My team's been working really hard to drum up hype. *Marina* is getting a lot of traction on Instagram, specifically."

"Is there a reason you made the place look like a train station?" my best friend asks, glancing at the grey runway. The edges are marked off in yellow, just like the edge of a subway platform.

"It's supposed to be symbolic," I explain. "People from all walks of life come and go through the station. It's a place of transience, where you can rub elbows with people from all sorts of backgrounds and who have different histories. I want it to reflect the diversity of the line and the variety of people I want to make up my target audience."

Lana chuckles. "That's some artsy stuff right there."

I frown. "Do you think it's tacky?"

"Hell, no. I think it's great! It really lends itself to the ambience."

"Mommy!" Felicia calls from the end of the runway. She waves at me with a laugh, standing just above the pit where the photographers will be stationed. They'll have the perfect vantage point to snap all sorts of pics of my clothes.

I'm just about to ask Felicia to come back when I spot movement out of the corner of my eye. On either side of the runway are rows upon rows of seats, organized on rising

platforms so my guests will have an unobstructed view of the show. Somewhere between the fifth and sixth row near the back, I see the silhouette of a person. I can't quite make out their features because there isn't enough light, but that doesn't stop the cold shiver that slithers down my spine.

"Excuse me?" I call out. "This area's supposed to be closed."

The man—at least, I think it's a man—doesn't respond, doesn't budge an inch.

"Hello?" I try again. "You're not supposed to be here."

"What's going on?" Miriam asks me with a frown.

I gesture toward the stands. "I thought you said we're the only ones at the venue today."

"We are."

I turn to find Johnny, who's lingering just off to the side in the wings. He's already making his way forward when I say, "Can you check that guy out, please? He's giving me the creeps."

I pick Felicia up while Johnny hops off the platform and climbs up the steps.

"Hey, bub," Johnny snaps. "You taking a nap or something? This is a closed set." He reaches out to shake the person's shoulders, only to freeze.

"What's wrong?" I ask, my stomach churning.

Johnny backs up with a deep laugh. "It's only a mannequin, Ms. Wilson. Nothing to worry about."

Lana laughs, too. "You had me worried there. I thought it was a creepy stalker or something."

I sigh a breath of relief, but that doesn't stop the discomfort crawling just beneath my skin. "What's it doing over there?"

"Maybe one of the contractors in charge of the setup thought it'd be funny?" Miriam wonders aloud. "Oh, well. No

big deal, I guess. Why don't we go check out the makeup and hair stations next?"

I nod slowly and start to follow her backstage, but I can't shake the feeling that we're being watched.

It happens again a few hours later when Lana, Felicia, Miriam, and I head out to a café for a quick bite to eat. I can feel someone's gaze on me, but I can't for the life of me pinpoint where it's coming from.

"So our model list is finalized," Miriam says, flipping through several documents on her trusty iPad. "All the makeup artists have their call times, your designs will be carefully transported to the location the day prior to the show, and only high priority guests will be in attendance." She turns the screen toward me. Several names stand out like bright spotlights. "After the actual show, it'd be a good idea to rub elbows with them. Networking goes a long way in this business."

I nod, albeit distractedly. "Right. Yes, of course."

"Do I get to sit next to a VIP?" Lana asks, pumping her eyebrows. "Maybe I can find myself a handsome celebrity boyfriend."

Miriam taps around on the screen to pull up the seating chart. She points at one of the seats closest to the front of the stage. "This is where you'll be."

"I chose your seats myself," I say with a smile. "Did you make sure to save one for Dominic?"

Miriam nods. "Oh, yes. He'll be right here." She points at the iPad, his name typed in an incredibly small font over the square box representing his seat. She slides a laminated pass to me, the words *ALL ACCESS* printed in bold on the front. "He'll need this on him when he arrives."

It's arguably the best seat in the house. Not only will he be the first to admire my clothes as the models step out to strut their stuff, but he'll also be at the perfect angle to see me in the

wings. My heart races at the thought of him there, watching me with pride. Everyone else will be watching the models, but Dominic will most certainly be watching *me*.

My skin crawls.

There it is again, that weird, cold feeling trailing along the back of my neck.

I turn in my seat. No one is there. The café isn't even busy, so it'd be easy to point out anybody suspicious. A couple on a date, a businessman taking a lunch break, a family of three picking out cupcakes by the display window, and the barista behind the counter, but that's it.

Am I overworked? Because the only real explanation is that I've accidentally fried my brain with all this fashion show preparation.

"Earth to Arin," Lana teases. "I mean this with love, babe, but I think you need a nap."

"I'm fine," I insist.

"*I* wanna nap," Felicia mumbles tiredly against a bit of her chocolate chip muffin.

Miriam chuckles. "Such a cutie. It's totally fine if you want to head home. Sit back and relax a little."

"But the show is next week."

"And we're ready," she assures. "It's going to be marvelous, Arin. Don't you worry. Your designs and passion for fashion will speak for themselves."

Try as I might, I can't take a deep enough breath. Maybe I'm feeling strange because I'm letting the pressure get to me. That has to be it. Now that my biggest dream in life is just seven days away from becoming a reality, I think my body is having some sort of physical reaction to all the excitement, stress, and general disbelief and wonderment.

And all I really want right now is a good long hug and kiss from my favorite absentee mobster.

“When is Dominic supposed to be finished with work?” I ask Johnny. He isn’t seated at our table, but the one directly beside it, sipping at an Americano.

“Not until late, Ms. Wilson.”

“Take me to him,” I say. I turn to Lana. “Will you take Felicia home?”

“Sure thing,” my friend replies.

My bodyguard, on the other hand, doesn’t seem as enthusiastic. “He’s very busy. I’m sure Signore Costello would rather not be disturbed.”

I’m not annoyed with Johnny. I’m really not. But if I’m not firm with him, then I’m genuinely worried I won’t see Dominic until New Years. “I want to see him,” I say, plucking Dominic’s all access pass off the table as I stand up from my chair. “Just to say hi. It won’t take long.”

“But—”

“But what?”

“I’ll get in trouble.”

I pat Johnny on the shoulder. “You let me take care of it, okay?”

He nods reluctantly. “As you wish, Ms. Wilson.”

CHAPTER 33



ARIN

If I was bothered by the number of suited men outside the loan office that one day, I'm *especially* bothered today as I start toward Dominic's new base. It looks like your run of the mill high-rise, complete with wide glass windows and a fancy revolving door, but the sheer number of people here makes my blood run cold.

Inside, it's a maze of hallways and multiple floors. It's quite the operation. If Dominic put this together, then it's really no surprise why I haven't seen him lately. It must be no small feat to achieve this level of organization and air of legitimacy. Any passerby would think this is a normal place of business, a fact I try my very best not to dwell on.

Johnny leads me to the elevator and takes me to the top floor. It's a classy place, brightly lit with polished tile floors and cream-colored walls—a stark contrast to the dark and dingy loan shark office Dominic used to work in.

“Wait here,” Johnny tells me. “I think he’s in the middle of a meeting, but I’ll let him know you’re here. Don’t wander off.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

I linger, casually admiring the view from the fortieth floor. The people and cars look like tiny ants from way up here.

“I’m telling you, fratello, we’re good.”

The low murmur of a man's voice reaches my ear. At first, I don't pay it any mind. It could just be a conversation in passing, and it'd be rude to eavesdrop.

“No, he doesn’t suspect a thing.”

Now *that* gets my attention.

I crane my neck a little, checking over my shoulder to see if I can identify the speaker. There’s no one in sight. I know Johnny told me not to go off on my own, but the little voice in the back of my head is what commands my feet to move forward. As silently as I’m able, I wander down the hall, peeking carefully around the corner.

And there I see Milo.

He looks this way and that, keeping an eye out. Everything about him reminds me of a weasel, from his shifty stance to his little nose and missing tooth.

“It’s all going according to plan,” he says to someone on the other end of the phone. “No, he didn’t believe the pictures I showed him... I don’t know. I thought it was a pretty convincing fucking cadaver, but he apparently knows what you look like alive *and* dead.”

My ears burn. I don’t have enough context to figure out what he’s talking about, but I know it’s important.

Milo sighs, running his fingers through his gel-covered hair. “How are things on your end? Any idea what security is going to be like the day of the event? Hm, good. That definitely makes things a bit easier for us.” And then, after a brief pause. “Our tracks are totally covered. You have nothing to worry about, El—”

The sound of a door swinging open forcefully cuts him off. Somewhere down the hall come thunderous footsteps, growing louder and louder as they approach.

Dominic rounds the corner, startling Milo out of his private conversation. He hangs up quickly, stuffing his phone into his back pocket.

“What’s wrong, boss?” he says with an easy chuckle. “What’s got you in such a bad mood?”

As swift as a bird of prey, Dominic rounds the corner and nearly bumps into me. He looks at me down the length of his

nose, his expression hard and impossible to decipher. “What are you doing here, Arin?”

Milo appears at Dominic’s side, watching me suspiciously. “How long were you standing there?”

I swallow at the sticky lump in the back of my throat. I can’t imagine what his reaction will be when he realizes I’ve heard the better part of his phone call. Granted, I don’t know what he’s talking about, nor to whom, but I don’t think eavesdropping on a member of the Mob is going to go over very well.

“Not long,” I lie as calmly as possible. I’m pretty damn convincing if I do say so myself. “I was looking for the bathroom.”

Dominic takes my hand, pulling me along with him toward what I assume is his office. “You still haven’t answered my question.” He walks rigidly, a pace or two behind myself like he’s using his body as a wall to shield me from Milo’s view.

“I wanted to see you,” I say easily.

Dominic swiftly whisks me to his office and closes the door firmly behind him. He does *not* look pleased.

“I finished with the show’s preparations early,” I tell him. “I know you must be busy—”

“Very busy.”

“But I haven’t seen you in days.”

“So you decided to drop by unannounced?” His question feels accusatory, his tone laced with an edge of something uncomfortable.

I frown. His demeanor is rubbing me the wrong way. “Is it really that big of a deal?”

“You asked me to keep my personal and work life separate.”

“Yes, but that’s working out a little too well.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It *means*,” I grumble, crossing my arms, “I never see you anymore. I asked you to keep those men out of our apartment. I didn’t think that would include you.”

“Things have been hectic around here, dolcezza.”

“So hectic you haven’t been able to make it to dinner for the last week?”

“My work is important.”

“So is being there for me and your daughter!”

“I *am* there for you and Felicia. I provide—”

“Don’t you get it?” I snap, throwing my hands up in the air. “We don’t need *things*, Dom. We need *you!*”

My skin feels raw. My head pounds and my eyes sting with angry tears. I didn’t realize how frustrated I was with our situation until this very moment, everything suddenly erupting to the surface. I’m sure we could have avoided this argument had we been given the opportunity to talk, but that’s very well impossible considering how little time I get to spend with him anymore.

“This is the longest we’ve talked in over a week, Dom. How is that acceptable?”

His jaw ticks. “It’s not.”

I huff, the air in my lungs burning red hot. “So what are we going to do about it?”

“What do you *want* me to do about it?”

“Take a day off.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“You know perfectly well why.”

“Because you’re in the Mob and the big bad Mob men will kill you if you dare to take a mental health day?”

“Do you have to be so damn dramatic?”

I pause, staring at Dominic in disbelief. I care for him. I really care for him, but sometimes it's like I'm talking to a tree. Big, unmovable, and lacking the ability to hear.

"Is this it?" I ask slowly, my throat unbearably tight. "Is this what I can expect going forward?"

"I have given you a wonderful place to live, the connections you need to further your career," he says sternly. "Our daughter has all the toys she could ever want, three square meals a day, and when she's old enough, I'll ensure she has access to the best education money can afford her."

"And you really think that's enough?"

"It was good enough for me. Why can't it be good enough for you?"

I sigh, my heart twisting angrily in my chest. We're going around in circles. He's too stuck in his own ways, blind to understanding that I need more than material goods. Hell, I don't even *need* material goods to be happy. All I want is his company, his laughter, his warmth. But Dominic is too hard and too proud to understand that.

He's been molded by a world that taught him money is everything and vulnerability is a weakness. I thought I'd managed to get through his walls, but now I see it's so much more complicated. These are hang ups that aren't going to go away any time soon. Not unless something drastic happens, but I'm not going to hold my breath.

Taking a deep breath, I reach into my purse and pull out the all-access pass I intended on giving him. The date and time of my fashion show are printed on the back, along with directions on how to get there.

"This is for you," I mumble, hating the bitterness coating my tongue. "*If* you have time."

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Home, to be with our daughter." I turn on my heels and reach for the doorknob. I pause, my chest aching painfully. "Do you know that I try to stay up every night waiting for you?"

Dominic's face falls, his brows knitting together.
“Dolcezza, I—”

“And every night, Felicia asks if you can read her a bedtime story.”

“Arin...”

“I'll get out of your hair,” I interject.

“Wait—”

I'm already out the door.

CHAPTER 34



DOMINIC

She is not in my bed when I return home.

Nor the day after that, nor the day after that.

Guilt weighs heavily on my chest as I mull our argument over, absolutely hating the look on her face when I said she was being dramatic. They were words spoken out of turn, without thought. I didn't mean them, but my brain didn't kick in in time to keep my mouth from running.

I need to apologize. I know I should. Not just for the way I spoke to her, but for my absence as of late. Arin's right. I've been so consumed with work that I've unintentionally neglected my wife and daughter.

Wait? Did I say wife?

Man, I really *am* tired.

But now that the word is in my head, I can't stop thinking about it.

Wife, wife, *wife*.

On the sixth night that I return home to find my bed empty, I dare to venture into the other half of the apartment. Nerves and anxiety don't suit me, yet my palms get clammy and my heart thuds loudly in my chest as I wander down the hall into what can only be described as Arin and Felicia's side of our home.

Shit. Maybe Arin's right.

I've been so adamant about keeping business and personal separate that I've accidentally drawn an invisible line straight through the center of the apartment. Hers and mine. Cut off from one another, even though that was never my intention. Time just... got away from me a little.

I pop in to check on my daughter first.

She's fast asleep, already tucked in and sleeping soundly. Her night light glows softly from one corner of the room, a beacon of safety in the darkness. The toys and books I purchased for her lie about the space, clearly well-loved and adored. It fills me with pride knowing I can afford to give her a life free of want.

And you really think that's enough?

"Daddy?" Felicia stirs, slowly propping herself up on her elbows as she rubs the sleep from her eyes. "Daddy?"

"I'm sorry, principessa," I whisper, stepping quickly to her bedside. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"Had a bad dream." She holds her arms out and grabs onto me, hugging me with such strength that I marvel.

"It's okay, little one," I murmur, gently rubbing her back while pressing a kiss to her forehead. "I've got you, you're safe. Why don't you lie back down and—"

"Don't go!" she whines, clinging to my shirt with her tiny fists. "Stay here."

I'm not the kind of man who knows what it's like to have their heart melt, but Felicia's plea makes me fold like a shaky house of cards on a windy day. How could I possibly deny her something so simple?

I have her carefully balanced on my lap with her cheek resting against my shoulder as I carefully wrap her in her blanket. Once safe in her little cocoon, Felicia quickly starts to nod off, her eyes fluttering closed as she yawns deep and wide. I take a moment to admire just how much she looks like her mother. From her cute button nose to the shape of her little ears and the curl of her long lashes. There's no doubt in my

mind that Felicia's going to grow up to be just as gorgeous as Arin.

Once I'm sure she's sound asleep and no longer plagued by remnants of her nightmare, I lay Felicia down and tuck her in. I kiss her on the top of her head before leaving her room, the door shutting with the softest of clicks.

When I turn, I find myself staring at Arin's room just on the other side of the hall. I don't hear her sewing machine, but I can detect the faintest light seeping out from beneath the crack in the door frame.

We haven't spoken in almost a week. Knowing she's upset with me makes my chest uncomfortably tight. My gut tells me to go in there and apologize, but...

Shit. I've never had to do this before. I don't apologize for *anything*. I'm a negotiator through and through. If there's a deal I can't strike, that's when I brute force my way into getting what I want. That's just the world I live in. Take what you can and leave your feelings and morality at the door.

That won't fly with Arin.

I need to make changes. I know I do. But that will take time, trial, and error. I wish I could claim I was a perfect man, but I'm not. All I can do is take a deep breath and try to make things right.

Knocking on her door rewards me with no answer.

"Arin?" I call.

No response.

Curious, I peak inside. Her bed is empty. The sheets are smooth and undisturbed, which tells me she likely hasn't gone to bed yet. There's really only one place she could be, so I move through her walk-in and enter her studio—her own private little world.

A smile spreads across my lips when I see her. She's at her workstation, slumped over and snoring, a piece of cotton trapped between her cheek and the table's surface. There's no

telling how long she's been here, but I can't imagine it's a particularly comfortable way to fall asleep.

It's chaotic in here. More so than usual. All sorts of sketches and pictures of models wearing her designs and seating plans and laminated press passes are strewn about. And I remember. Her show is tomorrow. Arin's probably stressed out of her mind, working herself to the point of exhaustion.

I place my hand on her shoulder, giving her a gentle shake. "Arin? This is no place to fall asleep, mi amore."

"Mmphf," she grumbles in protest, her eyelids sealed shut.

I chuckle. "Dolcezza, you're going to wake up with a sore neck if you—"

When I take a step closer, I realize what she's working on. It's not some scrap of fabric, but an entire suit jacket. It's obscured by her body, the majority of it trapped beneath her chest. It looks like she was in the middle of stitching on the label.

Marina's.

Pressing a kiss to her cheek, I whisper in her ear, "Wake up, my love. The show's about to begin."

She shoots upright, making a little snorting sound as she wipes her mouth dry. She groans when she realizes where she is, glancing at me with wide, alert eyes. "W-what are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you."

Arin shrugs. "After a week away? Figured you'd forgotten all about me."

I cup her face and sigh. "You're looking for a fight."

"No, I'm not."

I smile gently. "Yes you are, spitfire."

She sighs, too tired and defeated to continue. "Yeah, alright. I guess I am."

I hold her gaze and take a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Arin. I should not have spoken to you that way. You’re right. I’ve been neglecting you and Felicia, and that simply isn’t acceptable. Adjusting to my new role has been... challenging, but I will make more of an effort going forward to spend more time with you and our daughter. You are, and always will be, my top priority.”

Arin’s body language shifts, the tension in her shoulders melting away as she leans against my chest. “I’m sorry, too,” she mumbles sheepishly. “For causing a scene. And being so needy.”

“You’re allowed to need me, dolcezza. In fact, I’d prefer it.”

I let my hands slide down, lifting her face with a finger just below her chin. I kiss her softly on the lips, loving the way she feels against me. I’ve missed her more than I care to admit, and I really only have myself to blame for this distance I’ve wedged between us. Arin’s the one who deepens the kiss, the tip of her tongue dancing lightly over mine, but before I can make a move, she pulls away an inch.

“I should probably get some sleep,” she admits. “Tomorrow’s the big day.”

“Right, of course. I want you well rested.”

She sucks in a breath through her teeth. “Will you... Are you going to be there?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. I promise.”

Her sweet smile makes my heart sing. She turns and picks up the suit jacket she was working on. “I made this for you. To wear to the show.”

I inspect the label with a grin, admiring the addition of the apostrophe and S. “A special edition *Marina*, huh?”

“This way, when you put it on, you’ll know you’re mine.”

“Say it again.”

“You’re mine,” she whispers. “Just as I’m yours.”

I kiss her again, smiling as I do. “Go to bed, cuore mio. You need your sleep.”

“Will you stay with me tonight?”

“Try and stop me.”

We curl up together in her bed, the sheets nowhere near as soft as her bare skin against mine. As we drift off together, the same thought that’s been rattling around inside my head resurface.

Arin may not be my wife.

But I want her to be.

For now, we’ll take it one day at a time.

CHAPTER 35



DOMINIC

Arin pounces on me, excitement rattling her bones. “Today’s the day!” she squeals, crawling on top of me as she peppers my cheeks with kisses.

I stir awake with a groan. “Five more minutes.”

“I have to get ready,” she says as she hops off. “Lana will be here soon to watch Felicia, and then I have to head over to the venue to help organize the models and makeup teams. God, what should I wear? A classic black dress, right? Or is that too boring? I’ll figure it out.”

“Dolcezza, it’s five in the morning.”

“And I’ve got so much to do! I need to take a shower, do my makeup, style my hair. Photographers will be *everywhere*, Dom. Everywhere! I have to make sure my debut goes perfectly, or else—”

I wrap my arm around her waist and easily pull her back to bed, kissing her cheeks, the tip of her nose, her soft lips. “It *will* go perfectly, Arin. You need to relax.”

“Easy for you to say. I’ve got hundreds of guests coming to scrutinize my work.”

“There will be no scrutinizing, only appreciation.”

“Dom—”

“Enjoy today, Arin. You’ve done everything you can to prepare for this moment. All your hard work is about to pay off. What you really need to do today is savor every moment.

Would you rather spend your debut stressed out of your mind, or having fun?”

She laughs, kissing my lips swiftly. “I hate it when you make sense.”

“So it’s an around the clock thing?”

My phone goes off, buzzing away on the bedside table. I have no idea who could be calling me this early in the morning. When I check the caller ID and see Milo’s name, I almost consider turning my phone off entirely. Then again, it could be important.

“What do you want?” I grumble.

“The Russians,” he replies, sounding a bit far away and breathless.

“You want... the Russians?”

“No! They’re making their move!”

I sit up, alarmed. I knew I wasn’t being paranoid. The other players in New York have been way too quiet for my liking, and now I see why. “Tell me what happened.”

“They struck the gambling dens sometime around three. I only found out about it now. I’m on my way to see how bad the damage is.”

“I’ll meet you there. Order the rest of our men to be there.”

“You got it,” Milo says, hastily hanging up.

Time is of the essence. I’ve never known the Russians to twiddle their thumbs and wait for a counterattack. They’re more of a bulldoze and conquer kind of group. There’s no doubt in my mind that if the Irish—hell, maybe even the Chinese—catch wind that land is up for grabs, I’ll have a real mess on my hands.

Arin shifts beside me, her brows knitted together with worry. “Is something wrong?”

“It’s just a, um, business conflict. It won’t take long.”

She gives me a knowing look. “Okay,” she whispers. “Please be safe.”

“I promise. I’ll see you tonight at your show, alright?”

I give her one last kiss before getting up to get dressed.



We arrive twenty men strong, armed to the teeth well within the hour. The gambling den in question isn’t fully operational yet, still under serious renovations in the basement of an old liquor store whose owner had his license revoked. We move quickly, storming inside to find—

Nothing.

“What the hell?” one of my men grumbles, lowering his pistol. “Uh, boss? You sure we have the right place.”

“Milo confirmed the address,” I reply, glaring at my surroundings. Everything is as it should be. No signs of forced entry, no unwanted guests. What the hell was Milo talking about?

The angry screech of tires braking to a halt is what tips me off.

This whole damn thing was a trap.

“Get down!” I shout far too late.

A hail of bullets rains down upon us, shattering windows and decimating walls. I hit the floor hard, narrowly missing being shot. Half of my men aren’t so lucky, riddled full of holes before their limp bodies have a chance to land.

The attack lasts for an eternity, the thunderous clamor of bullets rattling my eardrums. A few of my men are alive, but understandably disoriented as the shooting eventually draws to a close. There’s no time to relax, however. This was only the opening act.

The doors to the gambling den burst open, a team of six or so men charging in with their weapons at the ready. They’re

dressed from head to toe in black tactical gear, their faces obscured by tinted goggles and cloth face masks. One look at them and I know these aren't the Russians or the Irish or the Chinese. These men are new players on the block.

Either way, Milo sold me out.

If I get out of this, I'm going to kill him with my own two hands.

The mercs are quick to pick off the survivors, shooting at point blank range. When they finally get to me, I spring into action, a bullet whizzing past my temple as I trap my attacker's arm in a lock. I twist hard, forcing him to not only drop his gun, but to snap his elbow in the opposite direction. His scream is cut short when I nail him in the face with a hard left hook, sending him flying into his teammate beside him.

I manage to roll out of the way as the remaining four assailants open fire, ducking behind an overturned table. It's not an effective shield, splinters flying every which way and nearly taking out my damn eye. Two of them try to rush me again, but I'm ready, sweeping their legs with a good, hard kick. Snatching up a piece of broken plaster, I swipe at one of the men, stabbing him in the bicep with all the force I can muster. He stumbles back, disoriented enough for me to kick away his pistol and slam his head into the nearest wall. His body slumps, unconscious.

Only three more to go.

I'm running on pure adrenaline at this point, nothing but the sound of my labored breathing and the pounding rhythm of my war drum heart. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch the glint of a knife as one of the mercs charges at me, eager to stab. My body is starting to feel heavy, so even though I manage to slide out of the way, the knife still slices through my suit. Luckily, I take no damage.

When the merc pulls away, he notices the special lining of my suit, now exposed.

Kevlar.

When I get out of this mess, I'm going to kiss Arin until she sees stars.

I subdue the man with a hard punch-kick combo, sending him flying into the solid frame of a low banister. His body contorts unnaturally, the hard crack of bones echoing loudly in my ear. There's only two left, but I'm sore, bruised, and running low on steam.

The last two mercs are smart enough to come at me at the same time, using my exhaustion to their advantage. Their range is too close to fire their guns without harming each other, so they come at me with a flurry of well-placed hits. They strike me across the face, get me in the gut, kick the back of my knees until my legs finally buckle.

I'm winded, seeing spots across my vision.

Things are going downhill *fast*.

One of them rears back, rushing at me to try and drive his knee into my face. My body might be tired of fighting, but my brain isn't. Instincts take over. I dodge out of the way just in time to grab my attacker by the leg, twisting so hard and with so much momentum that he falls flat on his back, head smacking against the floor with a hard *thwack*. I keep twisting—harder, harder, *harder*—until I hear, as well as feel, his hip pop out of its socket. He screams in agony.

There's only one left.

He's as good as dead.

I clamber to my feet, my knuckles aching and bruised.

“And I thought all those years stuck behind a desk would've made you slow,” he says, his voice frighteningly familiar. Even with his face obscured, I'd know my right-hand man anywhere.

“Elio?” I croak.

He yanks off his mask and goggles, smirking with all the cockiness I've come to know him for. “Hey, Dom. You're looking a bit rough.”

“What the fuck?” I hiss breathlessly. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

“I’ve been in hiding,” he says casually, drawing a blade from one of his vest’s utility pockets. “Biding my time.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t expect you to.”

Anger boils inside me, bubbling up past the surface. “You traitor. How could you do this? You were like a brother to me.”

“Save me the speech, Dom. You never saw me as a brother, you saw me as a lackey. Nothing more, nothing less. Don’t pretend like you cared.”

“But *why*?”

“Simple. I want to move up in the world, but you and Lorenzo were in the way. Even if I somehow managed to oust Lorenzo, the natural next step would be for you to take his place. It was too much work trying to figure out how to remove you both, so I let the two of you do all the heavy lifting.”

I frown, confusion washing over me in waves. “All the heavy lifting?”

“Why stick my neck out trying to get rid of Lorenzo when you could do it for me? All I had to do was instill distrust in both of you. A whisper here, a whisper there, and the rest took care of itself. When I convinced Lorenzo to order those hits on you, I thought for sure that’d set things in motion.”

My jaw would drop to the floor if it weren’t so sore and swollen. “The shootings... You were the one...”

“Now you’re getting it.”

“Tomasso died because of *you*!” I seethe.

“Collateral damage,” Elio says with a shrug. “If it helps, it was nothing personal. Tomasso was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“You son of a bitch!” I shout, lunging at him with all the speed I can muster.

He attempts to stab me with his knife, but not before I connect my fist to his jaw. He stumbles back, wincing in pain. It’s just the distraction I need to nab his knife, swiping at him with such speed that the blade splits the air. The tip of his knife streaks past his temple and ear, cutting off the top. Blood trickles down his face, coating his cheeks in red.

“Fuck!” he hisses, his hand flying to the wounded ear.

“That was for Tomasso, you fucking rat!” I wind back, fully prepared to bring the blade down to finish the job. “And this is for betraying me!”

BAM!

I hear the gunshot before I feel the pain. Turning my head slightly, I see a figure standing in the doorway, gun trained on me. My body suddenly goes cold, a sharp pain lancing through my ribcage. I don’t think the bullet hit anything vital, but that doesn’t make it hurt any less.

“I’ve got impeccable timing,” Milo says. “Are you alright, little brother?”

I stagger back, knife dropping from my hands. The smell of iron lingers heavily in the air. I look between Milo and Elio, too confused to speak. My body is going into shock. I can’t move, can’t think.

Falling to my knees, I attempt to slow the bleeding, pressing my palm against my wound. It’s futile. I’m losing too much blood. The tips of my fingers are numb, my senses dulling.

Elio steps forward, malice darkening his eyes. He grips my hair and yanks my head back. “Don’t worry, Dom. We’re not gonna kill you yet. Not until you’ve watched us destroy everything you’ve built.”

“And ruin your little plaything,” Milo adds darkly.

Arin. They’re going to hurt Arin.

Before I can fight back, darkness pulls me under.

CHAPTER 36



ARIN

The air is abuzz with excitement. The guests have all arrived and taken their assigned seats, a few of whom are famous names in the fashion industry. Miriam really went all out on the guest list, and I couldn't be more thankful. The photographers have organized themselves in the pit at the end of the runway, their expensive equipment set up to snap the perfect shot of my models mid-stride. The lighting is perfect, the models are ready to go, and the music playing over the speakers is exactly what I need to set the mood. The only thing missing is Dominic.

I peer out from the wings of the runway, squinting against the dim lighting. His seat is vacant. He's nowhere in sight. I find Lana and Felicia in their assigned spots, both giddy and in awe of the whole experience. Johnny sits just behind them, acting just as much their guard as he is mine. I'm glad they're having fun, but Dominic's glaring absence makes my blood run cold.

He promised.

Miriam taps me on the shoulder, a big smile on her face. "I'm going to take my seat. The show starts when you're ready."

"Thank you, Miriam. We'll talk after?"

"Of course! I'll see if I can get Rihanna to come and take a picture with you. That'll definitely help our social media accounts."

I meander back, hiding just behind the partition to get a good view of all the clothes before they head out one by one. I quickly glance at my watch. I can't delay the show any longer, no matter how much I want Dominic here. With a nod to the lighting assistant, the house lights dim and the runway lights up. The music changes to something more upbeat.

I send the first model on her way.

She struts her stuff, hundreds of eyes on her as she makes her way down the length of the runway. I can hear people speaking to each other in hushed whispers, admiring my gorgeous designs. Multiple cameras go off, their flashes almost blinding.

I make last-minute adjustments to each look before I send the model down the runway, fixing crooked earrings or smoothing fabric. I'm in my element, my blood buzzing warmly through my veins. I know every single one of these pieces like they're fragments of my soul. Every stitch, every fold, every seam made with my own two hands.

Before long, the model I selected to open my show comes back. It's chaotic behind the scenes, an entire team helping strip her out of her first look and quickly throw on her second. On the catwalk, the models are calm and collected. Behind the curtain, it's a frantic dance to get changed as quickly as possible. Makeup needs to be retouched; elaborate hairstyles gelled back into place. In the blink of an eye, she's back and ready to be sent out again.

When the show finally draws to a close, all the models file out in a straight line to the sound of thunderous applause. It sends a delightful shiver down my spine. They liked it! They really, truly liked it! As is tradition, the designer is supposed to step out last and take a bow. Taking a deep breath, I do just that, the warmth of the lights overwhelming as the sound of people clapping grows that much louder.

"Wonderful!" someone shouts.

"Amazing!" someone else calls.

I've never been more bashful. I can't believe how well everything worked out. Truly a label launch for the history books, yet...

I can't help but glance at Dominic's empty seat. My disappointment knows no bounds.

"Mommy!" Felicia yells over all the noise. "That's my Mommy!"

I manage to smile despite the cold lump in my throat. At least my baby and best friend are here to celebrate this occasion with me. I'll cry about Dominic's broken promise later. For now, I want to savor this moment for as long as possible.

I step off stage to hug my daughter, thrilled beyond imagination. Felicia and Lana are all smiles and congrats, as are the people around them. After the best ten minutes of my life, it's time to head backstage and deal with the aftermath of a fashion show. I kiss Felicia goodbye and hug Lana once more, then wave to Johnny as he escorts them to the car outside. They're safe.

The chaos backstage is in full swing, and I need a breather before I jump in. I step through the backdoor, sucking in a deep breath, a smile on my face. Before my mind can clear, the door opens behind me. I glance back, expecting Miriam or a model leaving out the back to avoid the crowd, but a huge man emerges and locks eyes with me.

I look in every direction, but there's nowhere to go. The man grabs my arm, yanks me close, and I feel the barrel of a gun against my ribcage.

"You're coming with me," the man growls in my ear.

Alarm bells go off in my head. I realize I stepped outside without the second man Dom sent to stay with me. I'm all alone.

I kick and scream and bite as I'm dragged away from the exit. The cold press of the gun shifts to my temple strikes, and fear slits through me. I'd fight harder, but what if the guy has

an itchy trigger finger? I can't fight too much or he'll kill me. All I can do is let the man take me to God knows where.

A car is waiting nearby, the engine running. I'm thrown into the backseat like a sack of flour, landing with a hard *thud* on the car floor.

"Who the hell are you?" I shout. "What do you want?"

The driver doesn't answer. He simply stomps on the gas and we're off, careening into traffic and narrowly missing cars in other lanes. I hold on for dear life. There's no time for a seat belt, no time to escape. They're going too fast. If I jump out of the car now, I most definitely won't survive the landing.

"Let me go!" I shout, kicking at the back of the driver's seat.

The sharp press of a knife against my windpipe shuts me up. A man beside me is bleeding from one side of his face. It looks like the tip of his ear has been cut off. It takes me a second to recognize him.

"Don't worry, *dolcezza*," he says, Dominic's pet name for me sounding very much like a slur. "Stay quiet and I won't kill you. I'd hate to have to pay to get my car detailed. Do you have any idea how fucking hard dealing with blood stains is?"

"Elio?" I breathe, shocked and bewildered. "You're alive?"

His grin sends a chill racing through me. "It's good to see you, Arin. You're looking well."

"W-what's going on? Why did you..." I shake my head, too confused and angry to form sentences. "What the *fuck*, Elio? Why are you kidnapping me? Where are we going?"

"Would you shut up?" the driver snaps from the front.

I can't turn all the way because of the knife at my throat, but I recognize his voice, too. "Milo?"

My heart races. What the hell is going on here?

A dreadful thought pries its way into my brain.

"What did you do to Dominic?" I rasp, tears stinging my eyes.

“Would you shut her the hell up?” Milo hisses.

Faster than I can think, Elio slams the butt of his knife’s handle against my temple. I slump against the car seat, black creeping in around the edges of my vision. I lose my grip on consciousness, slipping under in a hurry with only one thought lingering on my mind.

Dominic.

CHAPTER 37



ARIN

I have the headache of all headaches when I finally come to. There's no telling how much time has passed. Could be a few minutes, or a few hours, or even a couple of days. It's impossible to tell because it's pitch black with no hint of sunlight to be found. I groan, struggling to sit upright. I quickly realize I'm in a chair, my ankles taped to the legs and my wrists bound behind me.

"Hello?" I call out. My throat is painfully dry.

The lights flash on, blinding me, the contrast so violent I wince from the pain.

"Well, well, well..." comes a man's voice. It takes forever for my eyes to adjust. Elio steps into view, looking way too fucking proud of himself. "About time you woke up, princess. I was worried I fractured your skull or something."

My memories come rushing back to me. The attack after my fashion show, being dragged into the car, Milo in the front seat, Elio being very much alive.

I look around and realize I'm in a warehouse of some sort, surrounded by supply shelves. I'm unable to identify an exit.

"But why?" I demand, my voice weaker than I like. "I don't understand why you'd do any of this!"

Elio regards me with a sneer. "Remember what I told you all those months ago? How I have seven brothers? Yours truly just so happens to be a fraternal twin."

I frown, confusion making my head spin. "You're a twin?"

“Milo and I don’t look that much alike, so I don’t blame you for not noticing. Most people don’t. Hell, even Dominic doesn’t know. Milo got our father’s unfortunate nose.”

I shake my head, continuing to struggle against my bindings. “This doesn’t make any sense. Dominic trusted you! You’re his right-hand man. He trusts you with his life!”

“*Exactly,*” Elio says with a self-satisfied smirk. “He’d never see my betrayal coming in a million years.”

“But *why?*” I shriek, tears streaming down my cheeks. My eyes burn, my head pounds. I’ve got to figure out a way to get out of here.

“Do you want to know why I joined the Family?” Elio asks me. I’m certain his monologue is coming regardless of my answer. “I wanted to belong,” he continues. “My older brothers all joined out of some misguided sense of loyalty. You know what I say? Fuck loyalty. It doesn’t mean shit.”

I grind my teeth, desperately looking around for a way out.

Elio goes on. “I spent years dedicating my life to their cause. Following orders, getting my hands dirty, playing fucking babysitter to you and your brat. And how was I rewarded for my years of hard work? Nothing. I got nothing. Time and time again, I was passed over for promotions and pay bumps. Nothing I did was ever recognized, and what little credit I did earn went to Dominic because he was my immediate superior.

“For years and years, I watched from the sidelines as territories were mismanaged. Capos were shuffled around like playing cards. Milo was having a bit more success than me, but we realized one day that the only way we were ever going to climb the ladder was if we cleared the way.” He chuckles menacingly. “Lorenzo, that lazy fuck, was our biggest obstacle. We had to get rid of him, but we knew it was going to take a lot to get him to fall from grace. He was too well protected, and Dominic would never allow a direct attack.”

Rage burns inside me as I struggle against my bound wrists. The rope bites into my skin, the burn excruciating.

“Then how did you do it?” I mutter bitterly.

“Milo’s always been a gossip. You’d be surprised how much damage a well-placed whisper can do. It didn’t take very long before Lorenzo started doubting his number two. Dominic’s always been well-respected, and he knows how to run things. All Milo had to do was convince Lorenzo that Dominic’s ambitions were getting to his head. A fake text message here, a couple of false rumors there... Desperate men do stupid things, Arin. If Lorenzo didn’t do something about Dominic soon, Lorenzo could kiss his position on the ladder goodbye. At least, that’s what my brother led him to believe.”

“So that’s why he came after Dominic?” I rasp. “Because you convinced Lorenzo it was either him or Dom?”

Elio chuckles. “I must admit, it worked out surprisingly well. Of course, I didn’t expect Lorenzo to drag another capo into everything, but that turned out to be icing on the cake. It opened double the territory that Milo and I could split. Once my brother distilled enough distrust between Lorenzo and Dominic, the rest was history.”

“You *used* him,” I gawk. “Dominic trusted you and you used him!”

“Cry me a fucking river, sweetheart. That’s just politics.” Elio circles me like a bird of prey. “It was only a matter of time before Dominic made his move to oust Lorenzo on his own. He did all the heavy lifting for us. Instead of taking out three motherfuckers, we only have to focus on one. Work smarter, not harder and all that jazz.”

“What does kidnapping me have to do with any of it?”

“God, you’re fucking dense, huh?” He grabs me by the throat, his fingers squeezing so hard I can feel his nails breaking skin. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you, Arin. Dom would destroy the sun and the moon if it meant keeping you safe. Do you think I could truly destroy him without using you to do it?”

Dread claws through me, shredding my lungs and my stomach and my guts. My insides are hollow and cold. “You

wouldn't," I wheeze around his chokehold, tears stinging my eyes.

He pats my cheek. I don't appreciate the condescension. "Oh, but I would."

"You don't have to do this."

"Oh, but I do. Killing you, one of their capos, *and* decimating one of the Family's biggest warehouses is going to send the perfect message. We're done working for them. We work for ourselves."

"One of their capos?" I echo, confused.

Milo arrives, interrupting our conversation, dragging in a body with him.

Dominic.

I choke on a sob. His face is almost unrecognizable from all the cuts and bruises. His shirt is stained red with blood, his form limp and unmoving.

"Dom!" I cry. "Dom, oh my God!"

Milo drops him at my feet. The only reason I know he's conscious is the shallow rise and fall of his chest.

"Arin," he mumbles past his split lip.

Milo kicks him in the gut. "Shut the hell up!"

Tears stream down my cheeks. "I'm here, Dominic," I whimper. "Don't worry, I'm here."

"Are you hurt?" His voice is so weak I can barely hear him.

My heart breaks. He's broken and bloody, yet he's more concerned about me.

Milo ignores us, holding up what I assume is a detonator, judging by its big red button on top. "Building's rigged. Now we just need to get the hell out of here and—"

Faster than I can blink, Dominic jumps to his feet with whatever strength he has left. His hulking frame knocks Milo to the cold cement floor. My heart lodges in my throat as I

helplessly watch. It's a storm of violent, bloody fists. Milo loses another tooth to accompany the ones he's already lost. Dominic has the upper hand, smacking the detonator away.

Elio swoops in, chasing after the device as it skitters across the floor. "Jesus Christ, be careful! The whole place is gonna blow with us inside!"

I finally feel the duct tape around my ankles give way, ripping with the force of my kick. My hands are still bound, but at least I have mobility. I throw myself after Elio, tackling him as hard as I can before he can reach the detonator. I'm at a disadvantage with my hands stuck behind my back. Elio makes use of this fact, moving quickly to wrap his arm around my throat. I'm trapped in his chokehold, squirming for freedom as he squeezes tight.

"I fucking hate you," he seethes against my ear.

"Good," I growl. "Because I fucking hate you, too!"

I immediately chomp down on his arm as hard as I can. My teeth break skin, the taste of salty copper coating my tongue as Elio howls in pain. Dominic is still in the middle of his fight with Milo, but I can take care of myself just fine. Tapping into the well of rage storming inside me, I make sure to give Elio a piece of my mind.

I kick with all my might, check him in the gut with a good ram of my shoulders. Somewhere in the middle of the chaos, I finally manage to pry my hands apart. I scratch and I claw and slap him, making sure to leave Elio no time to recover. He might be twice my size and three times as strong, but there's no limit to my fury.

Screw the odds.

I lose it on Elio, climbing his back like a tree while I bite and claw at his neck and shoulders and face. He tries to slam me against a shelf, the hard impact of the metal stinging against my spine and my head. I don't feel the pain, though. Too much adrenaline. With the threat of death lingering over us, all I can do is fight.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Milo take a nasty right hook to the jaw. His eyes roll back as his body slumps to the floor. Out cold.

Dominic is winded, but not out for the count. He rushes Elio, matching my furious blows. Elio throws me off him and I land with a hard slam.

Right in front of the detonator. I pick it up quickly, minding the button that could end all of us in one fell swoop.

“Run!” Dominic shouts at me.

“Not without you!” I scream back.

With one mighty shove backwards, Dominic throws Elio against the nearest shelf. A few of the lighter items fall off, burying Elio under a mountain of fake cash. Dominic moves swiftly, taking my hand as we race up the stairs toward the second level. From where we are, I see a swarm of Elio’s mercenaries flooding in through the exit, their guns raised and ready to shoot anything that moves.

It’s time to strategize. We continue to climb the stairs toward the roof of the warehouse. My lungs are on fire and the muscles in my thighs and calves burn like fire is in my blood. I’m breathing so hard my throat feels ripped to shreds. Dominic shoves through the roof access door, the muggy air sticking uncomfortably to my skin.

There’s no way down. I can hear our enemies approaching from below.

We’re trapped.

Dominic takes the detonator from me before looking deeply into my eyes. He’s in rough shape. Rougher than rough, practically on Death’s doorstep.

“I love you,” he says. “Never forget that.”

My heart twists in my chest. Why does it sound like he’s saying goodbye? In exactly two seconds, I realize why.

There’s no time to protest. Dominic grabs me by the shoulders, pulls me toward the edge, and we leap off the roof. He presses the detonator’s switch. I shriek as I plummet feet-

first into the dark waters of the Hudson River while the sound of a terrifying explosion rattles my eardrums. The warehouse ignites into a ball of flames, pieces of the walls shooting out with violent force. The heat at my back is unbearable, but it lasts only for a second before I'm suddenly engulfed on all sides by frigid water.

My senses are shot. I can't see anything, can't feel anything. For a second, I wonder if I'm dead. In a panic, I accidentally try to draw in a breath. Holy shit, I'm going to drown!

My body kicks in before my brain does. Kicking with all my might, I somehow manage to pull myself to the surface. I hack and cough, both because of the water in my lungs and the heavy smoke filling the air. Disoriented, I stare up at the remains of the warehouse. It's an inferno. There's no way anybody inside could have survived that.

Elio and Milo, along with their team of paid thugs, are most likely dead. And Dominic...

Dominic.

I tread water frantically, searching every which way for a sign of him. The current is strong and there's a good chance the explosion might have knocked him unconscious. Panic grips my spine. Where is he?

"Dom!" I cry, splashing around uselessly. "Dominic!"

I muster up the strength to dive under again, taking as deep a breath as I can manage. It's too dark to see anything, and the pollution definitely doesn't help. Coming back up to the surface, I really start to lose it. My brain is overloaded. There's too many things going on at once. I'm trying to stay afloat while searching for him, overwhelmed by the sound of sirens and the foreboding orange glow of the warehouse ablaze.

"*Dominic!*" I scream, my voice breaking.

Somehow, I make it to land. I'm so cold it's painful. My teeth won't stop chattering. When I pull myself onto the dock, my body shivers so hard it makes me dizzy. Looking out to the water, I see no one.

I'm all alone out here.

Dominic is gone.

CHAPTER 38



ARIN

It's all over the news.

Some people assume it was an accident. Maybe an electrical fire or mishandled chemicals that weren't stored properly. Others think it might have been a domestic terrorist attack. The explosion was so big the whole harbor shook, and half of New York heard the massive blast tear through the air. The police are still investigating, piecing together what little evidence hasn't been burned to a crisp.

But I know the truth.

I know the truth and I can't say anything without a flurry of unwanted attention. If the Mob discovers I've blabbed to the cops, I could put myself and Felicia at risk. All I can do is keep my mouth shut.

The hours that followed the explosion were a blur, my memories foggy thanks to my unfortunate adrenaline crash. If Johnny hadn't been a few blocks away, apparently at Dominic's instruction, the chances that I would've frozen to death were distressingly high.

I waited a day, biting my nails all the way down to their beds. According to the police reports, several bodies were discovered at the warehouse, charred beyond recognition, though evidence of torched weapons suggested foul play might be involved.

No sign of Dominic, though.

Another day passed, and then another and another.

Before I knew it, a week had come and gone.

Still no sign of Dominic.

I receive several visitors in the days following the incident. A couple of capos paying respects. Isabella and Lana have been coming over almost every day, helping me take care of Felicia while I struggle with my daily cocktail of anguish, anxiety, and dread. No matter how hard I wrack my brain, I can't remember seeing Dominic anywhere in the water. My heart thuds loudly in my chest at the memory, all the *what if* scenarios gripping my thoughts like a starving python.

What if he drowned? What if the blast killed him before he even hit the water? What if the current swept him out into the Atlantic? The endless worrying is enough to make me puke. In fact, I do—and very frequently.

“Let me call the doctor,” Isabella offers. “Those waters are so polluted. You might've caught a parasite.”

I shake my head, waving her off weakly. I've been camped out on the living room couch for ages, unwilling to climb into either mine or Dominic's bed. All that empty space on the mattress next to me only reminds me of his glaring absence. At least here on the couch, I can press my back against the cushions and pretend it's Dominic holding me so snugly.

“I made your favorite,” Lana offers that night, just as she's done every night before. “Tuna casserole. I'll even add extra cheese and toss it under the broiler.”

Normally, mentioning Lana's famous tuna casserole would earn her a Pavlovian response. My mouth normally waters at the mere memory of her saucy, cheesy, calorie-intensive meal. Today, however, just the thought of tuna makes me shoot upright and run straight for the nearest bathroom. I luckily lose my lunch in the toilet, dizzy and feverish all over.

“Mommy, oh no!” Felicia gasps, holding onto her Nona's hand as they watch in horror from the bathroom door.

“That's it,” Isabella says, hurrying over to rub small circles against my back. “I'm calling the doctor. This is far too serious.”

“I’m fine,” I try to insist, except my voice is weak and cracking. “I’m fine. I’m just nauseated.”

Lana enters the bathroom, too, with a tall glass of water from the kitchen. “Nauseated?” she echoes. “When was your last time of the month?” Lana glances at Felicia. She’s far too young to understand what’s going on, but I appreciate my friend using the euphemism.

I think about it. Really, truly think about. Dominic and I have been having sex regularly for months now, but my period was always on time. I’ve been so distracted with the fashion show and all of Dominic’s work nonsense and being fucking kidnapped that I haven’t exactly been keeping diligent track of my cycle.

I do the mental math. It’s a rough estimate, but I’m pretty sure I’m over two weeks late.

“Okay,” I rasp. “A doctor might be a good idea.”

“You think?” Lana replies dryly.

I hurl into the toilet again.



I’m alone in the doctor’s office. Lana, Isabella, and Felicia were told to wait outside. As much as I need some support right now, it’s probably for the best. It’s cramped in here as it is, and the walls feel like they’re creeping in closer and closer with every passing second. Seated on the examination table, all I can do is fiddle with the loose thread at the edge of my sweater’s sleeve, silently willing my heart to calm down.

Unconsciously, I start rubbing my belly in a circular motion. Call it a mother’s intuition, but I think I know the answer even without the doctor’s confirmation. I remember feeling this way when I was pregnant with Felicia, a nervous excitement bubbling through my veins. Could it be? And if it’s true, am I ready to do this alone?

Again.

I grind my teeth, fighting desperately to keep my eyes from welling up. Dominic is out there somewhere. I can feel it. I refuse to let myself believe he's well and truly gone. He can't be dead. He just *can't*.

The doctor steps in, chart in hand. She gives the test results a quick scan. "It seems congratulations are in order. All your tests came back positive."

Even though I'm not as surprised as I should be, the air rushes out of my lungs all the same. I don't know what to make of all the emotions swirling around inside me.

Joy, excitement, wonder.

Fear, anguish, loss.

I'm obviously ecstatic knowing I'm with child again. The thought of Felicia having a little brother or sister to grow up alongside makes me hopeful for the future. I want nothing more than to fill my home with the sound of my children's laughter and shower them with all the love I'm capable of giving.

But I don't want to do it without Dominic. Once was hard enough. This is too much to bear.

So I weep, sobbing heavily into my palms as cold reality sets in. No matter how much I hope and pray, the signs aren't looking good. Dread and doubt tear through me until I'm hollow. There's an insidious voice in the back of my head that won't stop repeating *Dominic is dead*.

The doctor shifts uncomfortably. "Is there anything I can do for you, Ms. Wilson? Would you perhaps like to discuss your options?"

I manage to pull myself together long enough to shake my head. I wipe my eyes with my sleeves, my tears darkening the fabric as they soak into the threads. "N-no, thank you. I'm ok. Just a little overwhelmed."

Gathering my coat, I shakily make my way out to the waiting room. Lana, Isabella, and Felicia are already standing, talking in hushed whispers to a man I recognize.

“Johnny?” I breathe. “What are you doing here?”

He dips his head respectfully. “Ms. Wilson. I’m afraid I have bad news.”

I shake my head. That look on his face... There’s only one thing he could be here to inform me of. “No,” I whimper. “No, no, *no*.” My head spins. I’m not anchored to my body.

“We have ears within the police department,” he goes on, his face dark and grim. “They found a... body.”

It’s a good thing I’m at the doctor’s office because I’m about to be sick.

“It’s been sitting in the morgue for a few weeks now. They fished it out of the Hudson, but it was so bloated they had difficulty identifying the deceased. They were, however, able to recover this.”

Johnny turns his phone around and shows me a picture. The quality is blurry, taken in dim lighting as if the photographer was trying very hard to be discreet and avoid detection. Between my trembling hands, my teary eyes, and the poor image quality, it takes me a few seconds to make sense of what I’m looking at.

It’s a clothing label stitched to the back of a suit jacket.

Marina’s.

The special label I made for Dominic and Dominic alone. It really *is* him.

Grief overwhelms me. In the span of thirty minutes, I’ve gone from getting the best news to the absolute worst. My heart is a shattered, broken thing.

I don’t have the strength to put it back together.

CHAPTER 39



ARIN

Five Months Later

“**Y**ou’ll never guess who called me yesterday asking for a private fitting with you,” Miriam all but squeals over the phone. “I’ll give you a guess. They call her Queen Bey.”

I nearly drop the stack of fabric samples I’ve been carrying. “Are you serious? Please, tell me you’re serious.”

“Deadly serious, honey. So what should I tell her?”

Ever since the incident, people have been theorizing non-stop about who I am and what the hell happened. Apparently, a handful of people witnessed me being thrown into a car at gunpoint. Even after I made a public statement that it was a prank gone wrong—it was the only way to keep the cops from asking too many questions—people weren’t quick to believe me. Especially not now that I’ve essentially gone into hiding, refusing to make public appearances and only working on orders out of Isabella’s winter home.

Miriam frankly loved the idea. “A reclusive designer of extraordinary talent is a narrative that sells itself,” she’d told me. “Your demand is going to skyrocket!”

After learning of Dominic’s fate, I decided I had to get out of New York. I packed everything I could and took Felicia with me. My daughter’s flourishing out here away from the concrete jungle, and I’m pretty sure her little brother growing

in my belly appreciates the fresh air. It's a peaceful existence, far from the spotlight and crime and chaos of the city that never sleeps.

"Tell her I'm booked out until January," I say, my phone pinched between my ear and shoulder as I set my things down on my work desk. "I'm still working on the gowns Genevieve ordered for the Met Gala, so there's a bit of a wait."

"I don't think this particular client is accustomed to waiting," Miriam admits.

"I know, but you can't rush art. Mrs. Carter would know that." I flip through my sketchbook, admiring the dresses I'll be busy making in the next few weeks. "How are things at the store on Fifth Avenue?"

"Everything's looking good. We'll be ready for the grand opening by the end of the month. There's a lot of speculation as to whether or not you'll be there."

I smile even though I know she can't see me. "The clothes should be the highlight of the event, not me. Besides, as my representative, I trust you'll do the grand opening justice."

"You flatter me," Miriam says with a giggle. "Oh, shoot. I've got to go. That's the other line. I'll talk to you soon, babe."

"Talk to you soon."

I set my phone down and take a deep breath. It's only one in the afternoon, which means I won't have to pick up Felicia from preschool for another two hours. I was intending on spending my day productively, but my brain's been foggy lately, preoccupied with thoughts about the bun in my oven.

Isabella has basically given me free reign to do whatever I want to her winter home, even going so far as to add my name to the deed. I've been wanting to turn the room at the end of the hall into a nursery, but I'm as indecisive as ever when it comes to what color I want to paint the walls and where I should shop to buy all the things I'll need to welcome my son into the world. I suppose I could always order everything

online, but there's something incredibly satisfying about going to a store and picking everything out in person.

Thud.

I turn around and frown. The sound came from somewhere near the front of the house. There's plenty of wildlife in the area, so my initial thought is that it's those pesky raccoons I've caught rummaging through our trash. I'm about to ignore it and go back to work when I hear another *thud, thud*.

That's no raccoon. It sounds an awful lot like footsteps.

Whatever it is, it's on my front porch.

I remind myself to stay calm, though my time spent being the woman of a Mafia capo has taught me the importance of being alert and ready to fight if necessary. I'm all by myself out here.

Thud, thud, thud.

It seems like my unexpected guest is... pacing?

I grab the baseball bat out of the umbrella holder by the front door, holding it in front of me as I go to open it. I whip it open and shout, "Can't you read the sign? It says no trespassing!"

"Arin, it's me—"

I swing the bat before I can register his voice. It knocks him right in the ribs. The man keels over with a pained grunt. When our eyes lock, I'm in too much shock to worry about whether or not I've broken something.

"Dominic?" I choke.

My body is frozen where I stand as I stare at him.

He looks different. His hair is longer and he sports a thick, but well-trimmed beard. Gone are his iconic suits, exchanged for a simple black Henley and dark jeans. He looks leaner, like he hasn't been eating as well as he used to, but there's no denying he's the most handsome man I've ever laid eyes on.

And he's here. In the flesh.

“Did you miss me, dolcez—”

I jab him in the gut with the tip of my baseball bat. “FUCK YOU, YOU ABSOLUTE DICKHEAD!”

“Arin, please, calm down,” he says hastily, rubbing his stomach with a grimace with one hand, holding the other out to me. “Let me explain.”

“Five months,” I roar at the top of my lungs. “*Five months*, Dominic! How could you let me think you were dead this whole time? Do you have any idea how heartbroken I was? Oh my God, I thought you—” I wheeze, I sob. I’m probably an ugly, hysterical mess, but I don’t give a damn. My hands tremble, my body is ice cold and flaming hot at the same time. “We had a *funeral* for you,” I whisper. My throat is so tight it burns.

Dominic steps forward and sweeps me up in his embrace, his strong arms very much like coming home. It’s almost ridiculous how easily I melt into his touch, clinging to him like a lifeline out in the middle of unforgiving seas. He smells just the way I remember; his skin is warm just the way I remember, his presence is calming just the way I remember.

Dominic presses kisses against my forehead, the top of my hair. “I’m sorry, dolcezza. I died a little every day that I couldn’t be with you.”

“But *why*? Why couldn’t you? What happened, Dom?”

“Let’s have this conversation inside, cuore mio. You’re shivering like crazy.”

I nod, too overwhelmed to argue.

There’s no need for me to carry myself inside because Dominic does it for me, easily lifting me into his arms. He carries me bridal style over to the couch, allowing me to straddle his lap and hold him close. I bury my face against the crook of his neck, unwilling to give him even an ounce of space. The past few months have been unbearable without him. I’m not letting him out of my sight.

“Tell me,” I mumble against his skin. “Don’t you dare leave out any details.”

Dominic rubs my back in slow, soothing circles. He holds me just as tight as I hold him. “Death is the only way out of the life,” he starts, his voice a low rumble against my ear. “I realized something the day of your show. I’d been so distracted, trying to take control of my new position and getting used to my responsibilities as a capo. I didn’t realize how much of my time it was taking. As a result, it meant less time for you and Felicia.

“But that day... When we had our fight because you were worried I wouldn’t come... It made me realize I was putting my duties to the Family before the only real family I have. And when I learned Elio and Milo had taken you... I knew I had to make a change. I couldn’t just leave, though. That’s not how we work. So when those bastards wanted to blow up the warehouse, I saw an opportunity.”

“You faked your death,” I mumble.

Dominic nods. “It had to be convincing. Unfortunately, I had to deceive you as well. If anyone thought for even a moment that you were in on my plan, they would have kept looking.”

“So you *let* me grieve?” I smack him on the shoulder. “You dick.”

“Believe me, I’m not happy about it, either. I can’t even begin to apologize for the pain I’ve caused.”

I pull back a little, more than aware of how hot and swollen my eyes are from crying. “But why did it take so long? Why couldn’t you have tried to reach out?”

“I needed to wait to be declared officially deceased,” he says. He sounds a little too casual about it. “And the thing about being a dead person is that it’s very difficult to get anything done. No phone, no place to live, no access to my bank accounts. It was a hassle, but I finally managed to secure myself a new ID. See?”

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a driver’s license. I take it, turning it over to study it thoroughly. It’s incredibly

convincing. From its design to its weight to his picture printed on the front. The only thing that catches my eye is his name.

“Dom Wilson?” I read aloud, a light warmth blooming in my chest. “You’re going by my last name now?”

“If you’ll allow it,” he says with a gentle smile.

I half-laugh, half-cry. My nerves are all jumbled up, but I don’t care. When I’m with Dominic, I feel safe to let it all out. “Of course I’ll allow it.”

He runs his hands down my waist, then glances down, clearly noticing the weight gain. It’s not much yet, but it is noticeable. His eyes lift to mine, questioning.

I smile at him and nod. “I’m pregnant. I found out the same day I was told you were dead.”

“My dolcezza,” he whispers, his eyes filled with emotion. “Can I please kiss you now?”

“You don’t even have to ask.”

Dominic cups my face in his hands and dips in to slot his lips between mine. A perfect fit. Everything about him is familiar and wonderful. Our mouths meld together, we share the same heated breaths. It isn’t long before my hands comb through his hair, moving down to rake through his beard.

I giggle against his mouth. “Tickles.”

“Should I shave?” he muses, arms circling around my waist.

“I really like it, actually. It’s very sexy.”

“What my woman wants, my woman gets.”

“If that’s the case...” I roll my hips against him, shivering at the sensation of his hard cock nudging my inner thigh. “Your woman wants to feel you inside her.”

His devilish grin sends heat pooling between my legs. “Anything for you, dolcezza.”

CHAPTER 40



DOMINIC

I carry her to the bedroom, laying her down on the sheets as carefully as I can. I'm more than aware of her swollen belly, the curve of it utterly divine. We move slowly, ensuring that we savor every second together to make up for my prolonged absence. I slip her out of her clothes, peeling back layers like I'm unwrapping a gift.

In many ways, she *is* a gift.

And she's all mine.

Every movement I make is gentle, cautious. She means just as much to me as the child she holds within her. Carefully pulling her to the edge of the bed, I get down on my knees and part her knees, kissing a line up her thighs. My hands roam over her belly, her soft skin silky against my rough palms.

"I can't believe it," I murmur against her core. "Do you know if it's a boy or a girl?"

"A boy," she says with a contented sigh. "I had an ultrasound not that long ago."

A thrill shoots through me. A son. I'm going to have a son. "Is he..."

"Happy and healthy," she confirms.

Pride stirs in my chest. I can't even begin to describe how much I adore her. "I love you, Arin," I whisper against her leg, teasing her folds with the tip of my finger. "I love you with all my heart."

"I love you, too," she breathes. "So much."

Her pussy glistens with want, her clit red and begging to be touched. I've thought about this moment for months. There were days when the only thing keeping me going was the promise of getting to hold Arin in my arms again.

"I should have been here for you," I grumble, rubbing my thumb over her sensitive nub. "I'm sorry you had to go through this all alone again."

She jolts, moaning with pleasure. "You're here now. That's all that matters."

"I swear I'll be here the whole time when we have our third."

Arin laughs. "Our third? Getting a little ahead of ourselves, are we?"

"I've already got names picked out for our fourth and fifth."

She balks. "You want *five* kids?"

"I want eight or nine, if I'm being honest, but I'll be perfectly happy with however many you're willing to give me."

Arin squeezes either side of my head between her gorgeous thighs. "We'll talk about it later. For now, I want you to make up for the five months you've been gone."

A growl rumbles out of my chest. "With pleasure."

I dive in, placing her legs over my shoulders and grasping her by the hips to give myself access. I lick a stripe up her folds, savoring the taste of her sweet pussy before moving in to tease her senseless. Keeping a steady pace, I draw tight circles against her clit with the tip of my tongue, relishing the way she bucks against my mouth in search of that sweet friction. Her moans become tight and breathy as she grips the sheets, her head tossed back as ecstasy claims her. She comes on my tongue, her back arching beautifully as the rest of her body trembles with pleasure.

I get up off the floor and join her on the bed, our mouths finding each other like moths to a flame.

“Get on top of me, dolcezza. I want to see you ride my cock.”

She climbs on top before piercing herself on my throbbing length. Her walls are deliciously hot and tight, clenching around me as she takes me all the way to the hilt. I’m lost in reverence, staring up at her like a holy idol. I adore the roundness of her breasts and the curve of her belly, in awe of her radiant glow.

“Mother of my children,” I murmur. “So beautiful. God, you really are so beautiful.”

“I don’t think I’m going to last long,” she admits.

“That’s alright, mi amore. I don’t think I’ll last long, either.” I brace my hands on either side of her hips, offering her support. “Go at whatever pace you’d like. I’m all yours.”

“Mine,” she mumbles, moving her hips. She picks an easy cadence, gliding up and down my cock at her leisure. “Mine,” she says again with a languid moan. “All mine.”

“That’s right.”

The tight coil of heat in the pit of my stomach erupts with such intensity that spots speckle my vision. I’m quick to lay her down on the sheets, kissing her sweetly and slowly. I love the way Arin feels curled up against me, everything about her bringing peace to my soul.

“I’m sorry I hit you with the bat, by the way,” she says around that adorable laugh-snort of hers. It’s the cutest sound in the world, second only to the sound of Felicia’s laughter.

“Twice,” I point out. “You hit me with a bat twice.” She laughs again. I kiss the tip of her nose. “I guess I deserved it.”

“You guess?”

“Okay, okay. I deserved it.”

Arin peeks over my shoulder to check the digital clock resting on the bedside table. “I need to pick up Felicia from preschool. What are we going to tell her now that you’re back? She was at your funeral.”

“Any chance we could tell her it was a game?”

“What kind of fucked up game is that?” Arin argues.

“I guess I’ll... try and tell her the truth.”

“Probably for the best. Try sugar coating it. You know, like how you’d let a kid know Santa isn’t real.”

I grimace. “I can’t say I’m looking forward to it.”

“Tough,” she says with a smirk. “Consider it your penance for leaving us like that.”

I kiss her tenderly, knowing deep down Arin’s right. Placing a gentle hand on her belly, I say, “I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to you. All of you.”

“Damn straight, Mr. Wilson. Damn straight. Though I guarantee you that telling your mother is going to be a hell of a lot worse.”

I clap my forehead. “Sweet Lord, my *mother*.”

Arin cackles. “I’ll start planning your second funeral.”



I’m not used to having this much free time on my hands, but I can’t say I mind. Now that I’ve found this little slice of Heaven, there’s no need to give orders and follow commands. I can be present—here with the love of my life, my darling daughter, and my son who’s due soon.

As expected, my mother gives me the tongue lashing of a lifetime. She curses me up and down in both Italian and English, but all is forgiven when I pull her into a tight hug and explain myself the same way I did with Arin.

I spend my days fixing up the house, preparing for our little one’s arrival. There’s something satisfying about working with my hands. I take full responsibility of fixing up the nursery so Arin doesn’t have to lift a finger, repainting the walls a fresh coat of deep evergreen, popping into Arin’s office-turned-studio to check in on her latest creation.

Her talent will never cease to amaze me. It's fascinating, watching her turn a simple idea jotted down in pencil into a beautiful, tangible thing. I love the way her whole face lights up when she works, so in tune with her craft that she's never short of awe-inspiring.

My favorite days are the ones I get to spend with Felicia outside. When the weather is mild and the night air is clear, we spend hours playing outside in the front yard surrounded on all sides by tall, towering trees. She's going through a phase right now where all she wants to play is pirates. She's a swashbuckling captain, complete with a skull and crossbones hat and eyepatch her mother made out of felt, and I'm...

"Navy seadog!" Felicia growls, pointing the end of her foam sword in my face. "Time to walk the plank!"

I'm not going to lie, it's very weird playing the part of law enforcement after my years spent working for the other team. But my daughter's too cute to argue with, so I'm very committed to my role.

"Curse you, Pirate One-Eye!" I step off the edge of a fallen log, laying down in the grass while flailing my arms above my head. "Oh, God! These waters are infested with sharks!"

Felicia laughs maniacally, copying the cartoon villains she so adores on TV. "Arr! Let that be a lesson for ya, scallywag!"

Arin steps out onto the porch with a giggle, calling out to us. "Dinner's ready. Come inside and wash up, please."

"Aww," Felicia whines. "I still need to get the treasure."

I lift my head off the ground. "Maybe you can ask Mom to help you find it?"

"Good idea. Mommy, come help!"

Arin laughs, stepping down the front steps of the porch. She keeps a hand on the railing, moving with great care. Her belly is large and swollen, her due date about two weeks away. Felicia quickly takes her mother's hand and guides her into the trees, not too far away and still within earshot. Felicia gasps at the ground.

“Look at these sticks!” she declares. “They’re like lines on a map.”

“Do you think we should follow them?” Arin asks. “We need to find where X marks the spot.”

“Yeah!” Felicia cheers, tugging Arin along.

All according to plan.

While Arin follows Felicia around on the set path I helped build, I get up, dust myself off, and pull the ring box from my back pocket. I’ve been lying on top of the X the entire time. When my girls round the base of the tree trunk, I’m already on one knee with the ring box open. Inside sits my grandmother’s pearl engagement ring.

Arin beams, her smile brighter than the sun as her eyes gloss over with happy tears. “Oh, you two are so silly,” she says with a snuffle.

“Cuore mio,” I begin. “The first time I laid eyes on you, you were screaming bloody murder into your phone in the middle of the first-class lounge at JFK.”

Her cheeks turn a bright, bashful red. “God, please don’t remind me. It was so embarrassing.”

I chuckle, shaking my head slightly. “I thought you were perfect. Before you, I’d never met a woman more beautiful, more feisty, more brilliant. Fate led us to meeting that day, and it was fate when I found you again. When I’m with you, everything is right with the world. I never want to spend another day without you. Marina, will you do me the honor of officially letting me be Mr. Wilson?”

Arin nods, laughing lightly. “Absolutely.”

CHAPTER 41



ARIN

“Tommy, can you say Dada? *Da—da.*”
“Mama.”

Dominic sighs, pouting. “Come on, little man. You’re breaking my heart.”

I can’t help but laugh at my husband’s futile attempts to teach our son how to pronounce his *D*’s. Tomasso sits in his highchair by the kitchen table, his bib almost completely covered in mashed peaches.

“You’re supposed to put the food *in* his mouth, sweetheart,” I chide.

“It’s harder than it looks,” Dominic insists, scooping up a bit of food at the corner of our son’s mouth. “Come on, bambino. You have to eat every last bite. How else are you going to grow big and strong like your *Da—da?*”

“Mama!”

Dominic places a hand over his heart. “What’s it going to take, little man? Want me to pay you? I’ll make it worth your while if you say Dada.”

I roll my eyes, setting my laptop aside. I’ve been busy all morning replying to emails, catching up on all my A-list client orders. “I don’t think a one-year-old understands the concept of currency, sweetheart.”

“It’s never too early to understand the importance of a dollar.”

“You’re such an accountant.”

“I *am* an accountant.”

Even though I’m making more than enough money to provide for my whole family, Dominic insisted on finding a job. The first year was a tense one, spent constantly worrying about him being recognized. We’re far enough away from New York City, but you can never be too careful in this day and age. He’s almost unrecognizable from the man he used to be, but that didn’t make us any less tense about being discovered.

He decided to take a job at a small, independent accounting firm in town. It has no more than five full-time employees, which is perfect for keeping a low profile. In the grand scheme of things, it made sense for Dominic to take the position. His loan sharking days might be behind him, but he’s still got a knack for crunching numbers.

Lana bursts in through the front door, her arms full of brightly wrapped boxes. “Everybody’s favorite aunt is here!” she announces. “Where’s the birthday girl?”

I walk over and take some of the gifts. “Isabella took Felicia out for ice cream. Her friends will be here any minute now.”

My best friend looks around at all the streamers and balloons filling the living room. There isn’t an inch of our home that isn’t covered in birthday-related paraphernalia. “You went really hard on the decorations this year, huh?”

“I did that,” Dominic says, his chest high and proud. “I want all her classmates to know her dad throws the best birthday parties.”

I shrug. “He’s got a super competitive streak.”

“Whatever makes you happy, big guy,” Lana replies with a dry grin.

Tomasso squirms in his seat, his face curling up in agitation. A soft whimper bubbles past his lips, giving way quickly to ear-piercing sobs. He puts his hands up, reaching for me with his tiny little fingers. “Mama!”

I pick him up, holding him close to my chest as I soothingly pat his back. “It’s okay, sweetie. I’m here, I’m here.”

Dominic scratches behind his ear. “I think he hates me.”

“Don’t be silly, sweetheart. Tommy loves you very much.” I shoot him a cheeky wink. “He just loves me more.”

My husband stands at my side, one hand on the small of my back as he dips down to kiss the top of Tomasso’s head. “I can’t say I blame him.”

Lana smacks her lips. “So... You’re about to have a bunch of kindergartners running around on a sugar high. Please tell me you’ve got mimosas or something to take the edge off.”

“We’re serving the kids Shirley Temples with their pizza party. I can make yours non-virgin if you’re good.”

She rubs her hands together. “*If* I’m good? Babe, I’m a fucking saint.”

A sharp gasp at the front door alerts us of a new arrival. Felicia points a finger at her Aunt Lana. “That’s a dollar in the swear jar!”

Lana grimaces. “Why is it that every time I leave your place, my wallet is a million times lighter?”

“Because you swear like a sailor,” Dominic says casually, bending down just in time to catch Felicia as she throws herself into his arms.

“Nona got me three scoops,” she announces, already buzzing. She hasn’t even had cake yet. Something tells me today’s going to be a long, eventful day.

Isabella shrugs unapologetically. “What can I say? I love to spoil my granddaughter.”

Felicia eyes all the presents Lana brought in. “Can I open one now?”

I shake my head, smiling gently. “Why don’t you wait for your friends to arrive? You can open all of them at once when they get here.”

“But I wanna open one now!”

“Patience, principessa,” Dominic tells her. “That’s something you and your mother have to work on.”

I nudge his calf with my foot. “*Hey.*”

Felicia opens her mouth like she’s about to protest, but the doorbell rings. She rushes past us, excitedly pulling open the front door. A hoard of eight to nine girls and three boys greet the birthday girl loudly, storming in as they excitedly chatter about everything and anything.

The rest of the day goes by like a blur. There’s pizza and popcorn and movies. It’s almost a little bit frightening how much candy the kids are able to consume. They play video games and eat cake, but the most important event of all is when Felicia sits down with all her friends to rip into all of her presents.

New Barbie dolls, a friendship bracelet making kit, art supplies complete with glitter crayons. Our home suddenly feels like a messy aisle at Toys “R” US. One of the boys Felicia has a crush on—which she made me swear never to tell another living being—gifts her with a cute necklace decked out in fake diamond crystals. It’s safe to say she feels every bit a principessa when she puts it on.

All in all, it’s a wonderful day full of laughter and smiles and only one spilled soda on the couch. Before I know it, the party’s over with parents showing up to retrieve their kids. Felicia is so tuckered out from all the fun she’s had that she willingly brushes her teeth and goes to bed.

“Did you have a good day, sweetie?” I ask her as Dominic tucks her in.

She nods, yawning widely. “Yes. Lots of fun.”

My husband kisses her forehead. “Good night, birthday girl. I love you.”

“Love you, too,” she mumbles, already drifting off.

Dominic and I say our goodbyes to Lana and Isabella at the door, promising to get together in the next few weeks for a

big family dinner. We take care of Tomasso next, Dominic changing his diaper while I pick out his jammies for the night. He sleeps soundly in his crib, space-themed mobile turning slowly overhead.

It's then, and only then, that my husband and I have a moment to ourselves. He kisses me in the hall the way he always does, breathing me in slowly and passionately as his fingers comb through my hair.

"You know," he mumbles against my lips. "My birthday is in a couple of months."

"Is this a hint that I should start thinking about what present to give you?"

"I think you already know what I want."

I hum contently, pressing my hands against his chest. "I have a vague idea, but you should probably tell me. Just in case."

He nibbles on my earlobe, his breath hot against the crook of my neck. "You. In my bed. Dressed in something silky."

"Preferably easy to remove, right?"

"Always."

"You know," I say, tracing my fingers down the back of his neck. "You've been an amazing husband lately."

He frowns. "Only lately?"

"I think you deserve your birthday present early."

"Now that's more like it—"

We're interrupted by the sound of Tomasso's soft cries over the baby monitor in my hand. Dominic and I are quick to re-enter the nursery to check on him. Dominic picks him up, rocking him gently to soothe his wailing.

"What's wrong, little man? Bad dream?"

"Da..." Tomasso babbles. "Dada."

I bring a hand up to my face and cover my smile, practically melting at the sight of Dominic and our son

together. My husband holds our boy close, the look on his face absolutely precious. My heart has never been so full.

“That’s my boy.”

EPILOGUE



DOMINIC

“Now, for tonight’s story. The NYPD has stated that this is the biggest arrest in all the city’s history,” the news anchor informs flatly, staring into the camera like she’s trying to burrow into my very soul. “Arrests of several high-ranking members of the Russian, Irish, and Italian Mafias took place last night in what can only be described as a well-executed sting operation that took years of careful planning.”

It’s late, nothing but the moonlight and the flicker of the TV screen illuminating the room. I’m seated on the couch, a whiskey in hand, as I watch with mild interest. It’s been many years since I left the mob behind, but news like this can’t go ignored.

Shaky video shows uniformed officers escorting entire groups of handcuffed men. I recognize a few of them, but the majority of the big players are unknown to me. Sometimes I’m curious where everyone wound up. Old associates and colleagues... I wonder if any of them made it out like I did.

Highly unlikely, but a man can hope.

As I watch the late-night news unfold, I can’t help but reminisce. It’s only in hindsight that I realize how lost I’d been, dedicating my life to such a malignant cause. When I was a young man, I was desperate for the feeling of belonging. Now I realize just how misguided I’d been. I look back at who I was; that man is a stranger to me. How could I ever put the Family before *family*?

“Sweetheart?”

Arin rounds the corner, yawning wide as she pulls on one of my sweaters for warmth. It's way too big for her, cutting off at just above her knees. She circles the front of the couch and takes a seat beside me, squinting against the bright light of the television.

"Did the sound wake you?" I ask.

"No. Bed got cold. What are you doing up?"

"Couldn't sleep." I tilt my chin at the screen. "Crazy, huh?"

"Yeah," she mumbles, leaning over to rest her cheek on my shoulder.

"Sometimes I wonder..."

"What?"

"Sometimes I wonder what would have happened to me. If I'd stayed."

Arin places her hand on my knee and squeezes. "Probably dead for real or rotting behind bars. You would have missed out on *this*." She gestures vaguely at the home we've made for ourselves.

I kiss the top of her hair, breathing in the scent of her vanilla shampoo. "Thank God I didn't."

"What's done is done," my wife assures me. "You made some bad choices, yes. But you made good ones, too. In the end, that's all that matters."

I wrap an arm over her shoulder and bring her in close, thinking about all the close calls we've had. Needless to say, I'm in a strange headspace tonight. I'm one of the lucky ones, blessed with a beautiful wife, darling children, and a third one on the way.

"Come to bed, sweetheart," she whispers, rubbing her belly. She's two months along. We haven't told anyone yet, but it's only a matter of time.

"Alright, dolcezza. I'm coming."

We return to our bedroom together, hand in hand, our bodies curling up together beneath the sheets. The whole house is quiet, the air still and warm. When the edge of a nightmare tries to take over my dreams, the light scent of Arin's vanilla shampoo and the feel of her silky skin is all I need to push those thoughts away. I sleep peacefully at my wife's side, grateful for the life she's given me.

EPILOGUE II



ARIN

I've long since done away with making prom dresses, but this is a unique exemption.

Felicia stands on the raised platform in front of my tri-fold mirror, deep ruby red satin draped over her body. It's every ounce elegant as it is sexy with its corseted bodice and high slit on the left leg.

Dominic—ever a protective father—was concerned it was a little too suggestive, at which point I showed him the most risqué dresses I've ever made to prove him otherwise. He shut up promptly after he saw the barely there, see through dress I made entirely of Swarovski crystals that did very little to cover the nipple area. Felicia's dress makes her look like a nun in comparison.

"Eighteen," I muse aloud. "Time really does fly."

My daughter laughs softly. "That's, like, the fourth time you've said that today, Mom."

"But it's true! It feels like yesterday you were throwing tantrums when I refused to give you a pudding cup."

"To be fair, pudding cups are delicious."

I stand, smoothing the skirt of her dress. Even without the platform, Felicia towers over me by a good couple of inches. I'm still taller than Tomasso and little Bella, but I have a sneaking suspicion that my children are all going to inherit their father's height. Give it another few years and I'll likely be the smallest one of them all.

Felicia fiddles with one of her curls, chewing on the inside of her cheek as she studies her reflection with less enthusiasm than expected.

“What’s wrong, sweetie?” I ask her.

“I hope Alex thinks I’m pretty,” she mumbles bashfully, her cheeks turning a light pink.

I roll my eyes. “Sweetie, I’m sure he’ll think you’re *gorgeous*, but there’s only one person you need to impress.”

“Are you about to say me—”

“*You*,” I say with a grin.

“I knew it.”

“Nobody else’s opinion matters. You are the only one worthy enough to judge yourself.” I smile at her. “So? What do you think?”

Felicia smiles at her reflection. “I think... I think I look beautiful.”

I nod in approval. “That’s right, you do.”

“Thanks, Mom. I really appreciate you making this dress for me.”

“Of course! I want all the other girls to be jealous of my daughter. An exclusive *Marina* made by the designer herself? That Tammy girl who used to bully you can eat her heart out.”

Felicia laughs. “And you call Dad the competitive parent.”

“We’re both competitive. That’s what makes us such a dream team.”

“Boy, I’ll say.”

I rub her back. “Come on. Let’s save Alex before your father makes him cry.”

My daughter and I vacate my work studio and head to the living room. I hear Dominic well before I see him, along with the jittery babblings of the young man trembling at our front door.

Felicia's prom date, Alex, is a nice boy. He's dressed in a rented tuxedo, his light blonde hair gelled back. Not only is he the captain of the basketball team, but he's also co-captains with Felicia on the debate team. They recently competed together at nationals and managed to place third.

But Alex isn't the confident, readily argumentative kid who managed to debate circles around at least ten other teams. Right now, he's getting the earful of a lifetime from my husband. The fact that he isn't yet in tears is proof of his character. Not everybody can withstand the full force of Dominic's *if-you-hurt-my-daughter* spiel and live to tell the tale.

"I want her home by eleven," Dominic says sternly, his eyes cold and locked onto the acne riddled eighteen-year-old before him. "Any later and I'll personally hunt you down and bring her home myself. Is that understood?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"No drugs, no alcohol, and no hanky panky."

Felicia's face turns bright red. "Oh my God, *Dad*."

"I'm only looking out for you, principessa. Boys these days are always up to no good."

I take my place beside Dominic and hook my arm through his. "Stop it, sweetheart. Felicia's a grown woman now. She's capable of making her own decisions."

My daughter is quick to take her date's hand. "Come on. Let's get out of here before things get even more cringey."

"See you later, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson," Alex calls over his shoulder.

"Make good choices!"

"Remember, back by *eleven-o'clock* or I'll break out Mom's baseball bat!" Dominic calls after them, but they're already racing across the driveway to Alex's waiting Subaru. We watch them go until the vehicle is out of sight.

I take a deep breath. "Time really does fly."

“Next thing you know she’ll be going off to college and getting married,” Dominic muses as he runs a hand through his greying hair. “And next will be Tomasso and Bella, and then we’ll finally be free.”

I giggle. “You’re the one who wanted a big family.”

“Yes, and while I don’t regret a thing, you have to admit it’ll be nice to finally get some alone time.”

I bump my hip against his. “You get alone time every night, silly.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Are Tommy and Bella asleep?”

Dominic nods. “They wanted to wait up to see Felicia go, but they were both pretty tired.”

I lick my lips, looking at my husband adoringly. “So what I’m hearing is we have some alone time.”

“You’re in for a treat tonight,” I say as I hop up on my toes to kiss him.

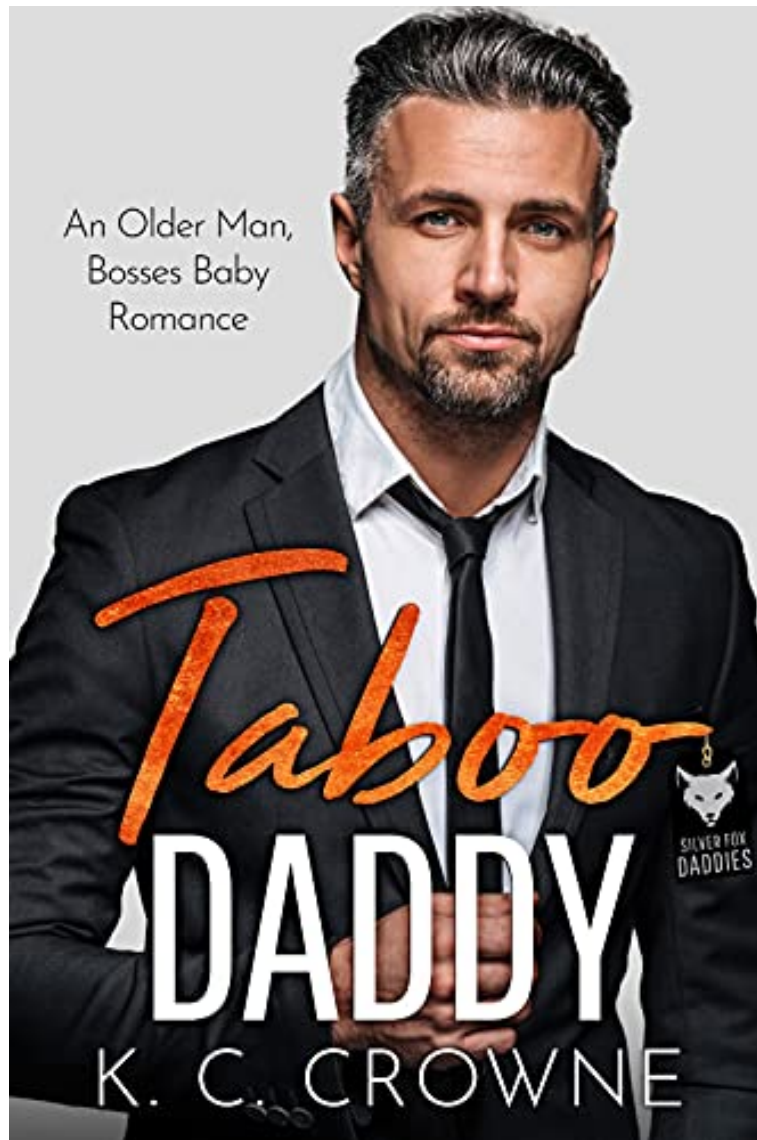
“Satin?” he guesses. “Silk? Lace? Tulle? The cute little number made entirely of ribbons?”

I smile wide. “You’re just going to have to wait and see.”

The End

*I hope you enjoyed Arin and Dominic’s love story. I’ve got great news. I have more bestseller books from my age-gap Silver Fox Series [HERE](#). I’ve included a free sneak peek to a top 50 Bestseller, *Taboo Daddy*, on the next page. Enjoy!*

TABOO DADDY (PREVIEW)



15 years age gap?

It's naughty.

It's taboo.

It's scandalous.

It's.... *happening*.

Noah was my cocky forty-year-old client.

Dark. Enigmatic. Incurably broken...

And.... incurably fine.

But, the beast in the perfectly tailored suit turns out to have a soft side.

And he's one h*ll of a devoted father.

I know I know..it's wrong...

The young and innocent city girl with a big mouth...

And a forty-year single dad with a big... ego.

A scandal is the last thing my family needs.

And Noah has more enemies than I can count.

But the pink bars on the screen tell me that this little secret...

Won't stay little for very long.

CHAPTER 1



NOAH

I *n. Out.*
In. Out.

The heaviness of my breath intensified as I felt a familiar burning sensation in my lungs. I increased my pace, and a delicious sense of heat and pain penetrated my entire body. Like a junkie, my body soaked it in and asked for more.

The end of my run was near, but the energy coiled inside me was nowhere close to extinguished.

A need to punch a hole through something or someone became agonizingly unbearable.

Normally, my morning jog gave me release. It was my coping mechanism. But this morning, I wanted to yell in rage at the world, to make it pay for all the fucked up things that happened.

Why her?

Why couldn't it be me?

I didn't have the patience to pretend I gave a fuck about someone else's morning. She had been better at small talk, while I hated any resemblance of it. It was never genuine, always a waste of time.

A small flame sat in my belly that I wanted to kindle into a wildfire. I wanted to take out my frustrations in a way that running couldn't do for me anymore, to fight with claws and teeth bared. My desire to take down a bigger and more formidable enemy nearly consumed my being.

The memories of a loving, happy family were shattered when my wife died of cancer. I was left to raise my daughter on my own and run the business my father left me shortly before losing my life partner. I didn't know what to do with myself anymore. I wanted to be the best dad and the best CEO I could be. I wanted to be the best in general, but that wasn't possible.

My sturdy foundation began to crumble, and I was floundering on my own.

I waved to the doorman as I entered front door of my building, cooling down as I rode the elevator up to the top floor. My heart pounded against my rib cage as I took slow, steady breaths. The condo I share with my daughter resided on the top floor of the building and dominated all of it. As I hurried across the entryway to my door, I pulled my sweat-drenched shirt overhead and headed straight to the bathroom. My reflection greeted me as I glanced in the mirror. I paused and rubbed my hand along my jaw.

The beginning of a beard covered my face, and my inky hair stood on its own, disheveled and windswept. I stared and remembered a time when I would have actually cared about my appearance. I used to shave every day and never would have let my hair get so overgrown and messy.

Now I didn't give a damn. There wasn't a reason to care anymore. It didn't matter that I looked like a panther ready to strike, all dark with vibrant green eyes. I had lean muscles that were prepared for a fight at any moment and a beast inside me that wanted to bite.

I didn't give a fuck if I didn't look like a proper businessman. I was capable of running a multi-million-dollar company regardless.

As I showered, I let my mind wander. I'd never had any desire to take over my father's firm. Even when I was younger and thought better of the world, I would have never stepped foot in the building. But it wasn't up for negotiation. I'd promised my father before he passed away that I would take his place. I had no plan to break my promise. Not to mention,

the most important person in my life who depended on me, my daughter, Tess, needed the stable homelife afforded by my steady and generous income.

She was everything I wasn't, so innocent and good.

After her mother passed, I'd had no idea what I would do. She was more nurturing and capable of handling issues with a gentle hand. In all honesty, I don't know if I would have made it to where I was today without Carolyn by my side, and when she died, I'd nearly lost my mind.

Tess and I grieved heavily. Hours were lost to tears and remembering my wife's memory. It wasn't until I heard Tess sobbing alone in her room that the situation truly hit me. My baby girl, like me, was in pain, and she was letting that pain fester and threaten to explode.

Tess pushed me to be a better person, a better father, and a better human being in general. And her life had never been an easy one. After she was born, she'd developed an infection that took her hearing. I had been devastated and terrified of what that meant, but Carolyn had taken the massive change in stride. She'd signed us up for sign language courses and eventually we figured it out together.

But now, just as Tess was reaching that critical point in her life where a mother would be needed most, all she had was me. And I was determined not to fail her.

The weeks after Carolyn's death were filled with research on how to deal with grief. I quickly found that therapy was recommended for those who lost a loved one. I'd never been a fan of therapy; I didn't like the thought of being vulnerable with a stranger. While I dreaded the thought of seeing a therapist, I knew that it would likely help Tess. I found a highly recommended therapist who was fluent in American Sign Language and was ready to talk with Tess about it when she beat me to the punch.

She was stronger than me. Tess wasn't even twelve yet, and she knew when to ask for help, a skill I still struggled with.

Papa? Tess approached me while I sat in the living room one evening. She liked to make the sign for Dad with her fingers in the shape that indicated the letter P, her special sign for me. I muted the TV even though it was unnecessary.

Yes, baby? I scooted to the side and motioned for her to join me on the couch. *What's going on?*

I- Her lower lip quivered, and she took a deep breath to try and calm herself. *Papa, I want to go to therapy.* She was hiccupping, beginning to sob, but her signing was clear. There could be no mistaking what she'd said.

My brows shot up toward my hairline. *You want to see a therapist?*

She nodded silently. Her shoulders were coiled tight as if she expected me to be upset.

Darling. I pulled her into a tight hug, then held her back at arm's length so she could see me. I had long since adjusted to the fact that I couldn't speak to my daughter and hug her at the same time. *That's fine. Thank you for coming to me. How long have you been thinking about this?*

A week or so...

I've actually been looking for a therapist for both of us. I'll call tomorrow and make appointments for us both.

She pushed me to be better and allow myself to be weak when I needed to be. The animal in me demanded I always protect Tess, but there were things she needed to experience on her own.

I'd become a guiding hand and had seen her flourish in school and at home. It made me want to laugh in the face of those who doubted me. After I saw her transform, I no longer cared what those voices said.

I would do anything for my daughter without a second thought.

CHAPTER 2



JENNA

I hated checking my mailbox. Nothing but bills, bills, and more bills. Sometimes, if I was lucky, there would be a fist full of junk mail crammed inside. Junk mail was nice because I could just throw it out without a thought. I didn't even have to read it.

I longed for the days when I didn't have to worry about paying anything. I would just look for something with my name on it, maybe a letter from my Grandma with a five or ten dollar bill slipped in. More than anything, I wanted to go back to when the mail didn't bring me dread.

Instead, I was stuck in the first couple days of the month with the arrival of bills looming over me. I was often reminded how close to the poverty line I lived. I was already ninety days behind on some things that I could let skate by for a month. Or two. Or three...

The credit card people just loved when I let my payments slip past the ninety-day due limit. I was forced to pay more in late fees and interest than my original bills. It was mind-boggling that a five-dollar lunch would cost me a hundred dollars or more just because I used my credit card.

I sometimes felt as if I was cursed forever, forced to incur the weight of bills and the wrath of my mother.

No use prolonging the pain of anticipation. I opened my mailbox and let out a groan of frustration. More bills. Maybe I should become a psychic? I could always tell when those letters from Satan would arrive.

I grabbed the envelopes and made my way upstairs to my studio apartment. I would have to make time to actually sit down and focus. A thousand different thoughts were trapped inside my head, and I couldn't decide what to focus on first.

My bills might have been a good place to start, but I couldn't handle that at the moment. Not with my sister's wedding right around the corner and my mother constantly breathing down my neck.

"You'll never be able to make a living off interior design, Jenna."

I felt as if her main purpose in life was to crush my dreams.

The concept board I had just started sat on my mess of a table. My client was a bachelor who wanted his apartment made into a "sick man cave". While I wasn't a fan of his vision, I wouldn't make a fuss. His idea of a cool place helped me pay my bills. I just wished he'd stop flirting with me. Every time I stepped into his apartment, he'd followed me like an unwanted shadow. I could feel his leering stare burn holes into my back.

But I wouldn't allow an immature dickhead to deter me from fulfilling my dreams. I needed a portfolio to be successful, and doing the actual work was the only way to build one.

My ass barely began to settle when a loud siren on my phone jolted me. I groaned into my hands and took a deep breath through my slightly stuffy nose. The siren was the ringtone I set for my ever-loving mother.

Why a siren? It fit all too well when you considered all the drama caused by my sister's upcoming wedding. My mother and sister shared the same pastime: driving me to drink. I had to give myself a bit of pep talk before I picked up my phone. I'd already been assaulted by their persistent nagging about the wedding so much that I often wanted to jump off the balcony of my apartment.

With dread in the pit of my belly, I picked up my phone and swiped the answer call button. “Hello?”

“Jenna?”

“Hi, Mom.”

“You have to go pick up your bridesmaid dress for your sister’s wedding today.”

“My day’s going swell Mom, thanks for asking.” An awkward silence filled the air, just like it always did when I used my usual sarcastic remarks. I raised an eyebrow when her words processed. “Wait a minute. They told me it’d be ready next week. It’s done already?”

Jessica’s wedding was in a week, and my heart raced with anxiety every time I thought about it. I’d wondered if PTSD after weddings was a thing. I could have sworn I was losing hair and years off my life from the whole ordeal.

The most recent rain of fire came about after I discovered my hideous bridesmaid dress no longer fit me due to unplanned inches shed in my waist and hips. Believe me when I say I was not complaining. Unfortunately for me, my sister certainly cared. She had always been a control freak and constantly badgered me about my dress and threw a fit because it meant I had to get my dress altered so close to her big day. In all honesty, she probably hated that she hadn’t shed the pounds, but I wasn’t going to bring that up to Bridezilla.

Jess and I came from a well-off family, grew up in the prominent community of Great Neck, Long Island, but sadly our upbringing was the extent of what we had in common.

Even before we were a twinkle in our parent’s eyes, they were moderately wealthy. My father was a very shrewd real estate investor and had made a pretty penny that kept my mother and sister in designer dresses and handbags. I, on the other hand, didn’t want to be beholden to my father’s wealth.

Since our teenage years, I’d prided myself in being an independent woman. I held down more than one job to pay my

personal expenses and the same when I paid my way through the Pratt Institute for interior design. Honestly, I took pride in proving I could, even when it aggravated my mother to no end. In her eyes, I was being foolish for not taking money from my parents to use for myself. However, the thought of living off my parent's wealth made me feel weak and opportunistic and that wasn't how I wanted to live. I couldn't respect myself doing that.

My grandmother, Susie, was my inspiration in more ways than I could count. I gained my sense of independence through sheer osmosis of being around her. Jessica, however, was too busy with her nose stuck in her Barbie Dream Home, but I always listened attentively when Grandma talked about women needing to fend for themselves. She had been widowed at a very young age and had independence thrust on her. Regardless, she loved making everything around her beautiful, and that hobby became the seed that grew my own passion for interior design. My grandma was granted a sum of money after my granddad's tragic death, and she wisely invested the money into various assets to support her six children. She loved to create an environment where her children and grandchildren could enjoy time together. I recalled our Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays filled with ambiances that caused jaws to drop, all thanks to Grandma Susie's hours of labor.

"Yes, your dress was finished just this morning. You'll have to make sure it fits ok and bring it home. But make sure it's put away safely. I don't want to see any paint or spackle or whatever you use on that dress."

"I know, Mother. I'll be sure to get it after I finish what I'm working on."

"Okay, good." There was a beat of silence, and I felt a bead of anxiety well inside me. "And Jenna, don't forget our deal."

I sighed and massaged the bridge of my nose. "Mother..."

"Let me finish, Jenna." Her voice was curt, and my dread worsened. "Your father and I previously agreed that we'd

follow through on your grandmother's dying wish to pass down her apartment in the city as your business studio once you turned twenty-eight, but—”

She paused for dramatics. I pictured her sharp features unshaken as she spoke, ever cold in her delivery of news, good or bad.

“Your sister and I want you to bring a date with you to the wedding.”

I fought back a groan of annoyance. I should have known something like this would happen. My mother knew how important Grandma Susie was to me, and she had the nerve to hold the future studio over my head. Never mind the fact I was an adult and could take her to court for breaking the law, but she knew I'd never do that. Mostly because I couldn't afford to.

I rolled my eyes and pursed my lips. I could feel the beginning of a headache. “I'm probably not gonna be able to swing that.” I hated to admit it because it showed weakness in front of a predator. “I don't know anyone I could I ask on such short notice.”

Without missing a beat, Mother said, “Well then, I guess you won't get your dear apartment. If you want it, you must bring a date.”

She hung up without a goodbye, and I scowled at my phone as if my mother's picture were on it. That really wasn't the way I wanted to end our conversation. I placed my phone on the table and looked at the time. It was close to eleven and I wanted to scream. I had so much to do today and the damned shop Mother made me take the dress to closed at five-thirty.

I picked up my phone again and dialed Sara's number. Sara Mills had been my best friend for years. We met senior year of high school when she moved into the district and had been extremely close ever since.

“Hey!” Sara answered her phone on the second ring. Her voice was cheerful as ever and brought a grin to my face.

“Hey Sara.” I got off my chair and meandered around my apartment. “Do you want to go to the mall with me?” I grabbed my wallet off the counter and took my keys off the hook by the door. I still had things to do at home, but I wouldn’t be able to focus with the thought of the dress looming over my head.

“What’s up?” she sounded concerned when she heard the tone of my voice.

“My mother, but what else is new?”

“What did she do this time?”

“She’s holding Grandma Susie’s apartment over my head to get me to do what she wants,” I grumbled.

“What the hell? You know she can’t do that legally, right?”

“I do, but she knows I don’t have the money to take her to court.”

“Ugh. What does she want you to do?”

“I have to bring a date to Jessica’s wedding.”

“But the wedding is so close!”

I snatched my favorite purse off my couch and nodded. I put my wallet in the purse and walked to the door.

“I know, Sara. Believe me, I do. And I don’t know anyone to take.” I sighed as I unlocked the door and walked out, locking it behind me. “My grandmother’s apartment is so important to me. We always talked about it becoming my dream studio.” I grouched as I headed for the stairs, “Mom hates the fact that I’ve always refused money from her and Dad but would accept Grandma’s city apartment. She doesn’t understand. She never did. And now, I’m gonna be so fucked if I can’t find a date.”

“I wish I had a brother to lend you.”

I laughed as I rounded the first bend in the stairwell. “I wish you did too, but I’ll figure it out. By the way, you never answered my question.”

“What? Oh - mall! Of course!”

“Wanna pick me up? I don’t really have extra money for a cab and I *really* don’t want to walk.”

“On it. Gimme a solid ten minutes and we’ll be cruising to the mall.”

“Thanks. I really didn’t wanna go alone.”

“Think nothing of it. I’ll be right over.”

I clicked the end call button and grinned as I stepped into the main lobby of the apartment complex. I lived on the third floor, and though we had an elevator that worked, it always made me nauseous, so I just used the stairs. Plus, all the walking made my legs look great.

There was a little lounge area in the lobby, and I took a seat. I wouldn’t have to wait too long for Sara. She lived close and drove like a madwoman and texted me not even five minutes after we hung up. I could only hope the traffic wasn’t too horrendous. I walked out front with my purse draped across my torso and spotted Sara’s beat up purple 2010 Ford Fusion.

I waved and hustled over to the car, climbing in and buckling up.

“Ready to go?” Sara asked with a grin.

I nodded. “I just want to get this over with.”

“Valid, now letsa go!” Sara did a poor Mario impression and pulled out of the parking lot.

CHAPTER 3



NOAH

I took a quick, hot shower and massaged the ache out of my legs. I changed into a fairly casual outfit, a navy-blue button-up shirt with dark jeans and socks. I didn't have to go to the office today, but I still did some work from home.

I was able to work for about thirty minutes when my phone rang. My brows furrowed as I looked at the caller ID. It was Tess's school, and I knew something was wrong. I answered with a curt, "Yes?"

"Is this Mr. Clark?"

"Yes. Is everything alright?"

"Well sir, Tess didn't show up this morning for her first period, and she's absent from her second period as well."

I tried not to groan because I knew there was no need to panic. Tess wasn't missing or in danger; she was simply having a bad day. She'd had such a hard time after her mother's death and began to hide away in her room and not come out for hours on end. I could hear her cry herself to sleep. Even though Carolyn had been gone for two years, we still struggled to come to terms living life without her.

Tess had been out so much she had to be tutored for a couple of months to make up what she'd missed while absent.

"I feel as though Tess might need to see a therapist about some behavior correction. It's not healthy for a girl her age to just skip school because she doesn't feel well. Maybe she would do better in a special education environment."

My brow twitched in anger at the pretentious tone in the principal's voice. She sounded so high and mighty, as if she knew what was best for my daughter.

“With all due respect, ma'am, I think you should keep your opinions to yourself.” If the woman was anyone other than Tess's principal, I would have likely ripped her to shreds for insinuating there was anything wrong with her. “Tess is already seeing a therapist by her own volition, and she doesn't need any behavior correction.”

I could hear the principal huff over the phone, preparing to say something I was certain would piss me off more. I was quick to hang up on her rather than say something I would regret. I wasn't thrilled that Tess skipped school, but I knew why she did and where she would be.

I put my phone in my pocket and grabbed my wallet and keys before I left the house. I made my way to the mall and tried to ignore the animal in me that wanted to roar in grief. I was able to find a parking spot close to the food court entrance. I got out of my car, wandering into the mall and using the escalator to get to the second floor as if I were in no rush. As I got off, I could see the silhouette of Tess through the shop window.

She was nearly identical to me but with dark hair that fell past her clavicles and bright green eyes. They looked like malachite, with different shades of green flecked throughout.

Next to Tess was a woman I'd never seen before. She was tall with defined curves accented by her form-fitting shirt and jeans. Her straight brown hair hung around the middle of her back and was tucked behind her left ear. What struck me was her wide brown eyes that reminded me of a doe. For a brief moment, I felt a surge of desire shoot through me. I pushed it back and ignored the warmth that brushed my stomach.

I moved behind Tess and rested my hand on her shoulder. I hated sneaking up on her like that, knew it would scare the daylight out of her, but in a situation like this, that was inevitable.

Tess whipped around to face me. In an instant, I saw all color drain from her already pale face.

Papa... She gulped as she signed, and any frustration that fogged my mind faded.

I sighed, and a heavy weight bore a hole in my heart. I hated that I couldn't take my daughter's suffering away from her. I hated that she had to feel even one ounce of it. But I couldn't shelter her from everything, and she still had to learn that there were consequences to her actions.

Darling, you're supposed to be at school right now.

Out of my peripheral, I could see the woman look between Tess and me.

I know, Papa. I know I'm supposed to be there. I just couldn't. I tried. I really did.

Tess brought her right hand up to her face and tugged gently on her hair, a nervous tick she'd picked up after her mother passed. I stepped in front of her and dropped into a crouch. I was more or less eye-level with her, and I placed a large hand over the one pulling her hair.

It's ok. I took her hands in mine and squeezed them gently. *I'm not upset with you.*

Tears pooled in Tess's eyes and I pulled her into a hug. I heard her whimper into my shoulder, and I could feel her tears soaking through my shirt before she pulled back and looked up at me.

I'm sorry, Papa! I made it all the way to school, but I felt so sick. I couldn't be there. No one understands - not the teachers or even my friends. They try to be supportive, but they don't get it! She hiccupped and blotted her tears on my shirt.

I know, baby, I know. You just need to let me know if you feel like doing something like this again. I don't want anything to happen to you.

Okay. I'm sorry. I just had to come here. I know it's been two years since Mama died, but it still hurts so much. I wanted to come here because it almost feels like she's with me. Like

she's just in the dressing room and is gonna come out any minute to ask what I think.

Her hands flew faster than hummingbirds, and I understood exactly how she felt. The store was one of her mother's favorites. She would always come and look at all the dresses. After we started dating and later got married, she would drag me inside to get my opinion on all the beautiful and bizarre things she would try on.

I also felt like she was there. I didn't really believe in the supernatural, but I did like to think that she watched over us. Maybe she did. I didn't know for certain, but both Tess and I were emotional wrecks, even if I didn't display my emotions publicly.

I'd lost my mate, the woman I thought would always be by my side. And Tess had lost her mother, the most important person in her life, besides me. To be in the store she frequented didn't help ebb the feeling of loss.

You're ok, baby. Do you want to stay here or go home?

Can we stay here?

That's fine by me. I let Tess go and rose to my full height. I offered her my hand and she gladly took it.

The woman who had been standing with Tess didn't look at us and was instead busy looking at the jewelry display. I didn't know her exact role in helping my daughter, but I couldn't mistake the kindness and compassion in her eyes when she'd looked at Tess.

"Thank you." My voice was rough with emotions I tried to keep in check. "For keeping my daughter company."

The unnamed woman nodded and gave me a weak smile. "It was my pleasure."

I nodded in thanks and watched as she scurried out of the store. As she passed, I thought I caught the scent of lavender.



END OF PREVIEW

Click here for the entire story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.C. Crowne is an Amazon Top 10 bestseller.

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