



Secret Mafia
DADDY

KIRA COLE

SECRET MAFIA DADDY

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Nico

Also By Kira Cole

ANGELO

I roll over in bed and there's a half-empty bottle of tequila on the nightstand. That explains the throbbing in my head but not the stinging sensation on my back and shoulders. I turn the other way and there's the culprit from the scratches on my back – a cute little brunette, her mascara and eyeliner smeared.

I sigh and scratch my belly.

This has been my life for so long. No attachments, no deep connections, no regrets. And yet, I'm beginning to regret choosing this lifestyle. I'm kind of getting tired of this faceless, nameless string of women who warm my bed for the night but leave me cold inside. They bring nothing new to my life.

Sometimes, I wonder what life would be like if I just actually tried to have a relationship.

No use dreaming about an impossible life, no matter how appealing it might feel.

Sitting up, I tap her on the hip.

“Hey, sweetheart, time to go,” I say, gently enough, and she gets up with a pout and staggers around, finding her clothes.

“You know, Angelo,” she says dryly. “This is the third time we've hooked up and I'm not sure you even know my name.”

“Sure, I do,” I say easily, although I'm wracking my brain to try and remember.

“Uh-huh,” she mumbles, her eyes narrowing. “Well, listen, don’t call me again.”

“Okay, baby.”

Truth is, I don’t know if I will call her again, but I’m pretty sure that if I did, she’d answer. After all, she came this time too, didn’t she?

I think we met at The Angel, a downtown New York City club.

I hate having to be back in New York, so any down time I have, I just want to lose myself in booze and companionship, as hollow as it may be. This place doesn’t have good memories for me, so I rather not remember anything about it, and keeping my mind numb with alcohol and sex when I’m not working helps.

She doesn’t look Italian or Italian-American, so I guess I didn’t meet her through work, but who knows? There’s plenty of ladies who aren’t of Italian heritage that hang around wise guys.

I should know. I’ve been with a lot of them. Tall, short, curvy, thin... I don’t discriminate.

And they generally like me. At least until I stop calling them, and then they tend to hate me. Not that I ever lie to them and promise more than I’m willing to give them, which is a fun night. But I guess they think they can change my mind. Spoiler alert, they can’t.

A fun night is all I want. All I have in me to share.

Or at least, it was, until lately.

Dante and Nico, my best friends, are both tied down now. They both took the leap, and I’d certainly never expected it from either of them. I’d thought we’d be the three fucked up musketeers forever.

So lately, I’ve been thinking about it. What would it be like to wake up to the same woman every day? Have her to worry about you when you went out on jobs?

Would it stifle me? I've always been wild and I don't want to be tamed. But at the same time, seeing my friends with their better halves makes something inside me react and yearn for that. That closeness. That connection.

Suddenly, in the back of my head, I think about a pair of silver eyes blinking up at me, and wonder where the hell that came from.

I can't quite remember the rest of the face, but I remember those gray eyes, wide and fringed with long, black eyelashes.

The brunette is yelling something at me but I'm not paying attention, and finally I just get up and walk her to the front door, opening it, and just standing there as she walks out.

I shut the door and sigh, walking to the bathroom to shower.

As I'm getting out of the shower, my phone starts ringing. I head to the bedside table, and after looking at the caller ID, I pick it up, answering the call.

"Status report?" a barking voice asks.

"Good to hear from you too, Nico," I drawl, and he snorts.

"Sorry, it's just I can't do my job right now and it frustrates me that you have to pick up the slack," he admits.

"Don't worry about it. You have good reason," I say, thinking of the time I brought him home bleeding and dying and the little one he has now. So, I have no problem 'picking up the slack' as he calls it, even if it has to be in New York, because we both owe a lot to Dante and I know that Nico is worried about this guy.

"So, any news?"

"I've located him and I've been tracking him," I state. "I've also been hanging around that club he goes to, The Angel?"

"Your kind of place," Nico cracks, making a joke about my name.

“Yeah, yeah,” I mutter. “I’m getting a real insight on his routine. A week or two more and it will be done.”

“Have you approached him yet?” Nico asks.

“No,” I say firmly. “I’m keeping my eye on him but keeping a low profile. I want to catch him off guard.”

“All right, fair enough,” Nico mutters. “Let us know how it goes.”

He hangs up and I throw my phone in the bed.

I’m happy to have a job. It’s been a while since Dante’s asked me for help, and it’s always a blast when he does. I love the way the adrenaline makes me feel, high even when I’m sober, like everything’s moving too fast but it feels good in a way that’s hard to replicate. It also helps me quiet my mind of what has no business being there.

Booze can do it in a pinch, but I rather work and keep my head on my shoulders. Booze is dangerous because you lose some control of your faculties and in my line of work that can be fatal.

Women help with the not thinking too, but not as much lately. Especially since Dante and Nico became tamed men, giving my head ideas it has no business having.

I groan and then hiss as the water hits my back. That brunette has torn me up pretty good. I embrace the pinch and try to remember last night, but nothing comes, and I’m not sure how to feel about that. Shouldn’t I at least remember something about her other than her hair color?

I pull myself from this line of thought, reminding myself I have a job to do. A big job. Dante and Nico are counting on me to get this done.

Technically, I could be a guy like Dante, who hires others to do their dirty work. I sure have the pedigree and money for it. But that would mean having some sort of contact with my father. And I sure as hell don’t want that.

I hate him and don’t think about him, so I won’t do it now either. I have to focus on what I’m here to do.

Dante needs me to nix this guy. He has a wife and a daughter now and he can't be in any kind of danger.

The guy is almost like a fucking ghost. He'd been in the wind ever since he stole from Dante, and it's not exactly like New York City is a small town. I know this city like the back of my hand and I know the places that wiseguys frequent. I staked out all of them, several times, until I lucked out.

I overheard him say he is going to The Angel tonight, so, I'm going too, and this time, I'm not going to pick up a cute little brunette, or blonde, or redhead... This is not a fucking social outing, this is business and I have a man to watch. I have to learn all about him in order to do my damn job properly. The sooner I'm done, the faster I get out of this godforsaken town.

I dress in a black, silk shirt and a pair of gray slacks, slicking back my long hair. I don't keep it short the way a lot of wiseguys do and it's almost long enough to put in a little ponytail, but I like to keep it loose.

I look in the mirror and smile. I look good. Not that it matters tonight, but it feels good nonetheless.

Once again, my mind runs away from me, and I find myself wondering if I'm the kind of man that could one day have a wife and kids. The picture painted inside my head makes my heart swell and hurt at the same time. Because I know I would if I could, but I also know it's probably not in the cards for me.

I've been through a lot. So much pain withheld and witnessed that the thought alone almost makes me want to run the other way. But the thought of finding someone that fits me perfectly, like Dante and Nico have, makes my chest hurt at the void that lives there now. Damn Dante and Nico for putting ideas in my head by being happily tamed.

I draw in a breath and walk to The Angel since it's just a couple of blocks from where I'm staying.

It's almost ten at night. Since I knew where he'd be tonight, I took the day for myself. I was up all night with the

brunette and slept all day. Luckily, Claudio Abato is a bit of a night owl himself, so I knew he wouldn't miss much.

I can relate.

When I walk into the bar, the lights are flashing, the music booming, and it gets my heart speeding up along with the beat. I start to feel better. I look around the club. My eyes scan across the group of people to try and find Abato's face.

He has a scar on his eyebrow, a pretty distinctive one that runs up to his hairline, so I'm looking for it. Instead, my eyes land on a pair of silver eyes that make my heart jump up into my throat.

Well, hello there.

The feeling of familiarity I get is so strong it feels like it slams into me. Do I know her? Where have I seen her before? I try to pinpoint where I know her from, because I just *know* I do. It's this gut feeling inside me.

She is so familiar and yet a complete stranger. But no matter how much I try, I can't place her. All I know is that my heart is racing as I look at the woman standing at the bar, leaning against it and looking bored out at the dance floor.

She looks to be a natural dirty blonde. Her hair curls at the ends, trailing down her shoulders and upper arms. I wonder what it'll be like to run my fingers through it. The way my fingers twitch with the need to touch it and a *knowing* of how silky it would feel, I can't help but wonder if I already have. Is it possible I have been with the silver-eyed beauty?

Would I forget her if I had? Because I don't think I would.

She's taller than the girls standing around her, maybe five-foot-nine in heels, but I'm well over six feet, so when I walk closer, I tower over her.

She wobbles a bit on her heels but I don't smell alcohol on her breath, and with all the bodies in the club pushing me forward as I walk, I'm close enough to tell.

"Excuse me," she says in a low tone, but loud enough for me to hear her. Her silver eyes flash and she presses her full

lips together.

“Excuse me,” I say politely, sliding my hand past her to touch the bar. “Just trying to get a beer.”

“There’s too many people in here,” she mutters, and I nod in agreement, although I don’t quite mind the push of a crowd. Keeps me anonymous.

Then she looks up at me for the first time, scanning her eyes over my face as if sizing me up, and her gray eyes widen. Does she know who I am? Does she remember me even if I can’t quite remember her?

“Have we met before?” I ask, leaning against the bar like she is to face the dance floor, my shoulder brushing against hers. My curiosity about this girl and what I’m feeling makes me want to know if this gut-deep recognition is real or if it is just me.

She looks at me for a moment longer. “No,” she says flatly, and takes off, pushing her way through the crowd to go out into the alley.

I grin widely, my heart pounding.

I love a good chase. I know what I came here for tonight, but the guy isn’t here yet and there is no way this little bunny is running away from me.

If only I could figure out why she feels so familiar.

CATARINA

I hate The Angel because it's always too crowded and the guys are too drunk and handsy, but my best friend, Alyssa, loves it. She loves the crowds and all the attention.

Even though we've been best friends since I was young, we are very different.

I don't get many nights out, and when I do, I like to go somewhere calm, chill, a place where I can relax and have fun. This is not my idea of fun.

I don't like the idea of meeting someone at a place like this, of going home with them. Been there, done that. And once was more than enough to serve as a cautionary tale. Yet, Alyssa does it at least once a month. Well, hopefully she doesn't have the same luck as me.

That night haunts me every day since. It gave me Chelsea, my sweet three-year-old daughter, but it also gave me a broken heart.

I found out the hard way that I can't be intimate with someone without my heart being involved. So, that was my one and done. The "one" time I had casual sex and learned I couldn't keep sex casual, and after that, I was "done" with it. I don't need the hassle, and besides, I want to get the hell out of the city as soon as possible. I need to leave my family and their lifestyle and run as far away as I can, so I can't afford to get attached anyway. I love them, but their life is not mine.

When we get to The Angel, I immediately notice the two big guys watching me and Alyssa, staring at our every move.

All thanks to Alonzo DeLuca.

I love my stepfather, I really do, but I'm already annoyed.

He took me and my mother in when we had no place else to go, and he adopted me and treated me like his own, so I'm grateful, but at the same time...

He's overprotective because of the lifestyle he leads, and I want no part of it. I long to go back to the days when my biological father would take me to the pier, show me the boats that he fished on. The breeze had been so nice, the sound of the waves soothing.

My stepfather's use of the pier is not for the faint-hearted and he'd never take me there. I wouldn't want him to, anyway. Besides, there isn't any peace when my mother constantly has to worry about my stepfather being shot.

I don't want the lifestyle that she has as a mob wife, so I need to get out of here. Go somewhere else, like the Midwest or something. Live a quiet, country life. Or maybe I'll go to California, near the sea, so that I can think of my father as I hear the waves crashing against the shore.

As much as I care for Alonzo and appreciate all he did for me and my mom, I need to get far away from him so that he can't try to 'protect' me anymore. Protection I wouldn't even need if he didn't live like he does. If he wasn't who he is.

I huff out a breath. "This isn't even going to be fun, Alyssa," I tell her as we stand at the bar. She's sliding onto a bar stool but I just lean my back against the bar, looking out at all the people on the dance floor. It's like a damn school of fish out there, everyone swaying to the music.

"Come on, Cat," she whines. "We never go out. It's been *months*."

I sigh. She's right, it has been a long time since I've been able to let loose, but that's because I know that my stepfather has people watching me all the time. It isn't as fun when someone's hawk-eyeing your every move.

"It'll be okay. They're chilling over by the door. Probably can't even see us."

“They can see us,” I say forlornly, looking over at the guys who tower over nearly everyone in the club. “They can always see us.”

This isn't really my scene. Months without a night for myself and the first one I get, I can't even enjoy it as I should.

I'm looking out at the crowd while Alyssa orders our drinks when someone sidles up next to me, so close that I can feel his breath.

“Excuse me,” I say, probably bitchily. I'm usually nice enough, but I'm not in the mood to get hit on, at least not before a drink.

“Excuse me,” he says. “Just trying to get a beer.”

His low-timbred voice sends a slight shiver through me and goosebumps pop up along my skin.

“There's too many people in here,” I mutter, and then I look at him. *Really* look at the man.

His wide brown eyes tinged with amber look down at me, a slight smile on his face. His jaw is strong, lined with stubble, his hair longer, slicked back, but there is no doubt in my mind of who this is.

Angelo Bianchi.

No fucking way, I think.

“Have we met before?” he asks, looking down at me curiously. And my heart drops to the floor.

He doesn't remember.

“No,” I say firmly, and abandon Alyssa in the club, pushing through people to get out into the alley. I need to get out of here, I feel like I'm suffocating.

I take only a few breaths of fresh air before the exit door opens, and I sigh, knowing that it's probably one of Alonzo's men.

When I turn, though, it's Angelo.

“Getting some fresh air?” he asks, still in that low voice of his, and I groan.

I don’t answer him.

“I know you from somewhere,” he says again, tilting his head with curiosity.

“No, you don’t,” I say, and turn my head away from him.

He just gets closer, cups my chin in his hand, tilting my face up to his.

I wrench away from him as his touch sears me. How is it possible that years later his touch still affects me?

I shake my head again, but he’s advancing on me, backing me up against the brick wall.

“Remind me, babydoll,” he murmurs. “What’s your name?”

“None of your business,” I mutter. If he doesn’t remember, I’m certainly not the one who will help jog his memory.

He blinks but he’s still grinning. “Feisty, I like that,” he muses.

I push at his chest but he doesn’t move and all that happens is that I feel how solid his pecs are. He’s tall and lanky but well-built, just like I remember.

I swallow hard. “Leave me alone,” I say firmly. I can’t afford being here longer with him, his scent enveloping me, the memories of our time together wanting to break free of the vault I placed them in my mind. No way. That can’t happen.

A noise, trashcans being knocked over, echoes through the alley.

I don’t think much of it. There are other people from The Angel milling around the alley, smoking or getting fresh air, even a couple of them throwing up from too much booze.

But Angelo starts, whipping his head toward the sound.

Because he turns, I do, too, and I see a man with a scar across his forehead just before he turns and runs full tilt away.

Angelo curses and lets me go with an, “I’ll see you around, babydoll.”

“In your dreams,” I mutter at his retreating form as I walk back into the club.

I find my friend, Alyssa.

“I’m out of here. You staying?” I say firmly, and Alyssa pouts and takes her shot.

“Why?” she asks. When I don’t answer, she adds, “Fine. I’ll go. But you’re coming out with me again next weekend.”

“Not here,” I mutter, but she doesn’t seem to be listening. We head out to my car and I’m glad I haven’t drunk. No need to call for a ride, I can just drive us home.

When we arrive, Alyssa takes the guest bedroom and I curl up into Chelsea’s bed. She snorts out a snore and then wakes, blinking her brown eyes at me.

“Where you been, Mama? On a ‘venture?’” she asks.

I smile. Chelsea is always wanting to go on “ventures” and she thinks every time I leave the house I’m going on some kind of epic journey.

“Not quite,” I mumble, tucking her hair behind her ear and kissing her nose. “But next time I go on one, I’ll take you with me, okay?”

“Okay,” she says sleepily, burrowing under the covers and closer to me.

No matter where life takes me, I’ll always take Chelsea on all my adventures. I look down at her and wonder if she’s dreaming of pirates and fairies, dreaming of happy endings.

I had dreams when I was little too. Good dreams. Happy dreams.

Life was never supposed to be like this. I was supposed to grow up with my biological parents, I was supposed to fall in love, get married, have two and a half kids and a dog or two. I was supposed to be happy.

Instead, thanks to my mom remarrying after losing my dad, I was pulled into a life I hate. A life of danger I never wanted to bring to my door. I am a mother, but never had the fairy tale to led to that. Just a memorable night and a broken heart to keep me company at night.

I'm not sorry it's just me and my baby because I know that love means hurt, and right now, I need to focus on getting us out of here and away from a life that was never meant to be mine.

I know the dark side of life and I'm not fooled by fairy tales and happily ever afters anymore, but I hope she never stops believing.

ANGELO

I'm frustrated that I lost the silver-eyed girl. Who *is* she? Every cell in my body screams I *know* her, but I can't for the life of me figure out how or where from.

Just talking to her made my heart pump.

Her disdainful attitude shouldn't have been attractive, but I have to admit she pushed all the right buttons for me.

Thanks to her, I almost lost my target too.

You can't get distracted, Angelo, I tell myself. Especially not for a piece of ass. But why is she still occupying my mind? And who the hell *is* she?

Stop it, Angelo! You need to focus on the job.

I need to focus on this scarred sonofabitch and on taking him out and Silver Eyes is not helping. If Nico knew I almost screwed up because of a girl, he'd have my head. So, I do my damn job for once and follow Claudio home.

A couple of days after crossing paths with Silver Eyes, I step into Abato's regular diner as I've done for the past couple of weeks. He goes there nearly every morning, so it's a safe bet he'll be here this morning. I've been following him around for a while now and have his routine down to a T.

I sit in the diner, ask for a burrito, and not five minutes later, in walks ole Claudio. Perfect.

I figure I'll just enjoy my breakfast as I watch my target. Win-win on my book.

When my phone rings with a videocall, I take it out of my pocket. I sigh and answer.

Nico shows up on my screen, sitting there with a baby in his lap, who's staring at the camera and cooing.

For a second, I think about hanging up, pretending the call died or something like that— Nico can be a hellion when he's pissed off and this job was supposed to be his – but in the end, I stay on the line.

“You steal a baby or is this one yours?” I joke, and Nico smiles a little, looking down at what is, presumably, his baby boy.

“This one's mine,” he shoots back. “Where are you?”

I make faces at the little guy and he grins and swings around his little baby fists. Man, he's already like his father.

“He's quiet,” I comment.

“Not at three in the morning, he's not,” Nico cracks.

I snort out a laugh, looking curiously at the baby. What would it be like to have one of my own? To have someone to come home to? Not just a woman but a *baby*.

It seems crazy, like it would fuck up my whole way of life, but at the end of the day, it would be nice to have someone waiting for me.

“Where's our friend?” Nico asks in a low voice.

“What the hell are you even doing calling so early?” I ask, trying to change the subject while my eyes veer for a second to the “friend” in question, just to see the guy ordering his regular breakfast order and flirting with the waitress, who finds him less than amusing, to say the least. “Shouldn't you be enjoying married life in bliss?”

Nico scowls. “I am. Besides, wasn't sure you could do the job.”

I know he is just trying to push my buttons. “Feeling like second best? Or are you just jealous, honey?”

He grunts. “I haven’t been able to go out anywhere.” He rolls his shoulders. “I guess I’m just feeling antsy. Thought maybe I could go out there and help.”

I look at the baby in his lap and laugh. “What, with a baby on your hip?”

Nico scowls. “Don’t go thinking I’m soft just because I’ve got a little one.”

I hold up my hands in defense. “Would never think it, bud, but still, you have to admit you can’t stay away from him or the missus, and you can’t exactly bring him or her on a job.”

“I know,” he sighs. “That’s why I’m just on the phone, talking to you about yours. Now, again, where is he?”

“Close,” I mutter, turning the camera feature to give him a visual of the man himself, before turning the camera back to show him my ugly mug. “Won’t be long now before I get really close and personal with the fucker.”

“Don’t curse in front of the baby,” Nico scolds, and I look down at the baby on the phone screen. He grins up at me as if he doesn’t give a damn about my language.

“He’s not old enough to understand,” I say, but Nico stares me down. “Okay, okay. I won’t curse in front of the little guy. Sheesh.” I stick out my tongue at the little guy and he laughs.

My heart seems to swell. Okay, maybe I like kids. I haven’t really been around them much, given my upbringing, but Dante’s little girl and Nico’s kid – they’re pretty cool.

“Just give us updates once in a while and let us know when you are done,” Nico mumbles. “I wouldn’t want to have to go there and do it myself.”

“Liar.” Something tells me Nico would love nothing more than to slit Claudio’s throat himself. All that pent-up energy since he’s been spending so much time with his wife and kid would make it that much sweeter for him.

He hangs up and I’m free to do my job again. I roll my head around on my shoulders. Fun time is over, it’s time to focus on what I’m here for again.

I scan the area just to keep an eye on ole Claudio while he pigs out, my eyes wandering once in a while to keep me aware of my surroundings.

As I sweep the room for the fourth time since I got here, I find a pair of familiar silver eyes, flitting past mine before I catch the glare of recognition in them.

She promptly walks right out of the coffee shop, leaving behind her little friend. Claudio still has a lot to eat in front of him, and his routine tells me he'll be here harassing the nice waitress a while still.

I get up and push past everyone, going out to the parking lot to find her.

“Wait up, babydoll,” I drawl, and she whirls around to face me.

“Don't call me that. You don't even know me,” she hisses, walking backward toward her car.

“Come on, don't be that way,” I fake-whine, following her. “You can't ditch your little friend, can you? Something tells me you're her ride.”

She huffs out a breath. “Maybe not, but I can lock myself in my car to get away from you,” she seethes.

“Why are you so mad at me, doll?” I ask her as she unlocks her car and yanks open the door.

“Who says I'm mad?” she all-but growls.

I chuckle. “Is it that I didn't call you back? After? You know, sometimes, I forget—”

“After what?” she asks. “I keep telling you, I don't know you.”

I look at her curiously, tilting my head. Maybe she's right. I don't know the exact lines of her face, but there's something about those silver eyes...

Maybe we never met, maybe we did, but with everything in me, I *know* her! Fuck. What is the deal with her? Who is she? Why can't I just let her go, ignore her? Forget her?

“Just tell me your name,” I plead, but she shuts the door and locks it, staring straight ahead and putting on some booming music.

I sigh and walk back into the diner.

The waitress glares at me. Maybe she thought I’d stitch her up.

“What? I wouldn’t run on you, sweets,” I whisper and wink at her as I head to my table again.

I frown thinking about the girl outside. I remember those silver eyes, I just *know* it, but I can’t place them.

I’m going to figure it out come hell or high-water, though.

CATARINA

“Where the hell did you run off to?” Alyssa asks, her tone half-annoyed, half-curious.

“Nowhere,” I say. “Just out to the car.”

“Before we even got our breakfast burritos?” She brandishes one at me and I grab it from her, unwrapping it and taking a bite. I’m ravenous.

“Wasn’t hungry,” I lie, taking another big bite.

She snorts. “You’re so full of shit, Catarina DeLuca.”

“Takes one to know one,” I shoot back, and she laughs, loud and open.

I smile. I love spending time with Alyssa, even if she gets me into trouble half the time. Hell, I’d been out with her that fateful night, come to think of it.

But I don’t want to think about that night. I don’t want to think about anything but how good this breakfast burrito tastes as I nearly inhale it.

“Where’s the little one?” she asks, speaking of Chelsea, and I grin.

“With my mom, and guess what.”

“What?” she asks suspicious, but with a smile on her face.

“I’m kid-free for the weekend,” I tell her. “She’s staying with her grandparents. They’re going to take her to the water park so I can relax.”

“That sounds good,” she says. “You need it. You wanna stay at my place?”

“Not tonight,” I say. I look at her. “Maybe Saturday?”

A slow grin spreads across her face. “Are you going to go out with me on Saturday?”

“I’m not sure if I’m going out, but I’ll come get you for the afterparty,” I suggest. Going to a strip club called “Pasties” isn’t exactly my idea of a good time, but I’m down for a few shots and some dancing afterward.

It’s not like I have anything against strippers, but I’m easily embarrassed, and they’re... well, naked.

“Aw, boo,” Alyssa whines, but I can tell she’s happy that I’ll be at least showing up after.

I feel relieved that she isn’t going to ask me more about a couple of nights ago or my disappearing act just now. It’s not something I want to talk about.

We head back to Alyssa’s place for some day-drinking because she talks me into buying some margarita mix.

“How come you never have fun out anymore?”

“What? What are you talking about?” I know it’s been a while since our partying days together, but I still have fun. Right?

Thinking back for the past few years, I notice a trend of memories with my daughter and my parents, but not much more.

“You don’t go out, you don’t date. Do you at least have one-night stands?” Alyssa asks.

“Why do you ask, you weirdo?” I ask, laughing a little uneasily as I blend our margaritas.

“Because, you used to be all fun in high school, and now you’re kind of a stick in the mud,” she says bluntly, and I turn around, blinking at her.

“Gee, thanks,” I say flatly, but she just laughs.

“Seriously, Cat. You were a hellion when we were younger. What happened?”

I shrug. “I don’t know, Alyssa. It’s just with what my dad does...” I trail off. Alyssa isn’t in the life, per se. She dates guys who are. That’s kind of her thing, but she didn’t grow up in it.

Hell, neither did I. Not really.

But I’ve been through enough in the last few years that I understand life in the mafia better than she does.

“I dunno, Cat. I plan to marry into it.” She grins.

I snort. “Marry who? One of those guys you’re having one-night stands with?”

She waves her hands. “Nah, not any of them. Maybe I’ll marry Santino.”

I gasp. “You will *not*.”

Santino has cheated on her twice already.

She groans, “I don’t know. I think about it sometimes. At least he buys me stuff, pretends to love me.”

“No, Alyssa,” I tell her, taking her hands in mine. “You have to wait for the right guy, not just latch onto the only one to give you a slice of his attention.

“Lots of guys give me attention,” she says flippantly, but I know what she went through when Santino cheated on her. And it wasn’t much better the second time, and it won’t be the third.

“Exactly,” I say softly. “Which is why you don’t have to worry about Santino. There’ll be other guys, better ones, who treat you right.”

“I don’t know, Cat. Seems like you have to take what you can get,” she huffs, but she squeezes my hands. “I guess I’ll hold out just a little longer, though.”

“Good to hear,” I say, and then I take a breath, feeling like I owe her an explanation. “And as for why I’m not as wild as I was in high school... I guess it’s Chelsea, you know?”

“You never did tell me about her father,” Alyssa says quietly, maybe even a bit fearful, as if afraid I’ll bite her head off for asking. Which might not be far from the truth.

“And I never will,” I say firmly. “Suffice it to say it was a mistake, okay?”

“Everyone sleeps with guys they’ll regret,” she says mournfully.

That isn’t exactly true, or at least it hadn’t been, for me, except for that *one* time.

And it isn’t like that’s ever going to happen again.

“Yeah,” I say and pour us a couple of margaritas. I need one, after that conversation.

Alyssa and I day-drink most of the day, singing songs we used to scream-sing in high school and dancing around, until she gets a call.

“Hey,” she answers, and I’m sitting on the couch, or rather, lying on it, looking at her with half-lidded eyes.

“Who’s that?” I ask, the edge of a slur to my voice.

She waves her hand, but from the look in her eyes, I just know it’s Santino.

“Alyssa, don’t!” I urge, but she’s already standing up and walking out onto the balcony of her second-floor apartment.

I sigh, plopping down further on the couch, knowing I’ll have to get a ride home.

I call the only person I can be sure to count on in this city – Alonzo, my stepfather.

“DeLuca,” he answers professionally.

“Hey,” I say, trying to sound sober. “I need a ride home.”

He pauses and then chuckles. “Drink too much at Alyssa’s?”

“Yeah,” I admit. “And she’s going to be picked up by her boyfriend and I just don’t wanna hang out here alone.”

“All right, *bellissima*,” he says gently. “I’ll send a car for you. But why don’t I get you a hotel room? I don’t want you having to play mom all weekend when this is supposed to be your weekend off.”

My heart swells with love for him. He may have his cons, but Alonzo does care about me, he always has, that’s why he adopted me.

“That’d be great, Papa,” I say softly, and he hums.

“I’ll book you a room at the Ritz,” he says, and I grin, unable to help myself.

“Can I get room service?” I ask.

“Anything you want,” he agrees, and I silently punch the air, thinking about how I’m going to tear up all of the candy at the minibar.

Maybe sometimes it is nice to be a mafia princess, even if I don’t like it most of the time.

The car he sends comes along with a *massive* man around my father’s age who looks like he’ll kill me rather than drop me off safely, but he’s quiet and drops me off at the Ritz easily.

When I go up to the desk, they already have my room ready, and the woman upfront slides a key to me.

I don’t really look like I should be staying at the Ritz, just wearing a pair of cut-offs I’d grabbed and an old T-shirt, but my father had probably paid out the ass for this room, so she doesn’t complain.

When I get to the elevator and call it, there’s a man waiting there already, and I keep my eyes downcast, not wanting to be talked to.

“Are you following me, doll face?” the man asks in a low, teasing tone, and I look up, my heart falling to my toes.

Angelo.

“God hates me,” I mutter, and Angelo laughs, getting into the elevator.

“I’ll take the next one,” I mumble, and he shrugs, grinning at me.

“See you later, pretty doll,” he says quietly as the doors shut and I groan, stalking over to the staircase since I’m only on the second floor, anyway.

I haven’t seen Angelo in years, and suddenly now he’s everywhere. What have I done to deserve this?

ANGELO

Tonight is the night. That fucker's minutes are counting down fast and he doesn't even know it.

I stake out Pasties for what seems like *hours*, watching naked women walk by. It makes me shudder, not because I don't like naked women, but because I know they're here out of desperation most times. It's their job to know who has a large, deep wallet and do their best to empty it out.

Which is going to be the case with mine if I don't finish this damn job. Not that I'm giving any to these women, but I'm paying everything out-of-pocket and I won't get paid until I'm done. I could ask Dante to pay for my expenses, after all I'm here because he needs me, but I don't fly like that.

I also don't like going without money, and I'm certainly not going to ask my father for any, so I'm more than happy when I see Claudio's scarred, ugly face just outside the alley. He's smoking a cigarette and looking around as if he's scared, so I duck behind a dumpster.

I haven't seen Silver Eyes since I saw her by the elevator at the Ritz yesterday, but she's been on my mind a lot, and that annoys me. If experience tells me anything is that we'll run into each other again sooner or later. But for now, I have to focus on Claudio.

There's no one else in the alley, so I feel lucky as I stealthily get out from behind the dumpster and grab him around the neck in a headlock. I pull him halfway behind the

dumpster. He tries to scream, but my hold on his throat prevents air from passing so that no sound gets out.

Adrenaline thrums through me like electricity when I take my knife out and slit his throat, ear to ear, then cut off a giant T on his forehead. Dante told me to make sure his death sends a message and I'd say this is a loud one. Don't mess with Dante. So I turn the guy into a life depiction of *The Scarlett Letter*, except instead of an A for adultery, he gets marked for the thief he is. It seems fitting.

When I'm done, I leave him on the ground. I'm reaching down for his wallet to give to Dante when there's a little screech and I whirl around.

A woman stands there, and I sprint to get to her as she takes off. Her heels make her wobble, though, and I grab onto her wrist.

She turns, and I'll be damned if it isn't the silver-eyed beauty herself.

"Who sent you?" I murmur, pulling her close.

She whimpers, "N-No one. P-Please don't hurt me."

"What are you doing here, then? It can't be a coincidence that you keep popping out like a fungus wherever I am. What do you know? Who the hell are you?" I'm still holding my knife, but I'm weirdly hesitant to use it on her. Anyone else witnessing what she did would be dead by now, but I can't seem to put the knife on her throat or chest and just get it over with.

Why? Why does looking into her eyes make me lose myself? Why am I powerless against harming her?

"Please," she whimpers, and I look into those silver eyes and lick my lips.

"You've seen too much, I'm sorry it has to be this way." And fuck if I'm not telling the truth. But what else am I supposed to do? She can ruin my life and put me behind bars for the rest of my life for this.

“I won’t tell anyone. I promise. I’ll do anything. Please don’t kill me. I have a little girl and she needs me.”

Fuck. She was already hard to think about killing, why did she have to make it impossible? “What on earth am I supposed to do with you?” I muse, looking down at her.

I can’t have her ratting me out. There has to be another option.

I could kidnap her and think about what to do with her later. But I can’t just keep her locked up somewhere for life, and I definitely can’t let her go. And with all that happened to me, could I unnecessarily leave an innocent little girl without a mom? A mom who did nothing wrong except be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Fuck. Double fuck. Silver Eyes has me by the balls, even if I’m the one holding the knife.

I have to take her with me, and because I’m me and don’t wish a childhood without a parent on anyone else, I have to take the little girl too. This is a gigantic mess and getting messier by the second.

A memory of Dante and how happy he is comes to me. And one of Nico and how he smiles at his little boy. I think of Dante and how he’d looked at Mia the last time that I spoke to him.

They both seemed so *happy*. Like they didn’t have to do anything else but be with each other again to feel fulfilled. I want that. I want it so bad I would do damn near anything for it. To find something that keeps away the darkness from my mind, for *good*.

Looking into her eyes, I notice the darkness isn’t inside me. Hasn’t been any time she’s been there. And this damn pull. This deep-set knowledge of *her*.

Could I keep her? How? It’s not like she’ll happily follow me. Unless, she doesn’t get a choice.

A lightbulb goes off in my head. There *is* a way to keep her alive, semi-free, and remain protected against her testimony.

“Are you married?” I ask. Something like possessiveness rolls through me at the thought. But this is not about that.

Wives can’t testify against their husbands, can they? What if... I know it seems like a strange way to solve my problem, but...it really is the perfect solution. She gets to live, and I get to have more time to try and understand this strange pull I have to her and guarantee my own safety.

She looks confused for a second before frowning. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Cute that she thinks she has a choice whether to answer or not. “Answer the damn question,” I say towering over her, and she shakes her head.

Perfect. I hide my smile, but I feel smug. This really is a stroke of genius.

“Here’s the deal. I let you live, and you get to go home to your little girl...”

“Thank you.” The relief on her face is so clear I almost smile. Almost, because now comes the flip of the coin.

“If...” Her back straightens and she tenses all over. “You marry me.”

Her mouth falls open. Then she closes and opens it a few times, like she wants to say something but the words don’t come out. *Yeah, doll face, I’m just as shocked as you are by this turn of events.*

Finally, she says, “What?”

“Against my better judgment, I’m giving you the chance to live. But for that to happen, you need to be married to me, doll,” I murmur, and her silver eyes, filled with tears, look up at me.

I can tell she is terrified, and I really hope she doesn’t make me kill her, because as much as I don’t want to, I’ll do whatever I have to do to protect my friends and myself.

“So, what will it be? Are we off to get that little girl and get married, or is this the end of the road for you?”

Her mouth hangs open and she blinks once, twice, closes her mouth, and swallows hard. “M-Marry you?”

Her stuttering is cute. Just as cute as her whole fuck-you demeanor before, and I hate that I notice that. I may have to kill her, so why am I thinking about how cute she is?

“You can’t testify if we’re married,” I muse. “If you come home with me right now, I won’t have to make... other arrangements.”

“I can’t go right now,” she says. “I have responsibilities.”

“Like what?” I ask, loosening my grip on her.

“I told you I have a daughter,” she whispers, and I raise an eyebrow. She wipes at her eyes as if angry she’s almost crying. “I need to be with her. I can’t leave her.”

“Of course not,” I say softly. I would never allow someone to abandon a child. No one deserves that. The child least of all.

I wonder how having a little girl in my life may change things. It may be fun. It also may stifle things, but I don’t really have a choice.

I mean, I *do*, but I can’t kill this little doll in my arms. I feel some kind of connection to her, and I want to understand it, so this is the best option.

“Are you sure there is no other way?” she asks, biting on her lower lip.

“Those are your options. You should be happy. No one else gets to choose their fate.” I know my smile is positively predatory.

She looks down at the ground. After a few seconds, she nods. “I’ll marry you,” she says. “I’ll do whatever you want. Just let me get back to my little girl.”

“I’ll take you to her,” I say. “But you will pack up your stuff and come with me right away. I need to get back to Chicago.”

“Okay,” she says shakily, and I usher her toward my car, away from the dead body on the ground. She looks back at

him as we pass the alley, trembling.

I feel bad for her. I remember my first kill, my first dead body. It isn't easy. Not that it gets any easier, but you learn to deal with it and the nightmares the lifestyle brings along. It's a dog-eat-dog world, and I'll be the one doing the eating for as long as I can.

"Now, I *know* I met you before, but I can't quite seem to place you." It's really frustrating. "So remind me of your name," I command, and she's afraid enough not to sass me.

"Catarina," she says. "Catarina DeLuca."

DeLuca. I've heard that name in some of Dante's circles.

"You're a little princess, aren't you?" I say teasingly, and she scoffs.

"Not exactly."

We walk to the Ritz and I get the valet to bring around my car, an unmarked sedan since I'm on a job. I usually drive a little two-seater, so it's good luck that I have the sedan today, since apparently I'm about to become a stepfather.

I like kids, so I'm not too worried about it. They're fun, always full of excitement and adrenaline, and that appeals to me. They're just full of wonder, and I've always wanted a little rugrat of my own.

I surprise myself with how excited I am about this.

Catarina sits quietly for a few moments after giving me directions, and then she takes in a sharp breath.

"If we are really doing this—"

"Oh, we are doing this alright," I cut her off.

She takes a deep breath and starts over. "If we are doing this, I think we should have some ground rules," she says.

I snort at the idea of her having rules. That's cute, that she thinks she has leverage on me since I could just decide to off her. But I'm a reasonable enough guy. And what's with the finding her cute again? I almost growl at myself. I need to stop

this shit. This is not a romantic relationship or a sexy hook up. This is a marriage of convenience here. *Focus*.

“All right, what are they?” I ask.

“No sex,” she says quickly, and I grin a little.

“None at all?”

“Absolutely not,” she says.

I shrug. “All right. I won’t touch you unless you ask me to.”

“I’m not going to ask,” she says flatly.

I ignore her statement and ask, “Anything else?”

“I get to have my daughter with me. And you have to make nice with my stepfather. He’s pretty powerful around here, and he’ll never allow the marriage without meeting you.”

“I’m good with dads,” I say, which is true. All my high school girlfriends’ dads loved me. I’m a good talker, and I can charm people.

“Of course you are,” she mutters, and a little sound like a whine or a groan escapes her and my head fills with the image of a goddess in bed, moaning my name.

Fuck, I’m instantly hard and this is definitely not the time or the place. What was that? I couldn’t see the goddess’s face but I know this is a memory, not a fantasy.

“You take me away from the city,” she says, pulling me out of my head. “I don’t want to be in this life anymore, but I can only get away from my stepfather if he thinks I’m protected. If we get married, I want it to be away from the city.”

That sparks something inside me. Pretty silver eyes, laughter, A talk about escaping the city, an unwanted life. All flashes, no real picture or image to hang on to, like a fast-moving slideshow.

“I already told you we were moving to Chicago, so that’s easy enough.”

“I won’t testify, but you don’t own me. I get to have my own life and I don’t have to be with you all of the time,” she says firmly.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I drawl, taking the exit where she tells me to.

We’re approaching a few huge mansions. This must be where her stepfather lives.

“And we eventually get divorced.”

“Clearly,” I say. I have no idea how any of this will play out, but that is something I want to keep on the table too, at least for now. No use having her think this is a forever kind of marriage. Though I am curious about her and there is this pull to her, I don’t know this girl. We might not even be compatible in the least and she might piss me off enough that I change my mind halfway through.

I won’t kill her, her little girl doesn’t deserve that, but I might be the one wanting her out of my house eventually. I have no illusions this has anything to do with love and I ultimately want what Nico and Dante have. The whole shebang.

“And then you let me go, right?”

“Naturally,” I say. I like her fire, I can’t deny that.

When I stop the car, I look at her for a moment longer. As the light hits her just right, the full memory hits me like a freight train.

Her gray eyes glinting up at me, full of lust and glassy with booze.

“Fuck me, Angelo,” she’d said. And boy, did I. That night had been one for the books. How had I not remembered before?

“Fuck me!” I exclaim. “I *do* know you, kitten.” She’d introduced herself as Cat and I’d called her kitten.

She squeezes her eyes tightly closed and then opens them again, sighing. “It was just that one night.”

I remember now, her nails dragging down my shoulders, the way she'd arched up beneath me.

"I'll be damned," I murmur, but she doesn't say anything more. I can't believe I forgot a woman like her, a woman who'd, by all rights, been *exactly* my type, and I can't wait to get her back beneath me.

We arrive at the mansion and it's a *huge* place, maybe bigger than Dante's. I appreciate the architecture and the plant life as I walk toward the door.

She grabs my arm, ushers me over to the side door.

"I don't want to wake him," she says. We've already been buzzed in, but something tells me he has guys for that.

We walk into the side door and into the mansion and she walks up the staircase. I put my hands in my pockets, feeling slightly nervous. Kids usually like me, but what if this one doesn't?

By the time I get upstairs, she's already in the room, waking up the little kid.

"Where are we going, Mommy?" she asks in a little voice, and my heart skips a beat.

"On an adventure," Catarina says in a hushed voice, and the little girl gasps, excited. I stand in the doorway, smiling a bit.

And then Catarina brings the little girl out, holding her in her arms and trying to hurry past me. I grab Catarina's wrist, wanting to get a look at the little scamp.

When I first glimpse her face, I have to blink a few times. My eyes must be playing tricks on me.

This can't be, can it? I must be hallucinating from exhaustion.

As I'm looking at her, the little girl yawns and looks at me, her brown eyes wide, and my heart stops in my chest.

CATARINA

I swallow hard, looking at Angelo, the realization sweeping across his face. Then anger contorts his features, and I draw back with Chelsea in my arms.

“Catarina,” he says in a warning tone.

“We’ll talk about this later,” I say in a hoarse whisper, and hurry outside to transfer Chelsea’s car seat into Angelo’s car and buckle her in. She’s already sleeping again when Angelo comes outside, trailing after us, his face terrifying, brown-amber eyes flashing.

“What the hell is this, Catarina?” he growls, standing outside the car.

I cross my arms over my chest in defense, as if it will help me if he decides to hurt me. I have no idea what Angelo will decide to do, and part of me is terrified.

The other part of me....is excited but afraid. I’m this close to finally getting out of the city and away from my father. I can be with this wild, dangerous man who’d made me come so hard I’d seen stars. But what if finding out the truth has him changing his mind? I don’t know how to feel, and everything’s confusing.

“She’s yours,” I say simply, and he barks out a bitter laugh.

“I *know* that, Catarina, it’s like I’m looking in the fucking mirror except for her hair, which is all you. Why the hell didn’t you call me?” he growls, stepping closer to me.

I back away, toward the car. “Because it’s not like you left your number, Angelo,” I snap back. “You fucked me and then left me alone with a baby in my belly.”

“I didn’t know,” he insists, his mouth twisted in a snarl. “And you should have told me.”

I sigh. “I didn’t know for weeks, Angelo, and by then, you were in the wind. I looked for you in clubs and bars around the city, but I couldn’t find you.”

None of it is a lie, I really did keep my eye out for him when I went out, but I could have maybe done more. Only, I know that he’s not the kind of guy to stick around, that much was clear even that one night.

“You didn’t look hard enough!” he shouts, and I brace myself against the car, my heart pounding. His mouth twists in a sneer. “You think I’m going to hit you?” he asks.

“Maybe,” I say in a shaking voice. “You just killed someone and almost did the same to me. I don’t know you, so who’s to say you won’t?”

“I never hit women unless they are a threat to my life. For now, and until we are married, you are a threat to me,” he says in a warning tone. “I won’t hit you. But don’t forget that I own your life, even if I don’t own you.”

I take in a deep breath. “Is that what I have to look forward to? Trying to protect myself and my daughter while you decide whether or not to kill me?”

“I would *never* hurt *my* daughter,” he barks.

“How should I know?” I take in a ragged breath. “Tell me right now, Angelo. Do I have to worry about you offing me the whole time we’re married, or what? If so, you might as well do it right now.”

“I could,” he says, as if mulling it over. “I could do it and take my daughter.” My heart races and he pauses. “But you’re the mother of my child, for better or for worse. I won’t hurt you.” He pauses again. “Not ever.”

I nod. “Good to know. Now let’s go,” I say quietly, not breaking eye contact with him.

Angelo shoves off the car and yanks the door open, getting inside. Luckily, my Chelsea sleeps like the dead, so she doesn’t wake.

I sigh heavily and get in the passenger side.

This is the price for my ticket to a better life, but it’s going to be a wild ride.

We arrive at the hotel in about half an hour, and I fall asleep halfway through.

When we get there, I step out of the car. I wobble as we walk toward the building since I don’t wear heels very often. Angelo steadies me with one hand on my lower back as I’m carrying Chelsea.

“Let me have her,” he says, and it doesn’t seem like a request. I’m afraid to hand her over, but I don’t really have a choice, so I do.

Angelo takes her gently and she promptly puts her head on his shoulder. It’s nearing daylight and poor baby is exhausted from being woken up and jostled around.

I bite my lip, thinking about how I’ll have to tell her that Angelo is her father. I wonder how she’ll react.

Chelsea loves an adventure, and she’s go-go all the time, so I don’t think she’ll mind too much. She’ll probably take it with grace. She’s young enough not to remember not having a father, and I wonder if Angelo will stick around after all this is over.

He holds her tightly with one hand as we get on the elevator, standing with her still sleeping on his shoulder. He looks over at her little face and kisses her tenderly on the forehead.

She wraps her arms around him and his face looks suddenly so tender that it makes my heart ache.

Maybe I'm wrong about him. Maybe he will be a good father, even if he might never be a good husband. Regardless, his lifestyle is not good for her, so I have to take her away from all of this.

Even if Angelo starts to love her, he's dangerous. Hell, he killed a man tonight. I can't have my daughter around that. But my stepfather's house isn't much better. I just want her to be safe and happy, and I don't want to see any more death.

Is that so much to ask for?

The elevator dings and the tension is broken between me and Angelo as the doors open and he strides out, pulling out his key card and opening the penthouse.

It's huge, with two bedrooms and a couch that looks like a pull-out, so at least we'll have plenty of room.

I put the overnight bag I made for myself and Chelsea down on the couch.

Angelo takes Chelsea to the unmade bed, presumably the one he's been using, and tucks her in gently, trying not to wake her.

I stand there awkwardly, not knowing what to do, and then Angelo roughly takes my elbow, dragging me out onto the balcony.

"You will *never* take her from me," he growls, as if he's known what I'd been thinking.

"I—" I start, and he cuts me off.

"You hid her from me, and I hate you for it, but one thing that's never going to happen is you taking her away," he says. "We're getting married, and we're going to stay married until such a time as I can trust you not to say anything. We're going to raise her together and be a family, but married in name only."

"Fine with me," I mumble. "Her name is Chelsea, by the way. Chelsea Anne—"

“Bianchi,” he says firmly. “Her name will be Chelsea Anne Bianchi as soon as we get back to Chicago.”

“All right,” I say quietly, ready to agree to anything to be safe and to get the hell out of the city and away from my stepfather. As much as I love him, he’s just as wild as Angelo. “But my stepfather—”

“I’ll deal with him,” Angelo says dismissively, looking out over the city instead of me. “We’ll go there tomorrow for dinner. You’ll call, make up something about how we’ve been together for a while in secret.”

I swallow. “I don’t know if he’ll buy it.”

“He will. You’ll make him buy it.” He glances at me. “You’ll do what I say.”

“I told you that you don’t own me—” I start, but he cuts me off again.

“Don’t I, kitten?” he asks, advancing on me until I back up against the balcony railing. “Your life is in my hands, so I think maybe I do.”

“I won’t live like that,” I argue. “You can kill me now.”

Angelo sighs, rubbing a hand over his face. “Bold of you to assume that I’d want to own you,” he says, and my heart drops in spite of how angry I am at him. “You’re the mother of my child and my wife in name only, and that’s it. But you’ll listen to me when it matters. It will be to keep you and my daughter safe.”

“*Our* daughter,” I say, panic rising in my throat from how he’s talking. “She’s *our* daughter, Angelo.”

He goes silent and walks back into the penthouse.

I stay outside on the balcony for a while, taking in deep breaths of fresh air and thinking. What am I doing? I don’t have a choice, but at the same time, some part of me wants to run away from all of it, just start over somewhere new. But I know that either Angelo or my stepfather or both would find me and drag me back.

I just have to remember that this is the only way to get out and protect myself and my daughter. Soon enough, Angelo Bianchi will be back to just being a bad memory.

ANGELO

I tuck in to bed next to my little girl, looking at how her eyelashes fan across her cheekbones, the way her chin turns up just like mine. My heart aches, and I feel a rush of anger rise in me again at Catarina.

She's curled up in the other bedroom, far away, and I'm surprised she didn't grab the couch to be closer. She's so worried that I would hurt our little girl. As if.

I'll never let anything bad happen to her. And I'll burn the world down if Catarina takes her from me. I hope she knows that.

As much as I'd fronted when we were arguing, I wouldn't go back and kill Catarina. I made the right decision, giving her this choice. Our daughter deserves a family, and if Catarina wants to get divorced, it's going to have to be civil.

As angry as I am, I want our daughter to have the best, most peaceful life. I've never imagined that something like this could happen. I always use protection, but now that I think about it, that night with Catarina was unusual.

I remember that night clearly now. How we talked about life all night long and we were both buzzed on tequila from the club. She'd been chatty and seemed like she had a wild streak, unlike now.

I guess I don't really know her at all, just like she doesn't know me, even though I still feel that draw to her, that connection.

It's just because we have a past together, however short it might be. And maybe my body recognized her even if my memory didn't.

But we've made this perfect little girl, and I can't wait to get to know her. She's beautiful asleep, and I think about her teenage years and how I'm probably going to have to bust some heads.

I don't think I'll ever fall asleep, but with my little girl in my arms I'm able to drift off.

When I wake up, I check my watch and it's nearly two in the afternoon. Catarina and Chelsea are playing on the floor, some big floor puzzle that Catarina must have brought with her.

"Hello," Chelsea says when I sit up on the bed, her brown eyes so much like mine sparkling. "I'm Chelsea. Who are you?"

"I'm your Papa," I say softly, and her eyes widen.

"Really?" she asks, and Catarina bites her lip but doesn't say anything, just nodding when Chelsea looks at her for confirmation.

Chelsea climbs onto the bed and puts her thin arms around my neck, kissing my cheek.

"It's nice to meet you, Papa," she lisps, and my heart feels like it's swelling in my chest.

I hug her tightly and then she climbs back down, simply going back to her puzzle. I watch for a moment, tears welling in my eyes, and then I wipe at them and go to shower.

In the shower, I think about everything. About what happened with Catarina, how my life is about to change now that I'm going to be married with a little daughter.

I'm going to have the life that Dante and Nico have. I'm going to be the father that my father never was. I'm going to be a husband to Catarina in name only, but I'll be the *best* father. It's what Chelsea deserves.

But I'm so angry that I've already missed out on so much of her life.

When I get out of the shower, I sling a towel around my hips to get my clothes, and Chelsea is asleep on the couch, her thumb in her mouth.

Catarina stares at my body for a moment and I would grin if I wasn't so fucking angry with her. I get dressed in front of her, unashamed, wearing a simple T-shirt and jeans for the flight back to Chicago we're taking later tonight.

First, we have a dinner to attend.

I have to deal with her stepfather. I wrack my brain to try and remember the name Alonzo DeLuca. I know that Dante has mentioned him, and I've heard about him from around. He's powerful in the New York City area, but not in Chicago. I think I can handle him.

"Did you call your parents?" I ask, looking at her after I finish dressing.

There's a blush on her cheeks, and for the first time I notice the freckles that are spread across her nose. It's cute.

Damn it. This woman stole my baby from me. How can I still find anything cute about her?

Catarina nods. "We're having dinner with them at six," she says.

"Good," I say. "That gives us some time to talk."

I sit down on the couch, looking up at her.

"What are we going to talk about?" she asks.

"Chelsea," I say simply. "I want to know everything, from the moment you found out you were pregnant."

She swallows visibly, perching on the couch arm. She's dressed casually now, in a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. Her legs are long and lovely. I try not to look, reminding myself that I'm still angry.

"I was shocked, of course," she starts. "But I knew right away that I wanted her. My stepfather was angry, demanded to

know whose it was but I wouldn't say. I told him today that we reconnected, and he didn't seem upset, just confused."

"Back to Chelsea," I say, frustrated and feeling anger spread through me, making my skin feel hot. I need to know everything.

"She was born in June," she tells me, her voice going softer. "The fourteenth, on a Sunday morning. It was about six in the morning when I started to feel the contractions. She was a preemie, you see, a month early. They had to keep her in the NICU in an incubator for a couple of weeks because she was so small. Only four pounds."

My heart aches. I should have been there. I should have been there for every moment.

"And after that?"

"She ate sooo much," she says, laughing softly. "She got really chubby, and she's still bigger than most three-year-olds," she explains. "She's just making up for being born so small."

"She's perfect," I say in a low voice, looking over at her on the couch.

Catarina looks at me, her gray eyes full of love for our daughter. "She is," she says. "She took her first steps when she was just ten months old. Always ready to go. Started speaking at one year. Her first word was cheese." She laughs and there's such a fond look in her eyes it makes my heart clench.

I realize that she's a wonderful mother, that she loves our little girl. She's taken care of her all this time, and even if I resent her for not telling me, I have to respect her as Chelsea's mother.

She's done a lot for our little girl, and I'm grateful for it.

I've always respected single mothers, but the thing is, Catarina didn't *have* to be one. From day one I would have been taking care of her and Chelsea.

"She's so smart," I say. Although I don't know much about her yet, I can just sense it.

Catarina smiles. “She is.”

Chelsea stirs awake and I go to her instantly, kissing along her face until she giggles. I forget Catarina and all the worries I’ve had when she hugs me tightly.

The next couple of hours, I spend time with my little girl. I put on a tiara and play tea party with her on the floor, and Catarina snorts out a laugh when she sees me. I grin at her and continue drinking imaginary tea with Chelsea.

By the time it’s five-thirty, Chelsea has already painted my toenails with pink polish. I chuckle, looking at them as I slide on my shoes.

“You’re good with her,” Catarina muses, and it makes me feel proud that I won her over at least as the father of our child. It’s good she validates my efforts. I want to be the best dad I can be for my little girl.

We head back to the mansion and Chelsea is bouncing up and down in her car seat.

“We’re going to see Grandpa,” she says brightly.

“That’s right, honey,” Catarina says. “But we’re not going to live with Grandpa anymore.”

“Who will we live with?” she asks curiously. “Papa?”

“Yes, baby,” I croon to her, looking into the rearview mirror at her. “Papa will never leave you again.”

She smiles at me and goes back to playing with her doll, a barbie whose hair she had cut into a short, uneven bob.

Catarina is nearly silent on the drive and so am I, only occasionally speaking to Chelsea, who babbles about her dolls and what they’ve been up to in her dollhouse.

We arrive at the mansion and we head inside, being buzzed in automatically.

A man stands in the foyer when we walk in, looking fierce. He has gray at his temples, lines on his face, but he doesn’t look more than fifty. He has a hard look in his blue eyes,

though, but I smile at him, sticking out my hand, while Chelsea goes to hug him around his legs.

“Hey Grampa,” she says brightly. “This is my Papa.”

“Is that so?” the man muses. “I’m Alonzo DeLuca,” he says, shaking my hand firmly. Almost too firmly.

“Angelo Bianchi,” I say, keeping my voice low and even.

He raises an eyebrow. “Any relation to Andrea?” he asks, and I look away, setting my jaw.

“No,” I lie. Andrea is my father. “Not exactly, anyway.”

Alonzo hums, and then ushers us into the kitchen, where Catarina says hello to her mother, a small, dark woman with silvery streaks in her hair and big brown eyes. Catarina must have gotten her looks from her father, because she doesn’t look like her mother much at all.

I sit down next to Catarina at dinner, lamb chops and baked sweet potatoes.

Alonzo says grace and then we dig in.

“It’s delicious,” I praise, looking over at Catarina’s quiet mother. She smiles, and when she does, she looks more like Catarina. It brightens up her face considerably.

Alonzo hides a smile, but I catch it. It looks like the way to please him is to be kind to his wife and daughter, so I have to put on a show. I don’t want him after me when we go back to Chicago.

I put my hand on Catarina’s knee. “I want you all to know that I would have been here for Chelsea’s birth if I could have been. I was on a job and had to go away for a few years.”

Catarina looks at me, shocked, but Alonzo nods his head, as if he understands.

“Did some time myself,” he says. “I know how it goes.”

“I’m just doing a few jobs here and there now,” I say, although that’s a lie.

I take as many jobs as I can get so that I don't have to take money from my trust fund. I hate my father and I don't want a single cent from him, if I can help it. There were times that I had to delve into his blood money, but I avoid it as much as I can, making my own blood money.

"As long as you stay safe," Alonzo says, looking at me intently.

I smile, showing all of my teeth. "I can take care of myself. And I'll never let anything happen to these beautiful girls," I tell him.

"It's good to hear that," he says. "All I want is for all my girls to be safe."

I'm glad I've already made a good impression, and Catarina is staring at me as if I've grown two heads.

She doesn't understand that I have many facets. I can be charming and deadly. A dream and a nightmare all wrapped up into one package.

Which part of me you unwrap is solely up to you.

CATARINA

How is it that my stepfather seems to like Angelo, when he never liked anyone that I've dated? Not that I've dated a lot. In high school, he chased away one of my boyfriends just because he didn't like the way he dressed.

But Angelo, who has basically forced me into this situation, is like his new best friend. The two of them are talking about prison and laughing.

Angelo wasn't in prison for the last four years, but he's convinced Alonzo that he was, and it sounds like he's definitely done time at some point in his life.

I have to admit that I'm curious, but I also almost don't even want to know.

The dinner goes by quickly and I clear my throat, standing up to announce that we're getting married, but Angelo stops me with a hand on my wrist.

"Alonzo, I'd like to ask you for your daughter's hand in marriage," he says, as if I'm someone who has to be given away, like it's the nineteenth century, and I huff out a breath, annoyed.

Alonzo smiles and looks at me, his eyes soft. "Is that what you want, *bellissima*?" he asks.

I nod slowly, even though part of me wants to run away from all this. I don't like that this has been forced on me, but at the same time, Angelo is my way out of the city, and eventually, out of the famiglia.

“When will you set a date?” my mother asks quietly, and I tilt my head.

“As soon as possible,” Angelo says. “I’m from Chicago, but we’ll fly you both out.”

“That sounds lovely,” my mother says. “I’ve never been.”

Her eyes are lit up like she’s so happy for me, and I feel a pang of guilt that all of this will be over as soon as I can manage to escape.

I know that my mother wants me to have a good husband, one that can protect me. She wants me to have a good life the way that she has.

And I’m going to. As soon as I get out of New York City. But her life will never be my life. I don’t want this for myself.

I know that I’m trading one devil for another, but in time, I’ll be able to get away. I have to believe that. I may not ever be able to keep him out of Chelsea’s life, but at least I can take her somewhere safe. He can come and visit anytime, as long as he doesn’t bring danger to our door.

“You’ve been quiet, *bellissima*,” Alonzo says to me, close to my ear so that Angelo, who’s talking to my mother animatedly about Chelsea, doesn’t hear. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

“I’m sure, Papa,” I say quietly, feeling a little guilty still for wanting to get away from him. He’s given me a good life, but not exactly a safe one. I’m always worried that someone might hurt me or Chelsea, and I just can’t live like this anymore.

Unlike Angelo, I didn’t grow up in this life. I grew up with my Irish father who was a fisherman, but his boat was lost at sea one stormy night when I was still so young. I remember that peaceful, normal life still, though, and I want it for Chelsea.

“So, you’ll be moving out?” my mother asks.

“Yes, immediately,” I agree. “Angelo and I can’t wait to get our life started,” I lie, looking at Angelo with a smile.

Angelo smiles back, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. I think he's still mad at me for not telling him about Chelsea, but I honestly don't know how I would have reached him.

By the time we get ready to go, Chelsea's sleeping on Angelo's shoulder again, her thumb in her mouth. I know I need to break her of that soon enough, so that it doesn't affect her teeth, but right now, asleep in her father's arms, it's so cute it makes my heart ache.

Angelo's gentle when he puts her into her car seat after we say our goodbyes. He's always gentle with her, and I have to admit it does things to my heart. All this time not having a father around to help and having to rely on my family...

But it doesn't matter. I can't go back, and it may have still been for the best. At least he's in her life now, and I'll do my best to keep him in it – as long as it's not dangerous.

But how do I know that everything Angelo does isn't dangerous? I remember how wild-eyed he was that night. It was part of what had attracted me to him.

I sigh, getting into his car, and he's quiet on the way home.

"You did a good job with Alonzo," I comment.

"Told you I would," he says, his voice cold now instead of the charming lilt it'd had with my father.

"When are we planning to get married?" I ask, glancing over at him. He doesn't even look at me. I guess he's still mad.

"As soon as we get back to Chicago," he says. "We'll go to the courthouse and later we'll have the wedding for your parents."

I nod slowly, thinking. So, this will be one of my last nights as a single woman. Not that I've done much as a single woman before. Especially since Chelsea.

Angelo wasn't my first, but he was certainly my best. I'd only been with a couple of guys in high school, mostly because my stepfather is so protective.

We arrive back at his suite and Angelo starts packing up.

I raise an eyebrow. “What are you doing?”

“You should be packing, too,” he says. “We’re flying out tonight.”

I feel something like anticipation or panic rise in my throat. “Already? But Chelsea’s so tired—”

“She can sleep on the jet,” he says. “We have to go tonight, Dante needs it tomorrow.”

“I need a shower,” I say, and Angelo shrugs, as if he doesn’t care one way or the other, and I go into the bathroom to undress and shower quickly.

While I’m standing under the spray of the water, washing my hair, the door opens and I gasp.

Angelo is grabbing his toiletries and I slide the door open just a slight amount, even though the glass is only a little cloudy and he can probably see everything.

“What the hell are you doing in here?” I hiss.

His brown eyes travel down the line of my body. “I said I wouldn’t touch you, not that I wouldn’t look.”

I huff out a breath, squeezing my eyes shut. I hate the way my body feels hot after seeing his intense glance at it. I still want him, whether or not I’m going to let myself have him. It’s not good for me to have these kinds of feelings for a man like Angelo. He hurt me once, he can and will do it again, despite this marriage situation.

An hour later, we arrive at the airfield, and Angelo carries Chelsea inside, keeping her in his lap as he sits down. She snuggles up next to him as he holds her like the baby she once was. I guess she still is. Maybe in our eyes, she’ll always be. And he’s missed out on so much.

“Do you have pictures or videos?” he asks quietly, looking down at her face. “Of when she was smaller?”

I nod. “I’ll send them to you.”

I do so before the plane takes off and Angelo watches, smiling with tears in his eyes. He wipes at them and looks over

at me, and his glare isn't quite as angry as it has been.

"You know that I'll never let you take her from me, right?" he says calmly, and I think the calm might be worse than the obvious anger. It's cold and almost more serious.

"I know that," I say quietly.

"Then what's your plan? I know that you want us to divorce. Where will you go?"

I shrug. "I don't know. Anywhere that doesn't have a mafia presence."

He snorts. "What, like the Midwest? You going to live in Texas?"

"Maybe," I say defensively. "I just want to be safe and independent, and those two things aren't possible with you or my father."

"I don't care what you do, but you'll allow me to see Chelsea whenever I want," he says, and I look at him for a moment.

"I want what's best for Chelsea," I say. "And I think what's best for her is to have both parents, so I promise not to take her away from you."

"Good," he says. "Because if you did, I'd hunt you down."

Great.

Another threat. And he seems like he means it, looking at me fiercely.

"I wouldn't do that to her," I admit. "She's already crazy about you."

He smiles tenderly and it makes him look ten years younger, makes his handsome face light up. "She is, isn't she?" he asks as she pops her thumb in her mouth, snuggling up against him for warmth.

The stewardess comes by and offers me a glass of champagne, but I decline while Angelo takes a glass.

“You should loosen up just a little,” he drawls. “Get that stick out of your ass. You’d be a lot more fun to be around.”

“Excuse me for not wanting to drink when you’ve just threatened me for the second time this week,” I say dryly.

Angelo shrugs. “I won’t hurt you. Ever. But I really mean it, you know? I’ll come for my little girl come hell or high water. I’ve lost too much of her life to let her just disappear from my life again.”

“I know,” I sigh.

“And I’m sorry. I don’t mean to keep threatening you.”

“You don’t?” I ask, and he shakes his head.

“It’s just that I’m angry,” he admits. “I would never take Chelsea’s mother away from her. She’s what’s important, now.”

“And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. But I promise you that I did try to find you,” I say, and that much is true, although he’s right, I should have tried harder. I was just afraid of what he’d say, of how he’d reject me and our baby. I was wrong about him, it turns out.

“I know I could have left my number,” he says, admitting some responsibility. “I just...well, I’m not that kind of guy.”

“Of course you’re not,” I mutter.

Angelo looks at me for a moment longer. “Don’t get it twisted, kitten. Just because I won’t kill you doesn’t mean I will tolerate disrespect from you.”

“Noted,” I mumble, and look out the window. Neither of us says anything more and Chelsea sleeps through the flight.

When we arrive in Chicago, we head to his apartment, which is another penthouse and has two bedrooms.

“Chelsea and I can take the other bedroom,” I comment.

“No,” he says firmly. “She needs her own room.”

I look around at the uncomfortable couch and start to walk toward it to unpack my things.

Angelo takes my wrist.

“You’ll be sleeping with me,” he says in a commanding tone.

ANGELO

I don't exactly *hate* Catarina anymore; I've moved past that. I'm still angry with her, and I still think she's a stick in the mud, but I still want her, and watching her with my little girl melts my heart every time.

Seeing her in the shower earlier made my dick stand at attention, and I want her to get used to being in my bed. Even if I plan on keeping my promise and not touch her until she asks me to, I'll do my best to have her begging for my touch sooner rather than later.

Plus, Chelsea does need her own room. She's only three now, but she'll grow, and even if we move somewhere more family friendly later on, I need to get the money first, so my apartment will have to be good enough for now.

"I'm not sleeping with you," Catarina says through gritted teeth.

"Yes, you are," I say. "I won't touch you. I promised that, didn't I?"

"And I'm supposed to believe you're a man of your word?"

I drop her wrist, taking Chelsea to her bedroom and lying her down on the bed. She cuddles up under the covers and I smile, ignoring Catarina.

"This conversation isn't over," Catarina hisses when I walk back into the room.

I sigh. “Listen, kitten, if you want to sleep on that leather couch, have at it. But we’re going to be doing this for *quite* some time, and I think you’ll be a lot more comfortable on the bed. Plus, it gives Chelsea some sort of normalcy, seeing her parents together.”

Catarina looks at me, catching her full bottom lip between her teeth. God, I want to kiss her, bite her lip bloody, throw her on the bed. It’s like my anger and lust have combined, somehow, and I want her even more than I did before I knew about Chelsea.

Maybe part of it is also that she’s had my child, that she’s mine in a way that I’ve never experienced with any other woman.

Catarina finally acquiesces, climbing into bed and piling pillows up between us.

I snort. “I can control myself, you know?”

“Likely story,” she mutters, pulling up the fluffy duvet and rolling over to face the wall.

I roll my eyes and start to undress. Catarina is sleeping in her clothes like some kind of maniac, but I don’t do that. I’ll leave my boxers on because of Chelsea, but there’s no way I’m sleeping in my slacks and button-up shirt.

Catarina is pretending to be asleep when I finish undressing, putting my Rolex on the night stand and sliding into bed with her. My foot touches hers and she wrenches it away.

Dramatic, I think.

She seems entirely different than the girl I’d met four years ago. Sometimes, her smile or a glint of her eyes show me the girl from back then, but most of the time she is just so closed off, almost stuck-up, that I want to show her a good time. I want to see her smiling more. I also want to feel her beneath me again, hearing her cry out my name as I make her come harder than ever.

Thinking about the future and all the possibilities ahead, I fall asleep easily, not having slept well ever since I first saw

Catarina at The Angel, and when I wake up, the pillows have been tossed onto the floor and Catarina has cuddled up next to me, wrapping one long leg around my hip.

I look over at her, her face close to mine, her mouth open as she sleeps, and my morning wood twitches. She moans in her sleep when I try to move, and then her thigh brushes up against my erection.

“Catarina,” I say in a growled voice.

She hums in her sleep, making that moaning sound again that tightens my stomach, but she doesn’t move. Apparently, she’s not exactly a light sleeper.

I grit my teeth, twisting my body to get out from under her, and finally she wakes, blinking those intriguing silver-gray eyes of hers.

Her eyes widen and she jerks away from me. “What are you doing? You said you wouldn’t touch me,” she hisses, and I snort.

“You’re the one touching me, kitten,” I tell her. “You’re the one all cuddled up next to me, rubbing your thigh against my dick.”

“I...I didn’t do that,” she insists, her cheeks flushing red.

I can’t help but grin a little. “If you wanted it so bad, you could have asked,” I tease, and she groans, covering her face with a pillow.

“I was asleep,” she mutters, her voice muffled from the pillow.

“Maybe,” I comment. “Or maybe in sleep you just did what you really have wanted to do all this time.”

“Get over yourself, Angelo,” she says, her voice still muffled behind the pillow, and I chuckle as I leave the bedroom.

Chelsea’s already up, having rifled through the bags to find her dolls and playing with them on the floor.

I lean down to ruffle her blonde hair as I walk to the bathroom, and she grins at me. I've seen that grin in my own mirror, and it makes my heart swell.

I don't know yet how I feel about being a husband, but I sure love being a father already. I can't wait to do more with her, watch her grow. My hope is that Catarina won't be able to get out of the life and she and Chelsea'll have to stay with me.

After all, we'll be married, even if in name only, and of course, I'll keep my wife and daughter safe. I may not be in love with Catarina, but I'll do anything to keep my little girl happy, and that includes having her mom around and happy.

I wash my face and shave, skipping a shower. I want to get this marriage over with, and I know someone who can watch Chelsea for me – Mia and Dante.

I dress in my best suit, and when I come back out, Catarina gapes at me, her mouth open.

“Why are you so dressed up?”

“Because we're getting married today, kitten,” I answer easily, watching Chelsea make her dolls fistfight with a grin.

“What about Chelsea?” she asks. “She's not really good in crowds,” she admits. “She'll run off.”

“She can stay with my friends,” I say.

“She doesn't know your friends. And neither do I,” she says, narrowing her eyes.

“I know my friends,” I argue. “And Chelsea is just as much mine as she is yours.”

There's an edge to my voice. Apparently, I'm still more angry than even I realized.

“I need to meet them,” she argues back, not backing down, and I groan.

“Fine. We'll have breakfast there, all right? Is that good enough for you?”

“Fine,” she answers, and rummages around in her things. She heads into the bathroom, as if I don't have an imprint of

the image of her naked in the shower in my mind.

“Your mommy is a pain in my—” I say to Chelsea.

Catarina yells through the door, “I can hear you!”

Chelsea giggles and pulls at my hand. “Pick me up, Papa.”

What else am I supposed to do? Say no? So, I pick her up, hefting her on my hip.

“Are we going on a ‘venture today?’” she asks in her little voice, and I grin at her.

“Every day is an adventure with me, sweetheart,” I tell her, and plant a sloppy kiss on the side of her face.

She laughs and wipes it away, but then she lies her head on my shoulder.

I know she must be exhausted and her sleep schedule has been off lately, and I plan to give her more of a normal life as soon as we get this marriage over and dusted.

Catarina’s a little feisty at times, but overall, she seems to play it safe, and she might not trust me, but she doesn’t seem to hate me or want to hurt me. At least for now.

I call Dante out on the balcony, holding Chelsea so she can look down over the city.

“Angelo?” he answers, clearly surprised to hear from me before ten in the morning. I usually sleep until noon, so I understand.

“Dante,” I answer brightly. “Look, I need a favor.”

Dante pauses. “What about the job?”

“Oh, that’s done,” I say easily, having nearly forgotten about the man I killed in a New York City alley. “Finished.”

“Oh,” he answers. “Then I guess I owe you a favor.”

And a hundred grand, I think, but don’t say. I’ll certainly need that money in order to start my new life, so I’m not going to piss Dante off.

“I was wondering if Mia would like to babysit my daughter, just for a couple of hours.”

Dante's silent for a long time.

"Hello?"

"Your *daughter*? What the fuck, Angelo?"

I laugh. "It's been a weird couple of weeks, Dante. I'll explain everything, but can she?"

Dante holds his hand over the phone, speaking quickly to his wife, and I don't hear much of it but it doesn't seem like an argument.

"Sure," he says. "When?"

"Right now, preferably," I say, and Dante chuckles.

"All right, Angelo. You can come pick up your fee, and we'll hang out with your...daughter." He says it slowly as if it still doesn't make any sense to him.

I hang up, looking at Chelsea.

"You ready to meet one of Papa's friends?" I ask. "They have a baby you can play with."

Her eyes widen and she grins. "I love babies," she says.

"Of course, you do," I croon, and take her back into the room.

Catarina is standing there, wearing an off-white sundress that hugs her curves and a pair of low heels. She looks gorgeous with her dirty-blonde hair tied up, ringlets cascading down her shoulders, and I clear my throat, trying not to stare.

I don't need her to know how attractive I find her.

Yet, I can't help but picture her all swollen with my baby, and it makes my skin heat up.

"I'm a play with a *baby*, Mommy," she says, and Catarina takes her from me.

"Is that so?" Catarina mumbles.

I'm used to living in the moment, but now that I'm about to have a family and a little girl counting on me, I need to change my ways a bit. Catarina might not be happy now, but

we'll both have to adjust to this new reality somehow because there is no way she's taking my baby from me any time soon.

CATARINA

“Dante, Catarina. Catarina, Dante,” Angelo says quickly as we stand at the door of a huge mansion, almost the size of Alonzo’s.

The handsome man standing there blinks once, twice at Chelsea, and then Angelo ushers him away and they head upstairs.

I stand awkwardly in the foyer, not knowing what to do, holding Chelsea’s hand.

A small, pretty woman comes up to us, smiling.

“Hello there,” she says, leaning down to get eye-to-eye with Chelsea. “What’s your name?”

“Chelsea,” my daughter says easily.

“Nice to meet you, Chelsea. Would you like to meet my daughter, Alessia?”

“Yes, yes, the baby!” Chelsea chants, and the woman laughs, taking her hand from mine and taking her into the dining room, where a chubby baby girl is banging around her blocks.

Chelsea immediately busies herself with the baby, and the woman turns back to me.

“I’m Mia,” she says. “Dante’s wife.”

“I’m Catarina,” I answer. “Angelo’s....”

I trail off, not sure I want to explain what I am to him. “Chelsea’s mother,” I finish, and Mia smiles.

“Would you like coffee? Tea?” she asks. “There’s also some pancakes for breakfast, if you’re hungry.”

“I want pancakes,” Chelsea pipes up, and in a few moments, an older, more severe-looking woman has set the table for all three of us, bringing a pot of coffee and two mugs and a glass of orange juice for Chelsea.

I’m shocked at how well the household seems to run and how their staff seems to snap to action.

I finally remember my manners.

“You have a lovely home, Mia,” I tell her, and she grins.

“Thank you.” She pauses. “Dare I ask what’s going on with you and Angelo?”

I tell myself that I shouldn’t talk to her, that she’s a stranger, but at the same time, I haven’t been able to talk to Alyssa, and everything’s sitting on my chest like I need to spill it out.

I look over at Chelsea.

“Marisa will take them to the playroom,” she says quietly, and when the older woman has taken the children away, I sit and sip my coffee and tell Mia the whole ordeal.

She just smiles and nods in the right places, looking shocked in others.

“I know it seems crazy,” I start, but Mia holds up a hand to stop me.

“It’s not quite as crazy as how Dante and I got started,” she says with a little laugh.

My eyes widen as I stare at her. “What?”

She lowers her voice. “He had plans to kill my father, and possibly me if I kicked up a fuss. Thought that my father had something to do with his parents’ death.”

I blink at her. Does everyone in the mafia have crazy getting-together stories?

“And you...you’re okay with that?”

Mia shrugs. “It worked itself out. Besides, Dante changed when Alessia was born.”

Until very recently, I couldn’t imagine a man changing that much, but seeing how Angelo is with Chelsea, I guess it’s not *impossible*... but Dante and Mia must have had some kind of connection before all of this.

All Angelo and I have is a one-night-stand.

“It’s temporary,” I say quickly, and Mia smiles at me.

“Of course,” she says, like she doesn’t at all believe me. Mia seems like a lovely woman, so I can’t really get mad at her. She just leads a much crazier life than I want to.

Angelo comes down the stairs after a while, holding a briefcase.

“Let’s go do this thing,” he says with a grin, and I stand up, taking in a deep breath.

“Thank you so much for watching Chelsea,” I say. “I won’t say goodbye to her because she’s a bit of a clinger and she might start crying.”

Angelo frowns. “Of course we’re saying goodbye to her.”

“I’m telling you, it’s a bad idea,” I say.

Angelo walks into the playroom and then returns with his eyes wide and Chelsea screaming and holding onto his leg.

“I told you,” I chuckle, and Mia snaps into action, grabbing Chelsea.

“You want to see my library?” Mia asks, and Chelsea snuffles and looks at Angelo and me, but then back at Mia and nods.

She’s still crying a little when Mia takes her up the stairs.

“See?” I ask, and Angelo’s looking after her, looking almost traumatized. I can’t help but laugh, loud and open, and he looks at me, something flashing across his face before he frowns.

“I don’t like leaving her, so let’s go and get back quickly.”

“All right,” I respond, and Angelo walks out to the car.

I follow and we ride mostly in silence to the courthouse. I’ve got my documents in my purse, and hopefully, Angelo has his. I still feel almost panicked about this, like it’s somehow the wrong move, but I don’t have a choice.

Angelo said he wouldn’t actually kill me now that he knew I was the mother of his child, but I don’t know if I can believe him. He certainly doesn’t trust me enough not to testify, even though I wouldn’t, even if everything fell through.

I’ve seen more than my fair share of crime, and I know that the guy probably deserved it.

We arrive at the courthouse and walk inside. Angelo takes my hand, and his skin feels warm against my palm.

ANGELO

The courthouse wedding is the important one, really, because it's the legal one and it'll be my protection from Catarina testifying against me in court.

Although, honestly, I don't think she would. But if I tell her that the marriage isn't necessary, she won't do it and then who knows what happens? Maybe she takes Chelsea on a new adventure, one I'm not part of, with some guy with bigger biceps.

The thought of it makes my blood boil, mostly because Catarina has a special place in my head now, if not my heart. She's the mother of my child, and Chelsea's pretty goddamned perfect, so Catarina must be an amazing mother.

What I've seen of her so far has been wonderful, at least when it comes to our little girl, and we co-parent well, even if she's a little overprotective. I can understand that. I would kill anyone who looked at our little girl twice, so I can't really complain that Catarina worries about her.

But she doesn't have to worry about Chelsea when I'm around. Sure, maybe she'll scrape her knees. All kids do. Catarina is just so *uptight* all the time. She looks like she's always clenching all her muscles. So yeah, maybe I did threaten to kill her yesterday, but we're past that now, aren't we?

I'm past her keeping Chelsea from me (kind of) and so she should be past how we reconnected. Now all that is left is to get married and put on a show for her family.

Then we can get to our real life.

I know that Catarina has plans that don't include me, that she wants this to be temporary, and maybe I do too, but I want to try it out first.

I want what Dante and Nico have, and maybe Catarina's it.

And if she's not, I still have my little girl, and I won't let Catarina take her far. Maybe she doesn't know it yet, but Catarina will have me in her life forever because of that little girl.

Lots of men in the wiseguy lifestyle are married in name only, and it works out great, after all, so why wouldn't it for me?

She mutters something under her breath and looks out the window, pulling down her dress to cover her thighs.

"You shouldn't cover those," I tell her, giving her a dark look.

"Just don't want to look like a slut on my wedding day," she mumbles.

I bark out a laugh. "You're a very classy slut, kitten," I tease her, and she shoots me a look that makes my dick twitch in my slacks.

What is it about a woman who doesn't listen, who talks back, but would let me do damn near anything to her in the bedroom? For one thing, they were hard to find.

Most of my conquests were just party girls, good for one night or maybe a couple but never for the long haul. But that wasn't what I wanted out of them, anyway.

I want that out of Catarina, even if she doesn't know it yet. It's not that I have *feelings* for her, god forbid, but there's something about her that intrigues me.

Especially in this tight, white dress that seems built for all my wedding night daydreams.

"We're still going to have a wedding night?" I murmur close to her ear as we walk inside, and she scoffs but I can see

her shiver and it makes me grin.

We wait, standing in line for what seems like hours, before our number is called.

I've got all my paperwork in a briefcase and I shove it at the officiant.

"We'd like to get married, please."

"Have you been through counseling?" the officiant asks in a droning voice.

I blink. "Counseling? No."

Isn't counseling for like weak, bored housewives? What the hell?

"If you get counseling, it's only twenty-five dollars," the officiant continues in that monotone voice.

"I don't care how much it is," I say flippantly.

"Sixty dollars," she says as Catarina puts her own documents up on the desk. "Did you bring a witness?"

"No," I groan.

The officiant shrugs. "Gotta have a witness."

Catarina looks up at me and I shift around on my feet. "Wait here. Do *not* call the next person in line.

"Sir," she starts, but I sprint out the front door and down the steps, finding a guy picking up quarters from the ground.

I shove a handful of fifties at him. "Be the witness for my wedding, and I'll give you another hundred."

"Hundred and fifty," the man rasps, and he smells like street and cheap booze but he's standing, so he'll do.

"Fine," I manage through gritted teeth, hauling him up the steps. "I'm Angelo, and you are?"

"Fred," he says easily, smiling at Catarina. "Are you the bride?"

She nods. "That's me," she says weakly, looking Fred up and down.

“This is Fred, he’s my new best friend, my best man even, can we get married now?” I say to the officiant, and she sighs as if I’ve ruined her whole day before she gestures us into a small courtroom.

Fred sits down in the front, whooping, as the officiant gathers herself.

She talks as if she’s underwater, and so slowly that it physically pains me, but we finally get through the I dos and I realize that I haven’t bought her a ring.

I know which ring I’d always thought I’d give my future wife, but my father has it, and well... I don’t want anything to do with my father.

“I’ll buy you any ring you want,” I say to her in a whisper, just before leaning down to kiss her, deeply, putting my arms around her lower back and pressing her to me. I can feel the swell of her ass just below my palms and I want to move my hands lower, but Catarina pulls away, blushing.

“You’re married,” the officiant says flatly.

“Thanks a lot, Rachel.”

“*Raquel*,” she drawls, and I grab Catarina and get the hell out of there. Fred follows.

“What about my two hundred?” he asks.

“One-fifty,” I answer, and he just stares at me with faded blue eyes, and I groan and press two hundreds into his hand. He grins and walks, albeit unsteadily, down the steps.

“That was...something,” Catarina complains.

“So, it wasn’t perfect,” I say, staring after Fred who had taken all the cash I had on me. “But we’ll have a real wedding soon for your parents.”

Catarina bites her lip. “And a ring?”

“Let’s go,” I tell her, ushering her down the street to a local jewelry store – one that pays protection to Dante.

She looks at all the rings but there’s no real spark in her eye. She finally picks one out, a single carat, and I look at it

and frown.

It will do for now as a placeholder, but I'll have to fix that soon.

CATARINA

As soon as the wedding itself is done, we're off, out of the courthouse like it's on fire, Angelo pulling me along.

I don't know why I feel disappointed. It's not like I want this, but I thought there'd be some kind of fanfare, at least.

Angelo just wants to get back to Chelsea, which would be cute if he was any other man. A man with a different life.

I guess it is still kind of cute.

We return to Dante and Mia's and pick up Chelsea, and I have to quickly say my goodbyes because Angelo is on the move.

"Why are you always in such a rush?" I complain.

"Because I want to spend every moment I have with my little girl," he shoots back. "Not like I got the opportunity before this."

He definitely is holding a grudge, and I guess I can understand. Will he ever forgive me for not trying harder to find him?

"Where are we going now?" I ask.

"That's up to Chelsea," he says, glancing back at her. "What do you think about a trampoline park, sweetheart?"

She perks up immediately, having been pouting at leaving the baby she wanted to keep playing with.

"Jumping!" she yells, bouncing up and down. "Let's go jumping, Papa!"

Angelo grins and even though he and I are certainly not dressed for a trampoline park, it doesn't seem to stop him.

When we arrive, he takes Chelsea and leaves me running along behind, trying to keep up with his long legs. He has Chelsea on his shoulders and she's giggling wildly.

These two are certainly a pair.

I hate how much she's like him, how impulsive and wild she can be, and he just makes it worse. I'm going to really have to worry about her during her teenage years, I can already see it.

I sit on the sidelines since I'm wearing a dress, and Angelo and Chelsea play for hours as I sit there. He left his jacket in the car and has rolled up the sleeves to expose his tanned forearms, the buttons on his shirt bulge as he jumps, as if they might pop open.

I keep my gaze averted, not wanting to be this attracted to him even though I am.

This morning, waking up wrapped around him, I'd felt heat course all the way through my body. It's been too long since a man has touched me, and that man happens to be him.

Chelsea's tuckered out by the time they're finished, and when we arrive back at the apartment, she's snoozing in her car seat.

She wakes up as Angelo takes her out, grabbing at his neck.

"Love you, Papa," she slurs, and Angelo's eyes well with tears.

"Love you too, sweetpea," he tells her in a low, crooning voice, and when he lays her down on her bed, he looks down at her for the longest time.

My heart aches. He does love her, no matter what other kind of man he is, and she loves him just as much. One thing is very clear to me. I can't take her from him, as much as I might want to get out of the city and out of his life.

No matter how far I get away, I'll always have this man in my life, and I guess that I have to get used to it.

So far, everything has been crazy but today was almost... domestic, him playing with Chelsea at the trampoline park. I guess maybe *every* day wouldn't be as crazy as New York us.

ANGELO

Dante gave me another job when I met him at his mansion, and when we arrive home, I'm glad that Chelsea is sleeping. It'll take me a few hours to do this, and then I can get back to her.

All I want to do is spend time with her, watch her every move, see her every smile. I can't wait to spend the rest of her life making up for those first few years. But this hundred grand isn't going to last forever, and Dante's offered me another hundred grand to interrogate Alexei Romanov, a local Bratva boss.

He's got some information on a business we're trying to get into, specifically a strip club out at the outskirts of town.

Catarina lies down with Chelsea, complaining of a headache, and that's well enough, too. She won't be asking me about where I'm going.

That's the one thing I don't look forward to – having someone to nag me when I'm late or worry about me when I'm gone for too long. On the other hand, the thought of having someone worried about me and waiting for me as I get home does something to me I don't care to look at too carefully.

Not that she'll worry. Why would she? It's not like she cares about me.

It's kind of a bummer, actually, that she's not more interested in me. I like the attention of a woman, and while Chelsea's around, it's not like I can entertain other women.

Honestly, since crossing paths with Catarina, the thought of other women doesn't appeal to me anymore anyway. And that is confusing and frustrating. What is it about her that has me feeling like this?

Maybe time will tell. In the meantime, I have to get Catarina a ring. Without feelings from either side, the act seems almost hollow. So, I'll do this job first and get some more money.

I leave the girls and head out to a local Italian restaurant called The Spoon.

Don't ask me why a Russian mob has a base as an Italian restaurant.

When I arrive there, I smile at the hostess, who's a cute little redhead with blue eyes. She doesn't have a Russian accent, so I'm sure she's just a local.

"Hey, sweetheart," I croon. "I'm looking for Alexei."

She blinks. "I don't think he's working today."

"It's important," I insist, leaning across the podium to look into her bright eyes. "I have something for him."

I hold up the empty briefcase, which I'd dumped out back at my apartment before leaving.

Her blue eyes widen and then she smiles.

"Right this way, sir," she says, taking the bait.

When I head into the door, the man in question is looking down at his desk, frowning at some numbers.

I shut the door behind me and he looks up, his eyes widening before they throw daggers at me.

"Who the hell are you?" he asks, his voice low and with a thick Russian accent.

I grin at him as I step casually around his desk. When he tries to get up and face me head-on, I punch him in the bridge of his nose. Blood bursts out of it and he yelps but I quickly pull him to his feet, turn his back and press it against my chest as I clamp my hand over his mouth.

“I need everything you’ve got on that strip club outside of town,” I say. “We’ve tried to do this the easy way.”

I know that because Dante never sends me unless he’s already tried everything else. He doesn’t much like my tactics, but they get shit done.

“It’s just a strip club!” he insists, his words muffled under my hand.

I slowly remove it. “Bullshit,” I answer. “It’s a front, and we need to know who’s running drugs into this city.”

We run all the drugs in and out of this city, thank you very much.

“How should I know?” Alexei insists, and I tighten my arm around his neck, closing off his airway for a few seconds. with my other hand I press on his nose and I guess it hurts a bit because he tries to scream, but the air is not there.

We play this game for a bit until he almost passes out from lack of oxygen a few times, and I have to slap him or press down on his broken nose with the heel of my hand to force him to answer my questions. After about thirty minutes, he finally relents and groggily says, “It isn’t me.”

“What do you mean, it isn’t you?” I ask. “It’s the Russians running drugs through there, and maybe some girls, too.”

I take in a breath. Sex trafficking is a big no-no for Dante. For me, too.

Women aren’t possessions. They aren’t things to be used and abused at will. They are to be loved, cherished, pleased.

Having a little girl, the thought of trafficking women makes me doubly sick to my stomach.

I exit the restaurant covered in Alexei’s blood, knuckles busted, and adrenaline rushing through my bloodstream. I don’t love it, but someone has to do this job and I need the money. I nod at the hostess as I leave. Her face goes sheet white.

I guess she’ll probably be in trouble after this, and though the thought of her coming to harm because of this is

troublesome, she made her own choice when she took that job. Those are the breaks for working for the mob, Italian or Russian.

The Bratva have been brave the last few months, and Dante has been having a hard time with them, so I'm not surprised he sent me, the last resort.

Nico's the one who does most of Dante's dirty work, but of course, he's been busy with the new wife and baby.

I have my own wife and baby now, so maybe *I* should take a break.

Nah. The money is welcome, even more now that my life has changed so much unexpectedly.

Back at the penthouse, I pray that Chelsea's still asleep, and she is. It's only taken me a couple hours there and back, so it isn't so bad.

I haven't missed out on her except for her gentle snoring.

Catarina's sitting on the couch with her legs tucked up under her, reading, and she looks up at me with wide, silver eyes.

"Angelo," she whispers. "What the hell?"

She rushes to me, checking me all over.

"It's okay," I say with a laugh. "It's not my blood. Well, most of it, anyway."

She frowns. "Are you sure?" She's checking me all over as if checking me for bullet holes.

"Are you worried about me, kitten?" I ask, and I can't seem to stop grinning.

The fact that she is fussing over me feels even better than anything I could have dreamed of. Having someone care about my well-being is an indescribable rush, and a feeling I can't really identify floods me.

Catarina makes a noise in the back of her throat but she doesn't deny it, heading to the bathroom and finding my first aid kit.

She bandages my wrists gently and I can't stop myself from grabbing her chin, forcing her silver eyes up to mine.

“When are you going to ask me to touch you?” I ask her.

“Never,” she whispers, her mouth parting, and I have to restrain myself from leaning down to kiss her.

But then, as I sit on the couch, she climbs into my lap, kissing *me*. She explores my mouth with her tongue, moaning in the back of her throat. Keeping my promise to her, I fight my own body but I keep still, I don't even put my arms around her.

She breaks away, looking at me, frustration evident on her pretty face, and I grin sideways at her.

“You haven't asked me yet, kitten.”

She pouts and licks her lips, looking down into my eyes as if searching them for something. Whatever it is, she must find it, because she opens her mouth to speak.

“Touch me, Angelo,” she whispers, as if she's loath to say it but is unable to hold it in any longer, and I grunt, my arms going around her as I stand up and lead her to the bed, away from Chelsea's bedroom. I shut the door with my foot so she won't hear us and throw Catarina down on the bed.

She bounces once before I climb over her, bunching her dress around her hips.

She moans low in her throat, putting her hand on my belt buckle and finally ripping it off, making me raise an eyebrow.

“You want it bad, don't you, kitten?” I ask her, and she frowns but leans up to kiss me again, arching her back.

I pause, spread her thighs with one hand and look down at her, glistening through her white panties.

I want to tug them off with my teeth, but I can't wait, ripping them off instead, and she doesn't protest. She claws her hands along my shoulders when I free myself from my slacks and push into her, pushing aside my bloody, ruined shirt.

I lean up to take it off without slipping out of her. She's wet and ready with hardly any foreplay and I remember her being like this that night, too. Just wanton and arching her back beneath me, wanting me so bad she could barely contain herself.

"Tell me you want me," I command, not moving, and Catarina whines.

"I want you, Angelo," she pants. "Want you so bad. Been so long."

I pause, thinking. "Was I the last one to touch you, Catarina?" I ask, and she bites her lip, looking away before looking back at me.

"Yes," she whispers.

Something like victory rushes through me. I tend to be a bit territorial, and I've felt that way about Catarina ever since I found out she had my baby. It makes me hot to think I've been the last one to touch her. That she's this desperate because she's denied herself any other man.

I rock my hips forward, finally, taking it slow, slowly pulling out almost all the way and ramming back in, rough, just like I remember she likes it.

She digs her nails into my back, marking me, and I hiss, leaning down to kiss her mouth, her throat, her collarbone, biting one of her nipples through the fabric of her dress.

I fuck her hard and without mercy, and soon enough she's all but mewling beneath me, crying out when she clenches around me.

"I'm coming, Angelo, please, don't stop," she whimpers, and I slow my strokes, smirking at her.

She frowns up at me, her molten-silver eyes flashing.

"Say please again," I tease, and she huffs out a breath.

"Please," she barks, and I laugh.

"Not like that, kitten. Say it sweet, like you mean it."

“Please, Angelo,” she breaks, her eyes bright. “Please fuck me.”

I slam back into her and she clenches around me again like a vice, and from that plus her moans I know that she’s coming, *hard*, wrapping her legs around my waist and locking her ankles to get me deeper.

I moan so loud I’m afraid that Chelsea may hear it, and thrust into her a few more times before spilling inside her.

She groans, rocking her hips with the aftershocks of her orgasm, and her silver eyes slowly begin to clear.

“Oh God,” she mumbles, covering her face. “What did I just do?”

I can’t help but laugh as I slowly pull out of her. “I told you that you’d ask me,” I say with a smirk, and Catarina groans again, hiding her face in the pillow, flipping over so that I can see the curves of her ass where her dress is pushed up.

I laugh again, smacking her ass, and get up to go and shower after the best damn orgasm of my life.

CATARINA

I hate myself and I hate Angelo and I hate this whole situation. I lie there on the bed while the shower runs, my body aching and finally satisfied for the first time in four years, and think about what an idiot I am.

What was I thinking? Just because he came in covered in blood and high off adrenaline? I have to admit that I'm attracted to danger, that's why I was so enamored by Angelo in the first place, but it's something that I've been trying to change about myself.

I don't need to slip back into old habits when I'm so close to getting away from this life, so close to keeping myself independent and keeping me and my daughter safe.

I will *not* hook up with Angelo Bianchi again, no matter what.

He gets out of the shower, towel slung low across his hips and I can see the tattoos on his chest, the scars on his abdomen. I look away quickly.

Angelo scoffs. "You don't like what you see? Guess I've got a few more scars than I did the last time you saw me naked."

That night had been soaked in tequila and wine, and I don't remember seeing *any* scars back then, so I just shake my head.

"Just trying to be respectful," I say softly, and Angelo snorts derisively.

“Don’t you think we’re past that, kitten?” he asked, sliding his finger up my throat and chin to get me to look at him.

He’s still just wearing a towel and there’s not much left to the imagination. My eyes are on his, though, because he’s gripped my jaw in his hand and now my mouth pops open.

He looks down at my face with his eyes dark with lust before he licks his lips and lets go of my face. I stumble a bit, surprised.

I’m not usually a submissive type of woman, but something about the way he’d held me there, looking into my eyes...it made pleasure bloom in my lower belly. I bite my lip, not wanting to know why I had that reaction.

“You like being told what to do just a little bit, don’t you?” he asks, as if he knows what I’m thinking, and I blush and look away.

“Only in the bedroom,” I say firmly. “Outside of that, I don’t listen.”

“You sure fucking don’t,” he mutters, and drops the towel, pulling on a pair of slacks and buttoning them.

When our daughter wakes up, her father is at least half-dressed, thankfully.

God, I can’t believe I’ll be forced to share a room with him for the foreseeable future.

I shouldn’t worry about that, because I plan to get divorced as soon as possible. Though, we still have to go through the wedding for my parents, and that’s going to take time and money.

Who’s going to pay for it, anyway? My father? I haven’t thought to ask. Everything’s been happening so fast.

I don’t have to wonder too long, because as soon as I get Chelsea dressed and her teeth brushed, my father calls.

“So, have you two set a date yet?” he asks immediately, and I have the phone on speaker so I just look at Angelo helplessly.

He takes the phone from me immediately and then speaks directly into the speaker, smiling as if he's charming my father through the phone.

"As soon as possible," he says easily. "We have to get the paperwork done but then we'll fly you and your wife out for the wedding." He flips through his phone, holding mine in his hand as my father rambles something about wedding cakes.

I swallow hard. It's going to be so weird to have an actual wedding, going through the motions when I know this is just going to be a temporary thing. Angelo doesn't seem to be bothered, though.

"How about the fifteenth? It's a Saturday," Angelo says, and I choke on air.

It's the eleventh.

My father pauses on the other line. "That's a tight window, but I think I can make it happen. *Carissima*, you still listening?"

"Yes, Papa," I say, feeling really left out of the whole situation.

"I'm going to get a wedding planner. I'll give her your number, she'll travel to you."

"Wedding planners travel?" I ask incredulously.

"If you pay them enough, they do." My father chuckles. "Let me say hi to Chelsea and I'll get out of your hair."

I sigh, handing the phone to Chelsea, who runs away with it and lies down on the bed, talking to her grandfather in excited tones about her new father and how he plays with her all the time.

Angelo grins in pride and goes into the bathroom, returning with his hair slicked back and a white button-up on.

He looks down at my sundress. "Is that what you're wearing?"

"What do you mean?" I ask, frowning, looking down at the floral pattern.

“Well, we’re going on our first date today,” he says flatly.

I blink at him. “What? Why would we do that?”

He shrugs. “Well, I thought we might get to know each other a bit better. And I guess it wouldn’t hurt to get a few pictures, a couple of posts on social media. Don’t want your parents getting suspicious.”

“I guess I’ll change,” I mumble, and head into the bedroom.

I look through my things and all I can find is a thin, black dress from before Chelsea was born, one that’s a little too tight across the hips after the baby weight. I frown at myself in the mirror, sucking in my stomach.

I’m not exactly happy with it but I do my makeup, a smoky eye and a red lip, and then put my hair up in a bun with some ringlets coming down.

When I exit the bedroom, Angelo is on the floor, putting together a floor puzzle with Chelsea. He looks up at me and does a bit of a double take.

“Oh,” he says quietly. “That’s better.”

“Do you think so?” I ask, oddly self-conscious about how tight the dress is around my hips and ass. I’ve gained weight since having Chelsea, since the last time Angelo had been with me, and I felt insecure.

“It’s perfect,” he says, and then clears his throat, looking back at Chelsea. “No, sweetheart, corners first,” he says gently, and she does as he says, fitting the corners all together.

“Oh, it’s so fast like this,” Chelsea muses, a smart kid, always picking things up quickly, and she’s finished with the puzzle by the time I’ve spritzed on some perfume and slid on a pair of low, black heels.

“Wear the stilettos,” Angelo commands, and I bite my lip.

“I’m not great at walking in them,” I complain.

“You’ll learn,” he says, and I want to roll my eyes but I keep telling myself this is *temporary*.

Look what you've gotten yourself into, I think. You let loose one time, and see what happened.

More than once, really, but who's counting? Sleeping with my husband was also a mistake, but it won't happen again.

As frustrated as I am, I can't help but smile at the two of them. Angelo, for all his faults, seems to take Chelsea in stride, and it makes sense, since she's always had a wild streak, just like him.

She's always wanting to go on adventures, "ventures," as she calls them, and no matter how many imaginary scenarios I think up, she always wants more.

Now we're on an adventure for real, and I lean forward and whisper to her, "How do you like your adventure with Papa?"

Her eyes sparkle as she looks at me and a wicked grin just like her father's spreads across her face.

"Can't wait to have more," she says, always greedy for adrenaline, and I sigh while Angelo laughs heartily.

"You're Papa's girl, all right," he tells her, kissing all over the side of her face while she giggles.

Even though Angelo had threatened to kill me, I have to be grateful for him for getting us out of the city, away from my father. I also have to be grateful for him for loving Chelsea, for accepting her even though he hadn't known her the first three years of her life.

I'd never imagined he'd be a hands-on dad like this, but I'm glad that he is.

As I head to the bedroom to escape from him for a second, I wonder if this "venture" will turn out to be a good one.

ANGELO

My heart swells every time I look at my baby girl, at her little smile so much like mine, the way sometimes she sticks her nose in the air like her mother when she disapproves of something.

Right now, it's baby carrots dipped in blue cheese, my favorite snack.

Chelsea sniffed them out, climbing up into my lap to ask about it, and then when I'd given her a bite her face screwed up and she lifted her chin high into the air.

"That's *nasty*, Papa," she says, spitting it out with her tongue back into my plate. Usually that would gross me out, but it's Chelsea, my own flesh and blood, and I just laugh and stand up, depositing her on the ground and she goes back to her puzzle.

"It's too chunky," she keeps complaining, her tongue stuck out, until I get her some apple juice to wash it down.

I chuckle. "I like it chunky."

"Mama eats apples and peanut butter," she says. "That's gross too, because she likes the chunky peanut butter."

"Does she now?" I ask curiously, since I have three jars of chunky peanut butter in my pantry.

Chelsea sucks down her apple juice. "Yeah. You both eat gross stuff," she says simply and then, when concentrates on the puzzle in front of her.

It seems strange to think that one day she'll be a rebellious teenager, and with her mother's looks – I may have to kill several teenage boys.

I'll have to talk to Dante about it. I'm sure he'll understand since he has a daughter of his own. Nico's the lucky one, with a boy. He won't have to worry too much about the kid getting taken advantage of or getting his heart broken.

I think about Chelsea, about her big brown eyes with the hint of amber so much like mine, filled with tears over some *boy*? No fucking way.

I'm jolted out of my thoughts about the future when the doorbell rings.

It's Mia, carrying Alessia on her hip. She's come to watch Chelsea for us while we go on our date. Dante's out on a job, so he wants them safe, anyway, and they'll be safe here.

"The spare room is already made up with fresh sheets," I tell her as I let her in, and she puts Alessia down on the floor. She's not walking yet, but she's holding on and pulling up on all the furniture.

As if she can smell baby, Chelsea comes running to the door.

"Alessia!" she chirps, and even though it sounds more like "alee-yah" in her baby voice, I'm surprised that she remembered her name.

Alessia looks up and promptly grins, holding her fat little hands out, and I feel a pang of pity for myself that I'd never experienced Chelsea like that.

If Catarina hadn't already sent me some pictures and videos, I'd be harassing her non-stop, because it leaves an ache in me to think about all the time I missed.

Mia plops down on my couch, looking exhausted. "She wouldn't sleep last night. She never does when Dante's away."

"That's because *you* don't sleep," I accuse, and Mia looks chagrined.

“Maybe so,” she says with a groan. “We just worry about him. It hasn’t been that long since Nico got hurt...”

I swallow, thinking of the day I’d brought Nico home and been covered in his blood. I don’t usually let shit like that affect me, but Nico and I are close, so it definitely had.

“He’s okay now. Enjoying that little boy of his.”

She nods tiredly. “Yeah, but Dante still won’t let him do any jobs. Not until the baby is a little older.” She grunts. “Hypocritical since Alessia is only nine months old.”

“You know Dante,” I say as Catarina comes down the stairs.

She’s got her hair down, the dishwater blonde curls falling to her lower back. Her makeup is natural but she’s still got that crimson red lip. I want that lipstick all over my body.

She’s wearing a white dress that stretches tight over her ass, hips, and thick thighs. I lick my lips, watching her walk down carefully in the stilettos I’d picked out. They make her legs look even more amazing than they already do, and I have to admit, I’m kind of a leg man. Or an ass man. Or maybe I’m really into small tits, because Catarina’s are less than a handful and I love running my palms over her nipples.

Or maybe I have to admit to myself that I just have a thing for a specific, blonde, silver-eyed girl who happens to have given birth to my child.

“We should be back in a few hours,” I say, still staring at Catarina as she smiles and nods at Mia and grabs her purse.

“Take your time,” Mia says, waving her hand dismissively. “I’ve got the girls. You have no idea how glad I am that Alessia likes Chelsea. She doesn’t like to play by herself, so I’m usually stuck as her playmate. Now, they’ll entertain each other while I watch reality television.”

Catarina snorts. “You watch that, too?”

“Yeah, all the housewife stuff. It’s fascinating. Like, we have money but we don’t act like that.”

“Mafia wives are a whole different thing,” I say.

“That’s a show, too,” Catarina snorts, and she and Mia share a laugh like it’s the funniest thing they’ve ever heard.

I look at them, baffled, and then lean down to kiss the top of Chelsea’s head. She ignores me, and her mother, too, babbling to Alessia about pirates and being the pirate queen. Alessia is happy enough, crawling around and following her as Chelsea searches for buried treasures in the shag carpet.

“Thanks again, Mia,” I tell her as we get to the door, and she smiles at me and gives me a thumbs-up. Dante couldn’t have found himself a better wife, in my opinion, and on that matter, I quite like Nico’s wife, Aurora, too. I guess I should be glad that Catarina and Mia get along.

“*Now* do you trust Mia to watch her?” I ask Catarina as we go down the elevator.

She shrugs. “Yeah, she’s a good mom to Alessia. She gets it.”

“Gets what?” I ask, lost as I open the passenger side door for her.

I slide into the car and crank it up.

“That I get worried,” Catarina says bluntly. “That what you do and what Dante does is scary, so we worry about our kids.”

“You worry too much,” I argue as I back out with one hand, looking behind us briefly so that I don’t hit the valet. He’s a nice kid, named Bud or Buddy or Bubba or something, and I tip him too well to run him over.

“You don’t worry enough,” she mutters.

“Don’t be difficult on our date night,” I warn, but there’s no real bite to it. I’m in a good mood, being back home and having my ready-made family, and I’m ready to give it a try.

We ride mostly in silence to the restaurant. The silence is awkward and I want to fill it, but what can I say?

Thank you for coming to dinner and giving me my baby doesn’t exactly seem like the best conversation starter.

As we arrive at the restaurant, I help her out of the car after opening her door. She takes hold of my arm.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” she whispers.

I look down at her with a frown. “What do you mean, you can’t do this?”

She licks her lips. “I’m not wearing the right dress.”

Angelo scoffs. “You look great.”

“Maybe we should do this another night.”

“No,” I say.

“No?” she asks, looking up at me with confused gray eyes.

“We’re doing this. Now let’s just enjoy our dinner before we go back to our little girl.”

We go inside and the hostess takes us to our table in the back. A romantic corner that is private enough that we can talk without being overheard.

After being served our drinks and as we wait for our food to come, the ring on her finger calls my attention. That won’t do.

“We have to get my mother’s ring.”

She blinks. “Your mother’s ring? Why?”

“Because you should wear it.”

“You really want to give me your mother’s ring?” she asks stunned.

“Don’t go thinking I’m soft on you, kitten,” I sneer. “I just want it to look real, okay?”

That isn’t exactly true. There’s something about the cheap bauble on her finger that doesn’t sit right with me. This is probably the only time I’m ever going to do this, and she *is* the mother of my daughter, so she deserves better.

And my mother’s ring is beautiful. It’s a single carat, too, delicate and inlaid with jades, my mother’s favorite stone. It’d look so good with Catarina’s silver-colored eyes.

“So...how do we get the ring?” she asks.

My shoulders slump. “I have to see my father,” I say, like I’m telling her I’m going to be hung.

“And you don’t get along, I take it,” she muses.

“No, we do not,” I agree tightly.

“What happened?” she asks.

“I don’t want to go into it,” I say through gritted teeth.

“So, you’re introducing me to your family? Your real family?”

“Though I met yours, I don’t really feel like meeting my father is necessary. I’m just going to grab the ring and be done with it,” I say in defense as I shift my weight on the chair.

She doesn’t seem to know what quite to say to that, so drain my wine and get up. My appetite is gone.

“What are you doing?” she hisses, looking at the table as I throw a couple of hundreds on it for their trouble.

“I can’t sit here anymore,” I say. “Let’s go.”

Her breath catches in her throat as I pull her up and drag her to the valet to get my car back. “Angelo, we should talk about this. We can’t just-”

My car pulls up and I tip the valet before opening her door and helping her inside before going around to my door and starting the car. “Are we going back to the house, or a hotel?”

Catarina looks at me with wide eyes.

“Which is it?” I ask her, turning to look at her.

“A hotel,” she blurts out after a few seconds of opening and closing her mouth, and I grin and take off as if the hounds of hell are on my heels.

“What is *wrong* with you?” she gasps, sitting back in her seat with her hand over her heart.

I shrug. I think I just don’t want to give her the chance to change her mind.

I take us to the nearest Four Seasons, just about half an hour from the house, and she bites her lip.

“What about Chelsea?”

“Mia’s staying overnight,” I say easily. “That was always the plan.”

“I didn’t know the plan,” Catarina complains with a huff.

As we get out of the car and I throw the valet my keys, I cup her cheek in one hand, getting her to look at me.

“Here’s the plan,” I say softly. “I’m going to make you come half a dozen times before I ever think about fucking you.”

Catarina’s gray eyes go all glossy with lust and she all but melts against me.

I grin, happy with her reaction, and drop my hand, striding inside to check in. The penthouse isn’t available, but they have a nice suite on the fortieth floor.

I’m going to win over Catarina DeLuca if it kills me. I want to be married, but not to someone who hates me, so step one is making her fall for me.

From how she follows me into the elevator, stumbling on her heels and grabbing onto me, I don’t think it’ll be that hard, as long as it starts in the bedroom.

CATARINA

What am I doing? Why did I blurt out “hotel?” I should have gone home to my daughter.

I know that Chelsea’s probably not even thinking about us, too busy on an adventure with Alessia and Mia. She loves having friends around and I haven’t been too good about finding her playdates, so I’m glad that she gets along so well with Alessia.

I hope they’re still friends when Alessia is older and Chelsea doesn’t think of her as some kind of bother. Wait, what am I thinking? I’m not going to wait around until Chelsea’s fifteen to move away, start my own life.

I’m just...somehow hypnotized by Angelo. I still don’t *like* him. But I like how he touches me, how he looks at me. I like how he makes me feel in the bedroom, and I like what a good father he is, but that’s as far as it goes.

Right?

So sure, my heart skips a few beats when he’s playing with Chelsea. It makes me happy. That’s normal. And maybe I’m just a *little* disappointed that our courthouse wedding was so rushed.

But that’s stupid. That’s just the little girl part of me that dreamed of my wedding someday. I don’t have those dreams anymore.

But I sure gave into Angelo quickly. When he approaches me in the elevator, backing me up against the railing, I leap up, wrapping my ankles around his back. He kisses between my

breasts first, licking his way across my modest cleavage. I've never had much to brag about in the bust area, but I'm *sensitive* there, and guys usually kind of ignore them.

Not Angelo.

When the elevator dings, he carries me out, ignoring the people waiting while I blush and hide my face in his neck.

He puts me down only to open the door and tugs at my wrist when I try to walk in on my own. He frowns down at me.

"I didn't get to carry you over the threshold in our wedding night," he says in a low voice, and I bite my lip as he scoops me up again, this time carrying me bridal-style.

My tight dress rides up my thighs, showing off my white, translucent thong.

Angelo's eyes are on the apex of my legs when he tosses me onto the big, four-poster bed.

I put my hands at the strings of the waistband of my underwear, but he shakes his head.

"Leave them on," he orders, and my breath catches in my throat.

He doesn't cover me with his body like I expected. He told me he's going to make me come half a dozen times, but that's just something guys *say*. He won't do it. He'll want to be inside me right away.

Angelo surprises me when he doesn't even remove his shirt, just tearing down the sweetheart neckline of my dress to expose my small breasts. The cool air in the hotel room makes my nipples pebble, and Angelo groans in the back of his throat.

He slides his fingers around my right nipple, teasing the peak until it's hard and engorged, and then leans down to put his mouth on my other nipple, sucking hard until heat is coursing through my lower stomach, sending shockwaves right to my sex.

I'm so wet against the fabric of the thong that I'm almost embarrassed, but I can't think while Angelo is abusing my

nipples, worshipping my breasts that are so sensitive and don't get too much attention.

I arch my back, crying out, aching with need, and Angelo listens to my body, sliding his hands up my dress to press his index and middle fingers against my clit through the translucent fabric.

I nearly choke out a moan.

"You're so sensitive, kitten," he murmurs, his words soft instead of harsh like they were the last time.

I bite my lip, not knowing how to answer and fisting my hands in the sheets as he slides his hand slowly down to my entrance, spreading my lower lips with two fingers on his other hand and looking down at me as if I am some exquisite meal.

"Can't wait to taste you again," he says, and lies between my legs. I spread my thighs, trembling, and I expect him to rip off my panties, take me eagerly, but he doesn't, just presses his face against the fabric and kisses my clit through it, softly.

I make a mewling, whining noise. "Please, Angelo, I need more," I plead.

"You'll get what you get," he says, but there's no real bite in it. He almost sounds distracted as he fits his mouth around my clit, sucking softly and getting me so close to the edge that I cry out his name and buck my hips toward his face.

He hisses when I grind my hips into him, taking my ass and thighs in his hands and yanking me forward to press the flat of his tongue against my clit, and if he'd just take off the damn panties, I could *feel* him, I could finally come.

"I'm going to make you come like this," Angelo says in a low tone, again as if reading my thoughts. "Not even going to take them off."

"Angelo, I can't, please," I babble, but he just goes back to his task, pressing his tongue against me and then letting up, sucking his mouth around my clit and then letting up right when I'm on the edge.

I'm going crazy and he's talking like he's reading me the phonebook, and I'm about to yell at him when he locks his mouth around my clit harder than before, sucking deeply so that even though my panties, I can feel the flicks of his tongue.

I spill over the edge like I'm made of butter, rolling my hips against his face, clenching hard around nothing and aching for more, and Angelo lets out a breath against my thigh.

"Now we can take them off," he mumbles, and rips them at the edges, throwing them onto the floor after I lift my hips for him.

Then he slides two fingers inside me, working them into me slowly at first and then hooking them upwards. When he places his tongue against my clit, I come again, suddenly, so fast it's like a bullet has shot me right in the stomach.

I cry out, my mouth dry, my eyes rolling back in my head.

"That's two," he murmurs, and tears are already stinging the backs of my eyes from overstimulation.

"I can't do six, Angelo, that's crazy," I say, but it cuts off in a moan when he keeps finger fucking me, pressing them deeper and dragging across a spot inside me that makes me see stars. It's only a few strokes of his fingers when I come again.

I'm panting by now, sweating, and he can't be *serious*, he's not going to make me come *six* times. I don't even know if that's possible, I've never even done that on my own.

"You can do it, kitten," he croons. "I know you can."

"I just want you," I croak out, but it's not true, I love the way he's making me feel. My head feels fuzzy like I've had a few glasses of wine and my body feels lax, my limbs loose and heavy. My abdomen aches a little from coming and rolling my hips, but it's like a good ache, like after a good ab workout.

"Wanna make you feel good," he continues. "It's what our wedding night should have been, and I'm going to make it one to remember."

I should say something snarky, like this is only temporary, but he keeps pumping his fingers in and out of me, adding a third, and it's still not enough as I gasp and rock my hips forward.

I barely even register it when I come a fourth time because everything feels so good and I've gone ragdoll under his touch.

He laps at my entrance with his tongue before licking up against my swollen clit again, and I jerk and tremble with overstimulation when he makes me come five, and then six times, never letting up to even breathe, just letting air out through his nostrils as he eats me out.

I'm all-but boneless when he sits up on his knees, breathing hard, his lips and mouth and chin covered in my juices.

"Did so good, pretty little kitten," he praises, and warmth spreads through my body. I feel fuzzy in a way I've never felt before, not even with booze.

"Want you," is all I can manage. "I want you inside me so bad, Angelo. Make me come again with your cock."

"That's the plan, princess." He chuckles, tilting his head as he looks down into my probably glassy eyes.

I feel weird, so floaty, but Angelo's there and he grounds me with his touch, moving his hands up to cup my breasts again before he pushes up my dress over my ass, revealing my lower stomach which makes me a little nervous. I still have a pouch there from Chelsea, but Angelo just growls low in the back of his throat and at some point while I was out of it he must have freed himself from his slacks.

He holds himself in hand and there's liquid at the tip of his dick. I realize that he's as excited as me.

I smile, rolling my hips into the air and pouting at him.

"I'm so ready, Angelo, please," I manage, and I swear there's a slur to my words.

Angelo doesn't waste time, doesn't even pump himself with his fist before he pushes himself inside of me, and it feels so fucking good that I almost scream, biting my fist with my hand to keep the sound in.

Angelo roughly takes my hand from my face, pinning my arms above me and just rolling his hips to slide in and out of me. I'm so wet it's an easy glide, and he moans, looking down at my breasts bouncing as I rock my hips, wanting more.

"I could fuck you so hard right now. Until you were sore the next day, feeling me between your thighs," he mumbles in a low tone, his voice raspy.

He's fucking me smoothly and evenly, not as hard as I want but my *seventh* orgasm is building and I can't believe that's even happening.

"Oh, fuck, I'm gonna cum again," I say, and that's when Angelo's hips stutter.

"You taste so good I could have eaten you out all night," he tells me, his eyes dark as his hips move faster, harder, ramming into me. "But you feel so fucking wet now, kitten, look at you. So pretty like this, begging under me."

I don't even realize I'm begging until he says it, the "please please please" coming out of my raw throat.

I come around him with a silent cry, my whole body going stiff, and Angelo shouts and keeps pumping into me, just a few strokes behind me before he pulls out, spilling white all over his hand, my sex, my stomach, and my black dress.

I frown down at the sight, head feeling light on my shoulders. "You ruined the dress."

He chuckles. "Don't worry, baby. We'll keep it for special occasions," he says mysteriously and sits me up, stripping it off me, over my head.

I nearly fall over and giggle a little, looking up at him. "Why do I feel so....drunk?" I ask him.

Angelo laughs a little. "Never been in subspace before?"

"What the hell is subspace?" I ask, curious.

He shrugs. “Never experienced it myself, but I’ve been with a few girls who drop into it. It’s just when you’ve had a particularly rough night of sex, you get all floaty and... agreeable.”

“Oh no,” I mourn. “Agreeable.”

Angelo snickers. “So I should ask you to do whatever I want when you’re like this?”

I groan, hiding my face under a pillow.

“Shower time for you, pretty kitten,” he tells me, and heaves me up out of the bed. I walk carefully. It’s really like I’ve downed half a bottle of wine on my own, and I can’t believe it’s just from the sex.

He keeps hold of me in the shower, and I’m glad because it feels like I may float away.

Angelo washes my hair, washes gently between my legs with a soft cloth and even when I moan and rock against him, he just kisses the crown of my head.

“You’ll be sore tomorrow,” he warns me, and I pout up at him but it doesn’t work. He washes himself and then turns off the water.

When I’m wrapped up in a big fluffy robe and back on the bed, I feel like I’m going to easily float off to sleep.

Angelo crawls in to bed naked, pulling me close to him, and we haven’t held each other like this since that first night.

I remember, now, how we’d talked all night, how he’d said the most interesting things about life and love and how it all breaks us in the end. I wonder if he still feels that way. I wonder if he’s still that man with the wild eyes and the devil’s smirk who seemed to have the softest heart when he talked about his friends.

I want to ask him, but I’m floating away on some kind of dream cloud with Angelo’s arms locked around me.

ANGELO

Catarina wakes slowly when I shake her hip the next morning.

“Check out is at twelve,” I say, a yawn cracking my jaw.

She rolls over into the covers, hiding her face. “No,” she says simply, and I laugh.

I run my hand along her hip lightly. “Are you sore?”

Catarina rolls over and looks at me. “Only a little,” she says, biting her lip.

“It’ll probably get worse as the day goes on. Hot bath tonight, okay?”

She looks at me curiously. “You’re used to taking care of girls after these kinds of nights, aren’t you?”

I blink at her. “Sure.”

I’m not. I’ve never done this much aftercare in my life, to be honest. Usually the girl feels a little out of it and I cuddle her until she falls asleep because I’m not a *monster* but when she wakes up, I kick her out or I leave, depending on where we are.

I can’t kick out Catarina, but we’re about to be kicked out of the Four Seasons if we don’t get ready soon, and even though I don’t care about that, I miss my daughter.

It’s strange, how I didn’t even know she existed and now I can’t seem to go just a few hours without her.

I pat Catarina on the butt gently and she groans dramatically and gets out of bed, stumbling a little on her feet.

I hand her the soiled dress with a sheepish grin, and she sighs.

“Those panties cost me sixty dollars, you know?” she says, gesturing to them in pieces on the floor.

“I’ll buy you a dozen more pairs,” I promise.

“You’d better,” she mumbles, and instead of going into the bathroom like usual, she just takes off her robe and slides the dress on, pulling it over her ass and hips. I watch with my mouth going dry, wishing we had more time.

I’d washed the dress in the sink last night before I went to sleep, so it isn’t that gross, and she seems agreeable enough. Maybe she’s still in subspace.

When we check out and get into the sun, Catarina squints and grabs on to me, hiding her face.

The sunlight probably does hurt those light pigmented eyes, so I take my sunglasses off my head and hand them to her.

She puts them on with a grin and they’re too big for her face but she’s cute.

My heart does this weird little backflip thing in my chest.

I put my hand to it. What the hell is *that*?

“You okay?” she asks, tilting her head.

“Heartburn,” I mumble, although I haven’t eaten since yesterday sometime and my stomach is growling rather than too full.

“We should eat,” she suggests, and I look over at her, surprised.

She usually doesn’t want to spend this much time alone with me, away from Chelsea. I guess I should milk it while I can.

I swing by a drive through and her eyes light up.

I chuckle and glance over at her. “So, you’re a cheap date.”

“Look, there’s just something about processed food when you’re Italian,” she says, leaning out the window to order a cheeseburger and loaded fries.

“You’re right,” I say, laughing a little. We get homecooked meals all the time, so there’s something about a fast and dirty burger every once in a while.

We sit in the parking lot while we eat and she digs into her burger with gusto, surprising me.

I munch on my very processed chicken sandwich just as happily, guzzling down fountain soda.

“Last night,” she starts, and I look over at her.

“Yeah?”

“It was...something,” she mumbles, flushing and looking away, but it was *something* all right, so it makes me grin.

“So, you’ll stay in the master bedroom,” I say easily, hoping that she won’t protest.

She looks at me for a moment with cool gray eyes but then she just nods.

“Yeah, I figured.”

“You did?”

“You seem to want to do this *weirdly* by the book,” she says.

It’s my turn to flush, just slightly, and I’m glad I’m olive complected so it doesn’t really show.

“If you’re going to do something, you should do it right,” I say firmly.

She chuckles and finishes her burger, picking at her fries.

“We should get home to Chelsea,” she says, and it again does something to my heart when she calls my apartment “home.”

What the hell is wrong with me? I fuck her really well one night and now my heart is doing things? Sure, she’s a little

cute all out of it with her mouth pouted and her gray eyes glassy, her body melting against mine.

But that's all it is.

We arrive back home and Mia's asleep on the couch with both girls cuddled up together at the other end of the wraparound leather.

I laugh a little, and Catarina goes to Chelsea, picking her up. She's like a doll in her arms, dead asleep, and Catarina takes her upstairs.

Mia rouses and sits up, blinking. "Shit. Sorry, bedtime was *late*."

I nod. "Seems like it. It's okay, though, as long as she was having fun."

Mia rubs her eyes. "They had me play treasure hunt like twelve times before bath time, and then that turned out to be diving treasure hunt." She pauses. "I think Chelsea taught my daughter to breathe underwater because she was down there too long and I freaked out."

I chuckle. "Chelsea can be a bit of a handful," I admit.

Mia waves her hand. "Alessia is going to be the same way," she says easily. "Takes after her father." She smiles. "And me."

I cock an eyebrow and help her gather her and Alessia's things, leading them out to her car, which is parked in the apartment parking garage.

"Tell Dante that I'll be back once I get this wedding thing over with on the fifteenth," I say, and Mia chokes.

"It's the fifteenth? I'll have to put a fire under Dante's ass to go."

"You guys don't have to come," I mumble, but part of me *really wants* them to. I'm only doing this once, so I want all my friends there. They're like family to me, especially after my father and I became estranged. I'd grown up with Nico and Dante.

Mia frowns. “Of course we do.”

She puts the sleepy baby into the car and gets inside, waving at me. I wave back, feeling a rush of love for my friends.

They’ll be there for me, even during an arranged marriage, and it means a lot.

I walk back inside, up the stairs where I hope to get a little more sleep while Chelsea’s still out, and I walk past Chelsea’s room.

I poke my head in, and Catarina lies curled up next to her, snoring softly with her hand around Chelsea. Chelsea’s hand is in her hair, a curl twisted around her little thumb.

My heart does that flippy thing again and I frown.

I really need an antacid.

I make it to my bed before lying across it diagonally and going to sleep, ignoring that weird, warm feeling in my chest.

CATARINA

I wake up in two hours when Chelsea wakes up, slapping my face not-too-gently to wake me.

“Mama! Mama! Alessia and I found *treasure*.”

“Treasure?” I ask, my voice slurred with sleep. “What kind of treasure.”

She grins wickedly, her face inches from mine. “*Monies*,” she says, and bolts off the bed to her toybox and throwing it open.

I yawn and stumble out of bed to go see, expecting it to be some type of kid jewelry or stones, but instead, it’s *cash*. I gasp and lean down, reaching into it, and there’s probably thousands of dollars in there.

“Chelsea,” I say slowly. “Where did you get that?”

“I *found* it,” she says defiantly, sticking her little chin up.

“What do you mean, you found it? Did you find it in someone’s purse?” I ask her in a derisive tone, and she huffs.

“No, Mama. Mia told us where to look and we *found* it. We’re pirate queens. We need pirate booty.” She giggles at the word and I look down at all the cash in shock. There’s also a women’s Rolex watch in there, and some jewelry.

“Mia gave you all this?” I ask, and Chelsea gives me a look as if she thinks I’m stupid.

“No, Mama. I *tole* you,” she insists. “We found it.”

I swallow hard and walk out into the hallway as Chelsea counts her pirate booty, slapping Angelo on the ass as he's fallen asleep fully clothed across his bed.

He snorts and wakes, turning over with a groan.

"What happened? Who's dead?"

"Nobody," I huff. "But Mia gave Chelsea all this *money*, and we need to return it."

Angelo frowns, running his hand through his messy hair as he sits up cross-legged on the bed.

"She gave it to her, right? Chelsea didn't steal it?"

I roll my eyes. "It's not like she gave her five bucks, Angelo, there are *thousands* in Chelsea's toy box. And jewelry."

Angelo barks out a laugh, but then he shrugs. "So? She intended her to have it, then."

"Chelsea's three years old, what is she going to do with five grand?" I ask, just guessing how much is in there.

"We'll put it in a fund for her or something," he says easily. "Don't get your panties all twisted."

I thin my lips, glaring at him. "I'm not wearing any," I hiss. "You left them on the floor of the Four Seasons."

Angelo looks up the line of my thighs with a hot look, but when he sees my face, he sighs, rubbing a hand across the back of his neck.

"Fine, I'll call Mia, see what the deal is."

He grabs his phone from the nightstand and calls and I stand there, stomping my foot.

I know that wiseguys and their wives do things differently. Hell, for my sweet sixteen, my stepfather gave me an SUV and fifteen thousand dollars, but Chelsea isn't sixteen. She's *three*.

Angelo leaves the room, walking into Chelsea's room. She's counting her money and wearing the pendant like some kind of maniac, cackling at all her goodies.

“It seems Chelsea hit the jackpot with her pirate booty,” Angelo drawls, not taking this nearly as seriously as I am. He hums through the rest of the call, nodding at parts. “Mia says it’s fine,” he says, shrugging. “She says consider it a wedding present.”

I gape at him. “A wedding present is like, a set of silverware, *maybe* five hundred bucks,” I tell him. “Chelsea can’t grow up thinking this is okay.”

Angelo tilts his head. “But that’s how she *has* grown up,” he says. “You’ve been living with your stepfather since she’s been born, and you can’t tell me that he doesn’t spoil you both.”

I bite my lip because he’s right, but also because I can’t tell him I’m planning on escaping this life altogether. Angelo will always be in Chelsea’s life, but in a diminished capacity once I get out of this marriage.

“She’s keeping it,” Angelo says firmly, looking at how her eyes light up when she counts out each denomination. “It’ll teach her how to count.”

“One old guy,” Chelsea murmurs. “Two old guys...”

I look over at Angelo. “It will, will it?”

He laughs and scoops her up into his arms. “You made a good living yesterday, pirate queen. Are you going to grow up and become one?”

“Nah,” Chelsea says, dropping her money on the floor casually, making me groan and pick it up. She wraps her little arms around her father’s neck instead. “I’m gonna be a *princess*. A fairy princess.”

“Well, and here I thought pirate queen was a good job,” Angelo mutters, and I hear Chelsea babbling about how fairies can grow their wings and hers just haven’t grown in yet as he takes her down the stairs.

I get on my knees, counting up the money. There’s seven grand, a Rolex watch, a diamond pendant (which is still around Chelsea’s neck) and a few rings, look to be expensive stones like rubies and jade. This is definitely over ten grand

worth of treasure, and Mia had just casually given it to Chelsea.

I blink. I'm not sure even my stepfather spoils us this much.

I just have to put up with it until I can get her out of here, I tell myself. Then we'll start a new life.

That's still the plan. Right?

I'm not going to let Angelo Bianchi sidetrack me anymore than he already has with his death threats and arranged marriage. In fact, this is all going to work out well for me. I just know it.

And so what if I hook up with Angelo a little bit on the side? We are *married*, after all, doesn't it have to be consummated? I'm going for a divorce, not an annulment.

It's just a little fun, that's all. That's all Angelo has ever been to me. Just fun.

I push the thoughts away about how I'd missed him when I hadn't gotten his number, how I'd longed to see him when I found out I was pregnant. He'd been drunk that night, sure, but he'd also been so sweet, talking to me about life and our friends and all our favorite things.

It was like we'd gotten to know each other on a level that usually only happens after dating someone for weeks. We'd just sped it up in that one night.

But he's different now. I'm different. I'm a mother and he's a killer and I can't live the lifestyle he lives. I can't fall in love with someone who threatened to kill me.

It's true that I don't think he would have done it, even then. I think he talks a big game, but killing someone in cold blood like that? I'm not sure he would have done it.

My stepfather is a wiseguy but he's never killed anyone who didn't try to kill him or his friends, first, and I assume that's what Angelo is like.

But how would I know? I only spent one night with him and now what, a week? It isn't like I know him. He could snap

and kill me anytime he wanted to, but instead, he's inviting me into his bed.

I'm sleeping with the devil, and I know it, but it feels so *right*.

It's just because I've been pretty much celibate since the night that Angelo and I met. I had been so afraid of another pregnancy that I hadn't hooked up with anyone, and I'd been focused on starting my new life.

I still am.

In fact, I take the money that Chelsea calls her pirate's booty, knowing she'll forget about it in a matter of days, and put it in a suitcase which I hide high up on a high shelf in the walk-in closet. There's already a surprising amount of women's clothes in there, and I stare at it, shocked.

It's expensive, too, all the designer brands, and most of it even has tags on it.

I huff and bypass all the women's clothes, having no idea why Angelo has so much of it and making a note to ask him later, but not in a jealous way.

I'm not jealous. If he has a girlfriend or whatever, someone who keeps her clothes at his house, he'll just have to keep her away from Chelsea. It's none of my business otherwise.

I dress in a pair of yoga shorts and a tank-top, walking downstairs, and maybe my cheeks are a little flushed with anger. I can't help it. He's proposed to me, made me marry him, and he's got some girl leaving clothes in his closet?

Chelsea is sitting in her highchair, a new one that Angelo must have bought for her, even though I don't know when he's had time to do it, eating bacon by the fistful.

"You should at least make her eat some toast with it," I say tiredly, noting to myself that Angelo is going to be difficult to co-parent with.

"I'm making toast," he says, winking at her, and when the toast pops up, he butters it and hands it to her.

She promptly shreds it into pieces and goes back to eating her bacon.

I groan. “Just two bites, Chels, please.”

Chelsea looks up at me, and she must sense that I’m on the edge, because she dutifully eats two bites of the ruined toast.

“Thank you,” I say, plopping down in a chair. Angelo slides over a plate of bacon, scrambled eggs, and toast with chunky peanut butter spread across it.

I look up at him.

“I didn’t know how you liked your eggs,” he says, sounding a little sheepish, and I pick up the toast first, looking at it.

“Chunky,” Chelsea says with a look of complete disgust on her face. “Papa likes it too.”

“Peanuts are good for you, Chelsea,” Angelo says, and Chelsea sticks out her tongue, dropping more bacon on the high chair.

I sigh and take a bite of my toast, which is actually my favorite. Angelo smiles briefly before cleaning Chelsea up.

I stare at them, surprised. I never imagined that Angelo would do any of the real work when it comes to Chelsea. I never thought, even after we reconnected, that he’d cook for her, clean up after her, give her a bath, things like that.

I thought he’d just want to be the fun dad, getting her presents and playing with her.

But Angelo isn’t like that. He’s a dad, through and through, and it makes me curious.

I raise an eyebrow at him. “Do you have siblings?” I ask.

Angelo snorts. “No, unfortunately I’m the apple of my Papa’s eye.”

The way he says it reminds me of when he’d said he’d have to get the ring from him.

“What happened?” I ask as Chelsea runs upstairs to her room, presumably to dress up in fairy princess attire since she’s been babbling about it all morning.

“With what? My parents didn’t want more kids, I guess,” he mumbles around a piece of chunky peanut butter toast.

“I mean with your father,” I say patiently, knowing that Angelo doesn’t want to talk about it.

He sighs. “He left. That’s all there is to it.”

“And now? Does he want to be part of your life?”

“Has for years, since I was a teenager. He left us for some bimbo and then that ran its course and he wanted us back like nothing had happened,” Angelo says bitterly. “I take his money when I need it, but I try not to need it. I don’t talk to him.”

“But you’ll have to, for the ring?” I ask, raising my eyebrows.

He frowns. “Yes, what about it?”

“Why is the ring so important to you?” I ask, picking at my eggs. I take a bite and they’re surprisingly fluffy. “I mean, this is all...temporary.”

“Sure, but no one’s ever going to believe I married someone without my mother’s engagement ring,” he says, like that should be obvious. “Least of all my mother.”

“She didn’t take the ring back?”

“Didn’t want anything to do with him,” he says, raising his chin like Chelsea does, like he’s proud. “Said she wouldn’t want anything that he gave her.”

“But you want it,” I say again, confused.

Angelo hums, shoveling down his bacon and eggs. He pauses and swallows before answering, his face a little pensive.

“I want you to have it,” he says simply, like the conversation is over, and I just stare at him.

I clear my throat after eating what I want out of my plate.

“Can I ask you something?”

“You’re my wife now. You can ask me anything. Know all my secrets,” he says in a teasing tone, but I just keep looking at him, unamused.

“Why do you have so many women’s clothes in your closet?”

Angelo looks at me curiously for a moment, as if he’s trying to decide my mood, and I try my best to keep my expression blank.

A slow smile spreads across his face. “What are you, jealous?”

“Oh, I am *not*,” I insist with a scoff, my cheeks reddening. “I just want to know. It’s weird.”

He shrugs. “I just picked up stuff here and there, you know? For girls. They always come over here and don’t have anything to wear home or out to breakfast, so instead of them stealing all my clothes, I bought some.”

I wrinkle my nose. “So, some of them are *used* clothes?”

He barks out a laugh. “No, whoever wore them got to take them home.”

“Kind of like a bonus, after sex?” I ask incredulously.

“If you want to think of it that way, sure. You can have whatever you want out of it.”

“I don’t want anyone else’s clothes,” I mumble, thinking that they hadn’t been my size, anyway. Angelo must go after much thinner women than me.

“Then we’ll throw them out,” he says easily, as if there’s not thousands of dollars of clothes and shoes in there. “We’ll get you new stuff.”

“I can buy my own clothes,” I mumble, sipping my coffee. It’s a little too sweet for me, but it’s not bad coffee.

“With what, your father’s money?” Angelo asks.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at him.

“Nothing,” he says quickly. “Just asking.”

I fold my arms across my chest, feeling defensive for no reason I can think of. Angelo doesn’t know me or my stepfather. He doesn’t know that I help out around the house, or how my stepfather has helped take care of me and Chelsea when things were really hard.

“I have my own bank account,” I say.

Angelo looks at me as if to say that my stepfather puts money in it and I frown.

“How do you make your money? You said you take some from your father.”

He points his fork at me. “Only if I *have* to. I’ve only done it a few times, when things were slow.”

“When *what* things were slow?” I prod.

Angelo cocks his head. “You live with one of the biggest *caputos* in New York, kitten. You must know what we do.”

“I know what he does,” I say stubbornly. “I don’t know what you do. Is your father a *capo*?”

Angelo nods. “Yeah, but I don’t work for him. Not ever. I work for Dante and a few of the other *capos* in the area on an as-needed basis.”

“As-needed,” I muse. “So, you don’t do weekly jobs?”

My stepfather had a variety of weekly jobs he needed done, and he outsourced, of course, just like Dante. Usually the guys in charge didn’t get their hands dirty.

Angelo shakes his head. “Only when I really need the money. One year, I had to beat up this guy like ten times for not paying protection money to Dante, but that’s not usual.”

I raise an eyebrow. “So, you beat guys up for money?”

“I don’t always beat them up,” he says easily. “Sometimes I just shoot them.”

“You slit that guy’s throat,” I say in a low tone. “What was that about?”

Angelo shrugs. “A message. Guy went after Dante. We don’t tolerate that, so he had it a little more personal than a gunshot.”

I swallow hard, thinking this is exactly the type of lifestyle I want to keep Chelsea out of. I’m determined to save money, from my stepdad or from Angelo, and squirrel it away like Chelsea’s pirate booty. When I have enough, I’ll leave, and we’ll figure out custody from there.

I’m not going to cut Angelo out of Chelsea’s life, but I’ve got to get her away from all of this. Out of New York. Out of Chicago.

Somewhere out west, California, maybe, where the wise-guy lifestyle is just the stuff of screenplays.

I stand up and take the dishes to the sink but Angelo grabs me around the waist, pulling me down into his lap.

“I have a housekeeper, you know?” he murmurs in my ear, and it makes me shudder.

“Still, no reason to give her more work,” I insist. I always load the dishwasher at my stepdad’s place after breakfast.

Before Angelo can protest, my phone rings, and I stand up and grab it out of the back pocket of my shorts.

“Wedding planner,” I say shortly, walking out on the back balcony, and Angelo groans.

I smile. *Saved by the bell.*

ANGELO

Catarina had so *clearly* been jealous of the clothes that she found in my closet, and that makes me smile through the rest of the morning.

She's out back talking on the phone for what seems like hours, so I go upstairs and Chelsea is throwing things out of her mother's luggage.

There's a lacy bra on the nightstand, a couple of pairs of underwear on the floor, and clothes everywhere.

"What are you doing, crazy girl?" I ask her, picking her up and tickling her.

"I'm looking for fairy princess dresses," she pouts. "I know Mama has some. I just know it."

My eyes light up as I think about the conversation I had with Catarina earlier that morning.

"Well, my fairy princess, I think Papa might have something *perfect* for you."

She gasps but then looks at me curiously. "Is it a kid's dress, though? Because Papa, kid's dresses aren't pretty like fairies."

I shake my head. "Grown up dresses," I tell her, and lead her into the walk-in closet. She squeals and starts to flip through the dresses.

I chuckle and go back into the bedroom, putting away the clothes that Chelsea had flung everywhere. I need to make some room for their things. After Chelsea picks out her fairy

princess attire, I'll throw the rest out and make some room in my drawers.

I think I wear the same button-up and slacks every time I go out, anyway. I used to switch it up with blue silk shirts at the club, or even red when a girl told me it made the amber in my eyes pop, but now that I'm a married man, I won't be doing that anymore.

I kind of like the sound of it. Married man. With child, even.

I wonder if Catarina wants more kids. I shock myself with the thought.

Do *I* want more kids? Something about it appeals to me, being able to see a baby all chubby and smiling up at me like Nico's baby had at the coffee shop.

But another baby with Catarina? Do I want to be tethered to her for that long? I suppose it's too late to worry about that, since Chelsea is already here. She's already in my life forever, so what's another baby?

I make a mental note to ask her about it when she's not mad about the clothes in my closet when Chelsea comes out, wearing a pair of way-too-big stiletto heels with a red bottom and a sequined, pastel purple dress I'd caught on sale.

"Look at you," I gasp, letting my mouth drop open dramatically. "A fairy princess."

"All I need is wings," she says. "But I'll grow 'em soon."

"Papa could probably acquire you a pair until your real ones grow in," I tell her, taking a picture of her with my phone to send to Nico and Dante.

"Really?" Her big, brown eyes widen. "You'd buy me *wings*?"

"Of course, sweetheart. You can come with me to pick them out."

Chelsea jumps around in the heels, making a godawful noise that the downstairs neighbors would be pissed about if they weren't all terrified of me already. I've already had

several neighbors complain about noise, but they stopped when I told them it could be worse, I could be practicing my target practice each week.

“Let’s go now, now, now,” she chants, and then pauses. “Can I wear this?”

She’s wearing her own clothes under the dress and I snort.

“Not outside, sweetie,” I tell her gently. “We don’t want people to *know* you’re a fairy princess. They’ll get jealous.”

She looks at me for a moment. “You’re right,” she says, and steps out of the dress. It’s so big on her it just falls to the floor.

I look at it, thinking it probably cost me a couple of grand and I’m going to give it to a three-year-old. I don’t mind even a little.

I’ve never loved anything the way that I love Chelsea, and it was almost instant. I knew she was mine the moment I saw her, and thinking back, I don’t think I’ve ever had anything that was expressly mine.

My father hated pets, so I never had a dog or a cat, and I didn’t have siblings. I’ve never fallen in love with a woman before. So Chelsea is it. She’s the one thing that’s mine, and she’s wonderful. Everything she does makes me smile.

Chelsea takes my hand, leading me downstairs where her mother is looking at her phone and frowning.

“Is a cake tasting usually over five-hundred-dollars or are they trying to scam me?” Catarina asks as we walk past her.

“Depends on the cake,” I answer easily, and then scoop Chelsea up to put her on my shoulders.

I’m in a pretty great mood, with my (in name only) wife and my sweet little daughter. Maybe Nico and Dante had it right all along.

Marriage doesn’t have to involve falling in love the way they did, though, clearly. I’m having the time of my life and I don’t have to worry about any of the messy love stuff.

Sure, I feel things for Catarina. She's hot and smart and funny and the mother of my child. Who wouldn't? But it isn't love. At least I don't think it is.

"So, when is the cake tasting?" I ask, licking my lips.

Catarina scoffs. "I guess whenever we go up there with five hundred bucks."

I raise an eyebrow. "So, today?"

She stares at me. "You want to go to a cake tasting? With Chelsea?"

"I love cake, Mama," Chelsea points out, and I grin at her.

I glance up at her. "I'll bring you back anything I can fit in my pockets, but it's an adult cake tasting, sweetheart."

She pouts. "But I love cake."

"Do you love Alessia more than cake?"

Her eyes light up. "I get to see my friend?"

"Exactly," I say with a chuckle.

Catarina makes a displeased sound in the back of her throat. "We can't just keep asking Dante and Mia to babysit," she starts, but I put a hand up to stop her.

"They have nannies, for god's sake," I tell her. "Maybe they'll let us take one."

She blanches. "I don't want a nanny that I don't know for Chelsea."

I huff out a breath, getting frustrated. "We'll talk about this later, but for now, cake tasting. We've got to make this wedding something to remember."

"Papa wants to pay for everything. He told me to get receipts," she comments.

I grin. "That's even better. Have you picked out a dress?"

She bites her lip. "No, not yet."

"Then we'll go shopping for that, too," I suggest, putting Chelsea down on the ground where she sprints off toward her

toys.

“Absolutely not,” Catarina says firmly.

“What? Why not?”

“I know this isn’t important to you, Angelo, but I want this to be by the book. And the groom isn’t supposed to see the dress until the wedding.”

I chuckle. “All right, Ms. Traditional,” I tease.

Catarina doesn’t respond, her expression looking blank for a second before she sighs, as if admitting defeat.

“Okay, let’s go to the cake tasting.”

“Great.” I cup my hands around my mouth. “Hey, all fairy princesses, the train to fairy town is boarding!”

Chelsea pops her head into the living room. “Fairies don’t take trains, we *fly*.”

“Well,” I say, laughing. “I guess that means the fairies without wings don’t get to go to fairy town.”

Chelsea huffs. “I guess.”

I grin at her, picking her up and carrying her to the car. Catarina sighs, and I know she doesn’t like it that I carry Chelsea everywhere, but I can’t help it.

She’s just so small and sweet and *mine*.

“I’ll take you to get your fairy wings, how about that?” I ask Chelsea, and she whoops in victory.

“Can we get the baby some too?” she asks, and I nod and she claps her chubby hands together excitedly. Even Catarina cracks a smile.

Maybe I’m not too stoked about being married, but I’m in love with being a father, and that’s good enough.

CATARINA

There's an odd flutter in my belly when Angelo takes Chelsea into the department store and comes out with a couple of pairs of fairy wings. It's something like excitement, I guess, on Chelsea's behalf. It's just because Angelo is a good father.

It has nothing to do with him. It's not because I have feelings for him.

Angelo is handsome, funny, smart...all the things people want in a man. But the one trait that he has that keeps me at a distance is a big one: he's a mobster, and one with a reckless streak about a mile wide.

I don't want my daughter to have to live her whole life in this kind of dangerous environment, and I know Angelo will never change. He doesn't even want to.

He loves the life the same way that I hate it, and so we can never be a couple. Not that I want to, anyway. Not that *he* does.

We are both perfectly content being parents and sleeping together on occasion.

But still, it almost feels like a date as we drop off Chelsea with her new fairy wings and head toward the bakery.

He puts his hand on my knee, humming low in the back of his throat.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you were enjoying this," I accuse.

"I am," he says simply.

I raise an eyebrow. “Why?”

He shrugs. “I like cake.”

I snort out a laugh. “Now you sound like Chelsea.”

“Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, I guess.”

I hadn’t been asking about the cake-tasting, though, but all the wedding planning. He seems excited when I mention certain things about the wedding, and he’s certainly more excited about it than I am.

I’m mostly terrified, worried that my stepfather or mother will see right through our façade and realize that we’re not really in love.

We arrive at the bakery and sit down and they bring us a truly insane amount of cake slices. Angelo digs in to each one but I take my time, savoring the taste. They all taste incredible, but Angelo spits out a couple of them – persimmon with lime and beetroot with lemon.

“No one should put vegetables in cake,” he says, rubbing his tongue with a napkin.

I’m laughing so loud I’m almost crying at the look on his face.

“What about carrot cake?”

“Carrot cake is an abomination,” he argues, and I lean against him, trying to catch my breath.

He idly puts an arm around me and I feel warm and happy, which kind of scares me, so I clear my throat and sit up straight.

“I like the lemon-apple flavor the best,” I say.

He pouts. “No chocolate?”

“What about the chocolate-lemon?” I ask, pointing, and he takes another bite of it.

He hums. “It’s perfect.” He raises his hand to get the bakery worker’s attention. “Chocolate lemon, please!”

“Excellent,” she says, smiling. “And would you like to pick out a cake topper?”

We pick out a simple one, two dark haired people, the man taller. It looks a little bit stilted, but after all, this whole thing is for show.

“If we were honest, we’d get the one with the couple in the bed,” he jokes under his breath as we walk out of the bakery.

I snicker and he smiles at me. “Do you want to get some real food before we pick up Chels?”

I nod, my stomach rumbling from eating nothing but sugar all day.

We head to a nearby diner, something quick with burgers, and I immediately order a cheeseburger and fries with a cherry coke.

“You know, that cherry coke from the bar is really a pomegranate coke,” Angelo says solemnly.

I raise an eyebrow. “How do you know that?”

“Used to bartend for a stint about ten years ago,” he explains. “They use grenadine, which is made from pomegranates, but no one ever complains that it’s not cherry.”

“You’re full of surprises,” I murmur. “Would have never pegged you for a bartender.”

“Why’s that? Too handsome?” He cracks a smile.

“No,” I say with a chuckle. “Too hot-headed.”

“I did get fired because I broke a beer glass and threatened a customer who was getting too handsy with the ladies,” he admits, and I laugh again, feeling open and free.

I haven’t laughed like this in what seems like ages because I’ve been so stressed. It’s nice to spend some time with Angelo that doesn’t feel forced.

I have to be careful, though. I have to protect my heart from that winning smile of his and those fierce brown eyes.

“Should I be worried about meeting your parents?” I ask Angelo curiously.

“Absolutely not. My mother is a peach,” he answers, munching on his fries.

“And your father?” I prod.

He grins but there’s no mirth in it, it’s almost bitter. “You won’t be meeting him.”

“Why not?” I ask, remembering that he had told me he didn’t feel like I should meet him when we talked about the ring.

Angelo shrugs. “He made his bed, now he gets to lie in it.”

I want to ask more, but I don’t want to push. For all his wildness, Angelo is a pretty private guy when it comes to his past and his emotions.

But he continues speaking, surprising me.

“He left us,” he says. “When I was twelve. Walked out to be with another woman when my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer.”

“Oh my God,” I say, covering my mouth.

“It’s okay,” he says quickly. “She beat it with a double mastectomy, but no thanks to dear old Dad.”

“And you haven’t spoken to him since?”

“Here and there, when I *really* needed money,” he admits. “But I always hate it. He certainly won’t be at the wedding. He doesn’t have the right to meet our daughter.”

I nod slowly. “I understand. It’s hard to lose your father.”

“Your father loved you,” he points out. “He didn’t leave you, he died. There’s a difference.”

“I know,” I say softly. “But it’s still hard growing up without one.”

Angelo reaches across the table to take my hand. “You’re right. I’m sorry, kitten. I should be more sensitive.”

I'm surprised as he kisses my knuckles, clearly apologetic. I slowly pull my hand out of his, blushing a little.

"Thanks," I mutter, not sure what else to say.

"I'm going to speak to him tomorrow about the wedding ring," he sighs. "I'm not looking forward to it."

"Do you want me to come with?" I ask, looking up at him over my glass, and he shakes his head.

"Nah, won't give him the pleasure of meeting my beautiful wife."

Butterflies float throughout my stomach. *His wife*. There's something about the way he says that...

No, Catarina, I tell myself. Don't get sucked in to how handsome and charming he is. Not again.

I clear my throat. "We should get back to Chelsea. She's probably driving the nanny *and* Mia crazy with those fairy wings."

He laughs out loud. "I hope she didn't try to jump off anything."

Angelo takes my hand as we leave the diner, and my hand feels so small in his, my heart racing just slightly.

My heart has been acting weird lately, and I'm a bit worried about it. Not about my physical health, but my emotional health.

I *cannot* fall back in love with Angelo Bianchi. Not now, not ever.

So when his arm slips around my waist after we've gotten Chelsea calmed down, bathed, and in bed, I pretend to be asleep, willing my racing heart to calm down.

I am *not* going to do this to myself again.

ANGELO

I wake up the next morning in a great mood, mostly because the wedding is coming up and I have to admit to myself that I'm a little excited about it.

Catarina is a beautiful, smart, and funny woman, and I could do a lot worse. It doesn't have to be about love, right?

I can kind of understand why she wants out of the life, anyway.

When I'm preparing breakfast in the kitchen, there is a thud noise and Chelsea starts crying. I run to her to see what happened and she is sitting down at the bottom of the stairs, her knees skinned pretty badly. When she sees me coming, she limps up to me crying with her fairy wings all sideways.

"Baby," I croon, and she snuffles, looking down at her knees and starting to sob.

"I bleed, Papa," she says shakily, like she's absolutely about to lose it, and when I see the blood dripping down her knees my heart drops to my toes.

I pick her up, ushering her to the bathroom and cleaning up her knees and washing the tears off her face.

My heart is pounding until she calms down and straightens her fairy wings. And those are just skinned knees.

I can't imagine anything happening to Chelsea, her having to go through any of the things I went through as a child with my father as *capo*.

Even though I'm not *capo* and have no desire to be one, I'm still in danger a lot of the time. Understanding Catarina better makes me like her more. But not like *that*.

I'm attracted to her, and she's a good mother. That's as far as it goes.

My good mood dissipates even further as I drink my coffee because I know that I have to see Andrea Bianchi, my father, today. In my opinion, Mama should have kept the damn ring, but I can understand her reasons for giving it back.

I take a deep breath and decide not to call ahead, just leaving the penthouse after scribbling a note to Catarina. I take Dante's private jet there, and the trip goes by easily despite my nerves.

When I pull up at his security gate, they wave me right in, recognizing my face.

Unfortunately, I'm the spitting image of my absent father.

I see him every time I look in the mirror.

I can't help but notice that he's getting old when he meets me in the foyer. He sticks out his hand for me to shake and I ignore it, looking in his face.

"I need Mama's wedding ring," I say flatly.

He gasps. "You're getting married?" he asks. "To whom?"

"You wouldn't know her," I say, frustrated. "Just give me the ring."

My father frowns, and then there's a sly smirk at the corner of his mouth. "I'll give it to you if you invite me to the wedding."

My eyes shoot to his. "You don't want to play this game with me, old man."

He shrugs. "I'm too old to play too many games. I'll sit in the back. I just want to watch my son get married."

"Hell, no."

“Come on. I know I’m not your favorite person, but you are still my son. You already cut me out of your life so much, just give me this one thing.”

I really don’t want him there, but this back and forth is only succeeding in taking me away from my daughter for longer. I want to be back in Chicago with Chelsea, not here, but I also don’t want this man anywhere near my family. Fuck. What should I do?

I think about it for a long moment. I guess it would look better if both my parents could show up to the wedding. Alonzo knows of Andrea, so they could chat or whatever. But fuck if I want this man there.

“I don’t know,” I muse.

“Come on, Angelo. I promise I won’t make a fuss. I’ll just be there in the back, not bugging you.

I sigh, thinking it over for a moment.. “All right, fine. But I don’t want you anywhere near my bride or me.”

“That’s okay. I just want to be there for you.”

“Whatever. I’ll email you the invitation.” I pause. “No plus ones, though. I don’t want you bringing some skank to the wedding in front of Mama.”

“I would never,” he argues, and I scoff.

“You did,” I say harshly. “You left us for some twenty-one-year-old, remember?”

“Of course I remember, Angelo. It was the worst mistake of my life.”

“Yeah, well,” I say, rubbing my hand across the back of my neck. “Where’s the ring?”

“In my study,” he says, going up the stairs, and I follow him after a brief pause.

Is this really worth it? I hated it when he’d left us. Hated him. Still do.

I remember yelling and sobbing at the door the night he left, asking him why he didn’t love us anymore.

I shudder just thinking about it. I was only a kid, but it still hurt.

I stand in the doorway of his office as he goes to get the ring, handing it to me in a ring box.

I open it and it sparkles beautifully in the light.

“I have it cleaned once a year,” he says quietly.

I scoff. “What, am I supposed to give you a medal for that?”

“You could say thank you.”

“Thank you,” I spit out, not meaning it in the slightest. This is the absolute bare minimum that my father can do, after leaving us the way he did.

“Son,” he starts.

“Don’t call me that,” I snap.

“Angelo,” he starts again, and I look up at him with a frown. “I just want us to talk.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. You blackmailed an invitation out of me. That’s more than enough to show me you are still looking out for you and no one else,” I say firmly, and walk down the stairs and out of the house. He follows me out onto the porch.

“Angelo,” he calls.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get your invitation,” I grunt.

He looks relieved, but I’m just trying to get him off my back. I don’t plan on saying word one to him at the wedding unless I absolutely have to.

I roll my shoulders, feeling tense and stiff, and I can’t help shutting the door a little hard when I close the car door.

The flight back does nothing to ease my mood. I’m still fuming when I arrive back at the penthouse.

Catarina is sitting there, sipping coffee. “You’re back early. I didn’t expect you for hours.”

“Just had to get one thing,” I say, and offer her the ring box. It isn’t much of a proposal, but the way our marriage has gone so far, it’s at least some kind of gesture.

She takes it and opens it, her mouth dropping open slightly. “It is beautiful, Angelo.”

“Try it on,” I order. “We can get it resized if we have to.”

She slips it on her finger and it’s a perfect fit. She must be a size six just like my mother. She moves her hand around so that the diamond catches the light.

My heart skips a beat. She looks so beautiful, even barefaced with her blonde curls damp. I cup her face, lean down, and kiss her softly, slowly, just slightly slipping my tongue into her mouth.

She makes a noise in the back of her throat, kissing me back, and when I pull away, her silver eyes look a little dazed.

I smirk at her. “Can’t wait for our wedding night,” I murmur. “I won’t be wasting this one.”

Catarina looks at me like she’s going to say something snarky, but then Chelsea bounces into the room, wearing one of my T-shirts that is so big it pools around her ankles on the floor. She’s also wearing the fairy wings, which keep it from sliding off her shoulders.

“Fairy, fairy, I’m a pretty fairy,” she says in a sing-song voice, and I chuckle and sweep her up, kissing along her belly and blowing a raspberry there.

She giggles and squeals as I put her down.

“You’re the prettiest fairy,” I say.

She frowns. “No, Papa. Tinkerbell is the prettiest fairy. Do you believe in fairies?”

Catarina gives me a sharp look and I realize that this must be important.

“Of course I do,” I say. “I’m looking at one right now, aren’t I??”

Chelsea grins. “Good, because you know what happens when people don’t believe in fairies?”

“What’s that, princess?”

“They *die*,” she says, falling dramatically on the floor and sticking her tongue out, making a face.

I can’t help but laugh and then help her up. “Well then, I’ll always remember to believe in fairies.”

She grins and climbs up into her highchair. Catarina buckles her in and gives her some cereal to munch on.

“How long do you think she’s going to wear those?” Catarina asks under her breath.

“Forever,” I say, snorting out another laugh.

No one makes me laugh like Chelsea, and I’m so happy to have her in my life that it’s affecting my feelings for Catarina.

I look into her gray eyes and my heart clenches in my chest.

None of that, Angelo, I tell myself. She’s a means to an end. And that end is not going to jail and having my perfect little girl in my life, so it’s important to me.

That’s all it is.

CATARINA

The day of the wedding comes up too quickly, in my opinion. I've been working with my parents to pick out everything, and I've finally decided on an off-the-shoulder, way too expensive dress.

My mother loves it, though. Says I look like a fairytale princess and Angelo will be floored.

I have to admit that I kind of want him to be floored, even if all of this is for show.

Angelo and I haven't been intimate with each other since our date because of all the wedding planning, and he's kind of grumpy the morning before the wedding, especially since Chelsea is staying with Mia while Dante and Nico plan his bachelor party. I don't even want to think about how many strippers will be there, it makes my blood boil.

He slides his hand along my waist and I shiver, but pull away, standing up to go to the bathroom. He groans from the bed.

"Come on, Catarina, it's been *ages*."

"It's been less than a week," I shoot back, brushing my teeth with the door open. He comes in to stand behind me, looking at me in the mirror as he palms my ass.

"Could bend you over right here," he murmurs close to my ear, giving me goosebumps. "Make you look at yourself in the mirror when I make you come."

My body floods with heat and I push my ass back against his crotch only for a moment before darting away, back into the bedroom where I pull off my nightie and put on a simple shift dress.

He looks at my body hungrily, sulking, his full bottom lip in a pout that makes him look younger.

I laugh. “We’ll have all our honeymoon for sex, Angelo. Besides, it’s tradition that the groom and bride sleep away from each other the night before.”

“Are you having strippers at your bachelorette party?” he accuses, and I snort.

“Are you?”

He goes quiet, frowning. “Is that why you don’t want to spend the night with me? Because you’re planning to take home some guy who takes off his clothes for money?”

I chuckle. “You sound almost jealous, Mr. Bianchi.”

“Maybe I am, Mrs. Bianchi,” he drawls, getting closer to me. “I know you said one of the rules is that I don’t own you, but...”

“But you want to own me?” I ask with a raised eyebrow.

“Maybe,” he mutters, trying to kiss me but I back away, grabbing my purse from the counter. Chelsea is already at Mia’s, having a sleepover with Alessia. My parents will be taking her for the majority of our honeymoon, but she wanted to see the baby for a couple of days.

She’s crazy about Alessia, and I think it’s adorable.

Angelo groans again and chases me to the door but I manage to get out into the hallway and he’s still only dressed in his boxer-briefs.

“Don’t think I won’t chase you outside,” he warns.

I smile and kiss him softly, and when he moans into my mouth and tries to grab my waist, I sprint toward the elevator, my heart beating too fast.

Angelo is cute when he wants to be, and I've got to keep my heart locked down.

It doesn't seem to be getting the memo.

I wave at him as he frowns at me and the elevator doors close. I let out a sigh of relief. It's hard to deny him when my body wants him just as much as he wants me.

Downstairs, there's Mia with a pair of expensive sunglasses in her little sedan, and she grins at me.

"You ready for the debauchery?"

There's only one stripper and he's really not my type, even though he's muscular and tall. There's just something about the sharp line of his jaw that isn't quite right.

"It's because he doesn't look like Angelo," Mia whispers to me when I complain, and I flush.

Aurora is supposed to join us but she gets caught up with a sick newborn, and I'm sorry that I don't get to meet her. She seems so nice from what Mia says.

My best friend, Alyssa, shows up, though, and she and the stripper get along like wildfire. I'm glad her mind isn't on Santino anymore, and I encourage her to take him back to the hotel that I've set her up in.

I have a great time, and I'm a little tipsy when we return to the hotel Mia and I have booked. She's gushing about what a great time she had.

"I never get to go out with the baby and Dante being so overprotective," she says. "So I appreciate you inviting me so much."

"You and Alyssa planned everything. You're one of my bridesmaids," I say softly.

Mia looks at me with tears in her eyes, and I wonder with a smile how drunk she is.

She hugs me tightly. "I couldn't have picked someone better for Angelo," she says. "You're so great."

I laugh a little, hugging her back. “Thanks, Mia. But you know it’s all temporary.”

“Sure,” she says, waving her hand as if that’s no big deal, and I frown but don’t complain.

She lies face down on one of the queen beds and she’s snoring in minutes. I take a shower first before climbing into bed in my robe, my heart racing, thinking about the wedding tomorrow.

I don’t know why I’m so nervous, but I am. We’re already technically married, so this is just the show we’re putting on for family and friends. I shouldn’t be so worried.

But I want everything to be perfect. Maybe I’d never have a real wedding – maybe this is it. So I want it to be right.

When I wake up the next morning, Mia groans and rolls off the bed, landing on the floor.

“You okay?” I ask, chuckling, and she gets up slowly, her hair mussed.

“Fine,” she says, a sleep-slur in her voice. “Just too much champagne last night,” she croaks. “How about you? Are you hungover?”

“No, not at all,” I say honestly, and she narrows her eyes at me.

“I kinda hate you,” she cracks, and I laugh, grabbing my shift-dress that I plan to wear to the church to get ready.

I’ve got hair and makeup, not to mention a manicure and pedicure to get to.

Everyone is at the church when I get there, all of the staff that are here to get me beautiful for my big day.

“How would you like your makeup, Mrs. Bianchi?” the makeup artist asks.

“Glam, but not too much,” I say, and she hums and starts while someone begins to brush out my long, blonde curls. In just a moment, someone starts massaging my hands and feet.

I'm being pampered on a huge scale, and I have to admit that I love it.

My father spared no expense when it came to this wedding, and that much is clear.

I enjoy being pampered for about an hour before they're done, and then I'm wriggling into my dress with the help of Mia and Alyssa, who showed up late and with hickeys all over her neck.

"Thank you for gracing us with your presence," I joke, and Alyssa groans.

"I'm sorry, but last night was..." she pauses, looking around at all the people in the room. "I'll tell you all about it later."

"You better," I tease, and finally, my dress is zipped up and my veil is put over my head. I only can glance at myself in the mirror before it's time to go, but I *do* look like a fairytale princess.

I take in a deep breath. *Here goes nothing.*

ANGELO

Ironically, there are zero strippers at my bachelor party, just bourbon for Nico and Dante and tequila for me and a bunch of Cuban cigars. Everyone who's anyone in the famiglia is at the party, though, so Dante and Nico get to mingle a lot.

I don't drink too much and don't talk much either, and finally, Dante nudges me.

"What's going on with you? You act like you're being executed in the morning instead of getting married."

"Just have a lot on my mind," I mumble, and what's on my mind is simple: *Catarina*.

This morning, when we were flirting and I was chasing her around the apartment, I'd felt so happy and free. It's unlike anything I've ever felt before, and I don't want to lose it. I want to chase it, in fact. Chase it like I've been chasing adrenaline all my life.

"Are you afraid you might be in love with your wife?" Nico asks, too loud, clearly a little drunk.

I choke on my tequila and pineapple juice.

"Keep your voice down," I hiss.

"Yes, because we don't want anyone to know you might have feelings for your lawfully wedded wife," Dante says with a laugh. His face is flushed. I guess they don't get out much anymore and they've both gone overboard.

"Besides, how would you know?" I ask Nico, frowning.

He shrugs. “I was the same way with Aurora. I couldn’t admit it to myself for so long, I almost lost her.”

Dante nods. “I married Mia for all the wrong reasons, but when I realized I was in love with her, that threw me for a loop.”

“It’s different, though,” I say, although my voice sounds weak to my own ears.

“How?” Nico asks, looking at me intently, and I open and close my mouth, unable to answer.

“So, your heart beats really fast when she’s in a room and all you want to do is bend her over the nearest available surface?” Nico goes on, still loud, and I groan and put my hand over my face.

Dante chuckles. “And you can’t think of anything but her, right?”

“Right,” I say, defeated.

“So, maybe you’re in love with her,” Nico says. “That’s not the end of the world.”

“For me, it kind of is,” I mumble.

Nico snorts. “Whatever. I was even more of a ladies’ man than you ever were, before Aurora. Look at me now. I’m happy with a new baby boy.”

“Chelsea makes me happy,” I say stubbornly. “That’s all it is.”

“Are you sure about that?” Dante asks with a raised eyebrow.

I chug the rest of my tequila and order another. There’s an open bar which Dante has paid for, so I plan on getting my money’s worth.

By the time a few hours go by, I’m three sheets to the wind and so is everyone else. We’re singing some Italian ditty on the way to the cars waiting outside for us.

“What if I am in love with her?” I breathe, looking down at my phone and her contact name, my vision doubling.

“So, what if you are?” Dante asks, parroting what Nico said earlier. “She’s your *wife*, man.”

He claps me on the back and it almost makes me nauseous, so I crack a window.

I want to call her but my fingers don’t quite work and I’m suddenly so exhausted I can barely make it back into the penthouse. Nico falls on the couch, snoring, and Dante is the only one to make it back to his place, where we’d all planned on going for the night.

I crawl into bed and I realize that my sheets and pillows smell like her, like the hibiscus shampoo she uses on her blonde curls. I breathe her in before finally falling asleep.

I wake up with a massive headache and Nico whistling and bringing me a glass of ice water.

“Aren’t you hungover?” I ask in a croak.

Nico shakes his head, grinning with all his teeth. “Didn’t drink as much as you did.”

“Fucker,” I mumble, and he laughs out loud. It hurts my head.

“Your wedding is in two hours, and we still need to pick up your suit and get you a shave and haircut,” Nico warns.

I groan as I chug the ice water and then stand up, getting dressed in a pair of basketball shorts and T-shirt, wanting to be casual before I have to put on a monkey suit.

By the time my shave and a haircut is finished, it’s time to go to the church. I’m a bit disappointed that I don’t see Catarina, but they’ve whisked her away to some back room to get ready and I do the same.

It doesn’t take me nearly as long as her, though, since I just have to put on my suit, and I stand outside, waiting, watching all the guests come in and sign the guest book.

My throat tightens when I see my father walk in and sign it. He’s alone, just like he said he would be. Thank God for small favors.

My mother comes in right after, smiling brightly at me from the pews as I stand at the altar.

I smile back and give her a little wave.

Andrea sits in the back, again, just like he said he would and something tightens in my chest. I swallow hard and look over at Dante and Nico, my groomsmen.

Aurora couldn't make it because the baby had a fever, so Alyssa and Mia are Catarina's bridal party.

The music starts and I shift my weight from one foot to the other, feeling anxious for no reason I can pin down.

Chelsea skips down the aisle, throwing flowers and then throwing the whole basket down, and I laugh along with everyone else in the pews.

And then Catarina comes down the aisle.

Catarina looks unbelievable, the ivory dress clinging to her every curve, cleavage spilling out the sweetheart neckline of her off-the-shoulder dress.

My heart does some kind of backflip in my chest. God, what if I do love her? What if all these feelings I'm having for her are real?

She's your wife, I remind myself, telling myself what Dante and Nico had said to me the night before. *Would it be so bad?*

As she gets closer and slowly removes her veil, I'm stunned into complete silence, my breath hitching in my throat. I'd known she was beautiful, but not like *this*. Her makeup is done up perfectly, her blonde curls trailing down her back from a little up-do, and the line of her jaw, her throat, her full lips, her silver eyes – everything is perfect. She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen and I stumble over my words when the priest asks me to repeat them.

I repeat every word, looking down into those stunning eyes of hers that have haunted my sleep since the first night I met her, and I realize that it's true.

I *am* in love with her. I'm in love with my wife.

Fuck.

The rest of the ceremony goes by in a blur until it's time to kiss her, and I cup her face in my hands, press my mouth against hers with all the love and confusion I'm feeling. Catarina makes a confused sound in the back of her throat and blinks at me as I pull away. I can't stop smiling. I can't wait to tell her. I can't wait to start our lives together.

I'm scared shitless, but at the same time, my heart is racing, my head light. This is better than any adrenaline rush I've ever had.

We don't get any time alone together, though, as she gets whisked away by her bridesmaids for pictures and my mother grabs my arm.

"How come I haven't met your wife?" she demands to know, and I'm frowning, looking for Catarina in the crowd.

"You will, Ma. I promise," I tell her, and that's when Andrea Bianchi comes walking over.

My mother's lips thin in a hard line, and I stare him down.

"You look lovely, Theresa," he says to my mother.

She narrows her eyes at him. "Is that so?"

"As lovely as the day I met you," he says, taking her hand and kissing it, and I push him away.

"As lovely as the day you left her, you mean?" I demand, and my father holds up his hands as if in defense.

"I'm sorry," he says quietly. "I was just being honest."

"She doesn't need your honesty," I say, and then my mother pats me on the back.

"Calm down, Angelo," she says firmly. "I can handle Andrea."

My father chuckles, his brown eyes sparkling. "You always could."

I'm about to get in his face when Nico saves the day, ushering me away for pictures with the groomsmen, and then

pictures with Catarina, Chelsea, and her family.

Catarina and my mother do meet, and they hit it off, talking about knitting of all things.

My wife is a *knitter*. And I'm madly in love with her.

I just need to get her alone so that I can tell her.

"Angelo, are you all right?" she asks after the third picture when I pinch the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger.

"Fine, just a little hungover," I say with a smile, and she snorts.

"Too many strippers?"

"What about you?" I ask, looking down at her intently, and she bites her lip, her gray eyes sparkling.

"You'll never know."

I want to groan out loud and take her into a broom closet to show her who she belongs to, but my mother and father are getting way too friendly at the cake table, and I head that way, Catarina on my arm.

My mother pulls Catarina into a hug.

Catarina hugs her back and then she clears her throat, looking at my father.

"This is Andrea," I say flatly, and Catarina hugs him, too, and I swear he lingers so long I have to pull her away.

"She's beautiful," he says.

"I know," I say, and Catarina nudges me.

"Be nice," she whispers in my ear, and I roll my shoulders, trying to relax.

"I am being nice," I mumble. I don't want my father getting any ideas that he can wiggle his way back into my life just because he forced me to invite him to the wedding.

I take in a deep breath and take Catarina's hand. "Let's go see Chelsea for a bit before we leave for the honeymoon," I say in a low voice, and I watch as my father frowns.

I shouldn't feel bad, but I do. He doesn't deserve to know my daughter, but the look on his face makes my heart sink nonetheless.

I guess, no matter what, you can't help but still feel love for a parent, despite what they did to you.

I shake it off, and Catarina smiles and drops my hand, going off to grab Chelsea. I walk away from my father, ushering Catarina and Chelsea elsewhere.

I'm just not ready for him to meet her. Nothing's changed. He's not a part of my life, and he won't be a part of my daughter's.

CATARINA

The wedding had gone better than I expected. It's really everything I always dreamed of when I was a little girl.

The huge church, the priest, my family...

Tears spring to the backs of my eyes when I see my mother and father, standing over by the cake.

We cut it and Angelo feeds me a piece more sweetly than I would have expected from him. Angelo's been...weird this whole time.

I guess it's not exactly weird, but it doesn't seem like him. I'm sure he's putting on a show for everyone, but I hadn't expected him to be such a good actor.

The way he looked so deeply into my eyes, the passionate way he'd kissed me?

My heart is racing just looking at him now, and I keep having to tell myself this is all an act.

I never believed in love at first sight until I met Angelo, and I'd tried to put those passionate feelings I'd had away. Especially now that he's back in my life.

I can't risk my heart. Not to a man like Angelo.

We speak to my parents and Angelo is laughing and talking with my father, kissing my mother's hand when she turns to go and mingle. He's so attentive to me, putting his hand on my lower back, pressing his thigh against mine when we sit. He's been looking at me in this way he never has before.

The man deserves an Oscar for this performance.

I feel like I can finally breathe when my parents take Chelsea home and everyone starts to leave the reception. Angelo and I do the traditional leaving of the reception, jumping into the limo and waving goodbye to everyone even though we're staying at a hotel in town a night before leaving.

The hotel, of course, is the swankiest one in Chicago, and I'm not unused to fancy places, growing up a DeLuca, but it's even above my standards.

Angelo is oddly quiet on the limo ride, although he keeps his hand on my thigh, under my dress, thumbing against my skin and making me flush.

When the hotel room door shuts, Angelo snaps into action, pressing me up against the wall, his right hand in my hair as he kisses me passionately, my mouth and then my neck, fluttering kisses along the base of it.

"Angelo," I breathe.

I'd expected, of course, that we'd sleep together, but this is the most passionate, the hungriest he's ever been for me, and I'm not sure how to handle it.

"Catarina," he says, not "kitten" or some other pet name. My name in it's true Italian pronunciation.

It makes my breath catch in my throat, my belly contracting with heat. His mouth on my neck isn't owning, just kissing sweetly and softly.

"We're married," he says, talkative somehow now when he's been mostly barking orders and action before.

I hum in the back of my throat and he's unzipping my dress, letting it pool on the floor. I'm wearing a set of white and pink lingerie that I'd gotten during my wedding shower.

He growls in the back of his throat when he sees how translucent it is, showing my nipples peeking against the fabric.

"So beautiful," he murmurs, skimming his fingertips down my waist, to my hip where he grabs and picks me up.

I jump into his arms, wrapping my arms around his neck and kissing him back as fiercely as he's kissing me. After such a stressful day, it feels good to let loose and let myself go.

"Look at you," he says with a low groan as he pops open the front clasp of my bra, letting my breasts free.

He's looking at me like he's never seen me before, and my skin feels hot all over. I almost feel light-headed, even though I've only had a couple of glasses of champagne at the reception.

"Angelo," I say again, shocked as he slides his hands down my body, cupping my breasts, pressing them together and putting his lips around one of my nipples, and then the other.

"Keep saying my name, kitten," he moans against my skin. "Love the way it sounds."

I let out a long moan, my back arching. I want more, want him inside me, but I can't deny that I'm enjoying the attention he's giving me.

He always makes sure that I am satisfied, but somehow, this feels different, more intimate.

He leads me to the bed and I lie down, spreading my thighs instinctively.

Angelo lifts up to slide my panties down and off my ankles, throwing them carelessly on the floor, and then he unbuttons his shirt. He's discarded his suit jacket already at the door, and I bite my lip at the sight of his honeyed skin.

He's up on his knees between my spread legs and as he unbuttons his slacks, he slides his hand down my body to my lower lips, teasing my clit with his thumb.

I gasp out a moan and lick my lips.

"Angelo, please, don't tease," I plead.

"Don't worry, kitten," he assures me. "I can't wait to be inside you, not tonight."

"Thank god," I whisper, and Angelo chuckles low in his throat before spreading my thighs further, removing his hand

from my sex and guiding himself into me with a low groan.

I expect the sex to turn rough here, because that's his M.O., but that's not what happens.

Angelo drops down on his forearms, just moving his hips to pump in and out of me, cupping my face and looking into my eyes.

"Those eyes of yours," he breathes. "They're something else, Catarina, you know that?"

I make a whining noise as he slowly fucks me, wanting more, wanting it rougher because my heart is doing backflips in my chest.

I cry out his name when I come, suddenly, hitting me like a truck, and Angelo kisses me hard, fucking me through my orgasm until I'm trembling from the aftershocks and on the edge again.

"Want you to come around me one more time, kitten, but I don't know if I can hold out," he says through gritted teeth, and I take in a deep breath, trying to calm myself.

It doesn't work, and as he rolls his hips expertly into mine, I explode around him, black spots appearing behind my eyelids.

Angelo lets out a sound like a growl and a moan against my neck, biting and kissing me there almost gently as he begins to speed up, his thrusts becoming uneven, almost sloppy before he spills inside of me.

I can't quite catch my breath, and I feel utterly confused. Angelo has never made love to me like that. Never been quite so passionate and intimate. At least not since that first night.

The first night that had made me fall in love with him.

He slowly pumps in and out of me once more, making me gasp, before he pulls out and lies beside me, gathering me into his arms.

"What a wedding day," I say breathlessly, and Angelo laughs.

“You didn’t like it?”

“I did,” I admit, hiding my face in his chest. “But you put on a great performance.”

Angelo frowns. “What do you mean, performance?”

“The way you acted today,” I say, pulling away to look at him frowning down at me. “You were so attentive. It seemed so real.”

“What if it was real?” he says quietly.

I swallow hard. “What are you talking about? This is all temporary.”

“What if it wasn’t?” he asks, looking at me intently.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, pulling away from him and sitting up on the end of the bed.

“I assure you, I do,” Angelo says, sitting up, unashamedly naked as I wrap a robe around myself and cinch it at the waist.

“Don’t do this to me,” I say in a half-whisper, looking away from him.

“Don’t do what? Listen, Catarina, something happened to me today. I’ve been looking at this whole thing in a new light,” he explains, his brown eyes lighting up.

“A new light?” I ask incredulously. “This time a little over a week ago, you wanted to kill me.”

“I would have never killed you,” he says, sounding exasperated. “That was just a threat.”

I glare at him. “So, you just threatened me because, what? You were bored?”

He sighs. “It wasn’t like that. You were a witness, you grew up in the life, you know—”

“Exactly,” I say flatly, pacing around the room. “I grew up in the life and I don’t want to be a part of it anymore.”

He sets his jaw. “Even if you had someone to protect you?”

“Especially then! I grew up under my father’s thumb, Angelo. I want to be my own woman. I want to have my own life.”

“And you will,” he insists. “You *do*. You have me and Chelsea and—”

I cut him off. “I do not have you.”

“Yes, you do, Catarina. That’s what I’m trying to tell you,” he says, standing up, still unworried about his nudity. I struggle to keep my eyes on his face.

“I don’t understand,” I say quietly, and Angelo comes toward me, and I back up away from him.

He rubs a hand over his face. “Catarina, listen. I want you. I want you, and Chelsea, and I want you for good. I never thought that I could fall in love.”

My heart drops to my toes. “Love? Are you saying that you love me?”

“I do,” he says softly. “I do love you, Catarina, and I’m stupid for not noticing it right away. I should have kept in touch with you after that first night, because you made me feel a way that no other woman has.”

“You’re talking crazy,” I say quickly. “How much champagne did you have at the reception, Angelo? Because this is ridiculous.”

“Is it?” he asks, putting a hand on my face. “I see the way you look at me. Especially when I’m interacting with Chelsea. I know that you have feelings for me, too.”

“You don’t know anything,” I insist. “You don’t even know how you feel. I’m supposed to believe that you just suddenly fell in love with me?”

“You’re supposed to believe that what I’m telling you is true, Catarina,” he says firmly, and I step away from him. I ruffle through my luggage to find a dress to slide on, and Angelo just watches me, his expression exasperated.

“I don’t believe you, Angelo. I don’t believe that you suddenly fell in love with me, or that this is all real.” He opens

his mouth and I hold up a hand to stop him. “But it doesn’t even matter if it is true, because this isn’t the life I want to lead. I can’t wait at home with Chelsea while you’re out on some dangerous job. I saw my mother go through it, and I won’t do that.”

“Catarina—”

“That’s it, Angelo. We do this for a while so that you can trust me, and we’ll figure out something about custody of Chelsea, but this isn’t a real marriage. You don’t love me.”

“Don’t tell me how I feel,” he warns darkly, and I bite my lip but then swallow hard, determined.

“It doesn’t matter how you feel if I don’t reciprocate your feelings,” I say, my voice going soft, and Angelo’s face falls before his expression shutters.

“Fine,” he finally says, through gritted teeth. “This is just temporary, then. Doesn’t that mean I can do what I want?”

I shrug, my heart aching. “You’ve always done whatever you want, Angelo, what changes now?”

“I guess nothing,” he says quietly, looking away from me, and then he gets dressed, throwing his clothes back on, half buttoning his shirt and sliding on his shoes at the door.

“Where are you going?” I ask, my throat tight with unshed tears.

“Out,” he says, and then he slams the hotel door when he leaves, grabbing his keys and wallet.

I plop down on the bed, choking out a sob. He has to be drunk. He can’t possibly be in love with me the way that he said.

What the hell is going on with him?

ANGELO

I rush out of the hotel before I even know what I'm doing, where I'm going. I call a car to take me to Dante's, and when I arrive, bursting past him into the house, he looks at me in shock.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asks. "Isn't it your wedding night?"

I let out a long breath. "It's not a real wedding, Dante," I say through gritted teeth. "Catarina made that *very* clear."

Dante frowns. "I thought you were going to tell her how you felt."

"I did," I burst out. "She told me I was lying, and that she didn't want this kind of lifestyle. Give me a job," I plead. "I need to do something."

Dante looks me up and down, as if considering. "I don't know if you're in the right frame of mind for a job, Angelo..."

"Oh, fuck off, Dante," I growl. "You're not my therapist."

Dante gives me a hard look but then softens. "All right, fine. You can check in on the Russians."

"Don't give me a bitch errand, Dante, I need to bust my knuckles open," I plead.

Dante huffs out a breath. "You promise you won't fuck this up?"

I shrug. "Have I ever before?" I pause. "Don't answer that."

Dante laughs. “All right, Angelo, I’ll give you a real job. But it’s important.” He gestures upstairs with his head and I follow him into his office. He closes the door after him.

Dante never lets Mia worry about what’s going on with him and the business, and maybe it’s better that way. Mia grew up just like Catarina, in the life, but she doesn’t seem to mind.

Catarina is basically saying that I’m not good enough for her, that I’m just a thug, and so today, I’ll be a thug.

It’s a weird feeling, being heartbroken. I absolutely don’t like it. It feels like there’s some kind of void in my chest, some hole that feels so empty that I don’t know how to fill it.

Adrenaline has always worked at chasing away the dark thoughts before, so I hope it does the same now.

“What’s the job?”

“Claudio has friends in the Russian mob,” Dante says flatly, and I blink.

“Claudio? He seemed like such a pushover,” I say idly. He might have been a thief, but he did not look to be much more than that as I followed him around New York before I made an example out of him.

Dante’s face is serious. I know this means that the job is in New York, but I don’t mind traveling. Not tonight.

“Well, he was buddies with Dmitri Ivanov, and he’s out for blood. Word on the street is he’s plotting to come after me.”

I crack my knuckles. “Well, then, we’ll get to him first.”

“That’s the plan,” Dante agrees. “But you need to wait for Nico.”

I scoff. “I don’t need backup.”

“It’s the Russian mafia, Angelo. This isn’t like finding Claudio who was just a low-level thug with connections. They’re trained and dangerous.”

“So am I,” I argue, and Dante sighs.

“All right, listen. I’ll let you keep Nico on standby, but just because I know you need this. Just be careful, all right? Keep your eyes open.”

“Sure thing, *capo*,” I say, but I’m barely listening. I’m just ready to go.

Dante gives me a few of addresses where Dmitri might be.

Not waiting for Nico, I take Dante’s jet and get an unmarked car once I land. Nico can meet me here later if necessary, or I can just save him the trip and be done with this as fast as I can.

I scope a few of the addresses, and they turns out to be a bust. I waste hours going from one location to the next. I’m going off adrenaline alone at this point.

The sun has been up for a bit when I finally get a lead. At one of the locations, there’s some kid there named Antonio who allegedly has information.

“Hey, Antonio,” I say, after checking my phone to be sure that’s his name. “What’s good?”

He frowns, looking back over his shoulder where he’s been playing cards out by a coffee shop. He has a shit hand anyway.

“Angelo Bianchi,” I introduce myself, and he must recognize the name, because his eyes go wide and he scrambles for either his phone or a gun, I don’t know which.

I kick the back of his chair and it goes flying out from under him and he lands on his back with a wheeze.

I grimace. “Oops. Knocked the wind out of you, did I?” I say conversationally. I put my boot on his throat and he claws at my shoe. “Dmitri Ivanov. You know him?”

There’s a shock of recognition on his face even though he’s turning blue, and after he loses enough oxygen, he gasps out an address.

It happens to be different than the address that Dante gave me, so I call it a win.

“Talk to you later, Antonio,” I say, looking over at the other men who clearly don’t care about the man on the ground. They’re just talking and laughing amongst themselves.

It makes me feel glad that I have a more loyal crew than this Antonio seems to have.

The new address is twenty minutes away, and on the ride, I can’t play the music loud enough. Thoughts of Catarina seem to push through, ridding me off all the blissful adrenaline that interrogating Antonio had given me.

Catarina, her blonde curls mussed as she first wakes up, those gray eyes glinting at me in the sunlight. Catarina, with Chelsea on her hip, smiling at her in that way she has.

Goddamnit.

I *do* love her. It’s not just that we’ve been sleeping together for a while or that she’s the mother of my daughter. It’s because of *her* and how I feel about her. This has never happened to me before, and as I speed to the next location, I feel like I can barely breathe.

My heart aches as I get out of the car, and instantly, before I can even look around, someone tackles me to the ground.

Fuck, yes, I think, beating the guy in the side of the head, rocking my body so that he can’t get good purchase. I feel light-headed and a bit dizzy, the rush doing its job, and I’m finally no longer thinking about Catarina.

Then he pins me and there’s a bloom of pain at my side. I realize that I’ve been stabbed. And all I can hope is that the cut isn’t too deep.

I kick him in the nuts but he blocks me with one hand and gets ahold of my legs, dragging me toward the building.

I’d thought that I’d parked far enough away that he wouldn’t see me, but clearly Dmitri had his eyes open. I hadn’t.

I’m too busy thinking about the woman who broke my heart.

I’m being captured, and it’s my own fucking fault.

It's dark and I'm still fighting when he gets me into the warehouse and ties my arms behind my back. I manage to make him grunt a few times in pain as I kick him in various spots, but I'm losing energy and blood.

I black out when he hits me in the face.

When I come to, it's daylight, and I'm thinking about Chelsea. If I never come home, she'll be worried sick. Even if Catarina doesn't care about me, I know that my daughter does, and despite the pain in my stomach and head, I wriggle in the restraints. He's made a rookie mistake – he hasn't tied the rope tight enough, and I manage to struggle out of them and stand up, leaning my back against the column and groaning quietly.

I can't hear footsteps, only the steady drip of something in the back of the warehouse, and I realize slowly that I'm alone. Thank god, because I don't think I can fight in this condition. I look down at my shirt and it's ripped through at the bottom, blood soaking my shirt. I seem to have stopped bleeding, though, and I hope I'm not bleeding internally.

I'll have to talk to Jimmy Sawbones, but at least I'm not dead.

I make it back to where I left my car, but of course, it's gone. My phone is missing so I stumble toward the alley, hoping to get to the next block over which will have a couple of convenience stores.

I borrow a phone at the nearest convenience store and call Dante's burner, which I've had memorized for years.

"Ricci," he answers in a bark.

"Dante," I breathe. "It's Angelo. I need help, I'm at the convenience store on tenth and twelfth."

"Angelo? Shit. I'll send Tony, a guy I trust there in New York, he's close. Ten minutes. Nico will fly there ASAP."

“Thanks, *capo*,” I croak out, and hang up the phone, handing it back to the store attendant.

Tony shows up in less than ten minutes, and I make my way out to his car slowly, holding the wound on my belly.

“Jesus Christ,” he mutters. “The Russians got to you?”

“Yeah, I know, I should have waited for Nico to come with.”

Tony simply nods, and there’s something pale in his expression, something almost shocked.

I lean back in the seat, relieved to be out of there.

When we get to the condo, Tony has a doctor waiting to patch me up.

Nico shows up a couple of hours later, but he just sits there. I frown.

“You’ve never this quiet,” I say slowly. “Something’s up. What’s going on?”

“We’ll talk about it when we get back to Chicago,” he says quickly.

I sit up. “No, we’ll talk about it now. What happened? Is it... did Catarina leave, take Chelsea?”

My heart is in my throat.

Nico sets his jaw. “We don’t know, Angelo. All we know is that they’re gone.”

CATARINA

I expect Angelo to be gone all night, but what I don't expect is for him to not come back the next morning. We had an early wake-up scheduled to go to our honeymoon, but it's an hour past that and he is nowhere to be seen.

I'm worried sick, working my bottom lip between my teeth until it's bleeding.

Chelsea's still with her grandparents, but since apparently we are no longer going anywhere, I end up going to get her, wanting her with me. She isn't disappointed at all, but she ends up immediately asking about her Papa.

"Papa's working," I say quickly, even though I don't know if that's true. I don't know what Angelo will do. I'm hoping against hope that he's not dead somewhere or in some woman's bed.

Both ideas fill me with dread.

I get Chelsea back home and settled and call Dante immediately.

"I haven't heard from him," Dante says, but it sounds like a lie.

I take in a deep breath. "Listen, I know that you have your wiseguy code and everything, but me and Angelo had a really big fight last night and I just need to know if he's okay."

"Call Nico," he says. "He should know something."

Dante gives me the number and I dial it, not liking how vague he was being. Angelo is probably on a job, and I'm not

sure he's in the right frame of mind.

Nico answers on the fourth ring.

"Nico, this is Catarina, Angelo's wife?"

"Oh, hello," he says, clearly confused.

"I'm looking for Angelo. He's not answering his phone, and well, I'm worried."

Nico hums in the back of his throat, as if considering what he should tell me. "He was supposed to meet me for a job, but he decided to take off on his own. I'm on standby. I'll fly out in about thirty minutes or so."

My heart leaps up into my throat. "He did?"

"I'm sure everything is fine," Nico says. "Give me a few minutes to make some calls and I'll try to find him."

"Okay, thank you."

He hangs up, and I only have to stew for about two minutes before someone calls back.

"Nico," I answer.

"Sorry, this is Aurora," a female voice answers. "Nico's wife?"

"Oh, yes," I breathe. "Do you know anything about Angelo?"

"I have his location," she says, sounding a little far away, as if she's in a dead spot. "If you can just meet me, I'll take you to him."

"I have my daughter," I say, and Aurora chuckles.

"Bring her, it'll be lovely to see her," Aurora says, and I bite my lip.

This all feels a little weird, but in the wiseguy lifestyle, things get weird sometimes, right?

"Send me your location," I say, and hurry to get Chelsea in the car.

Chelsea's just sleeping in the backseat because it's still pretty early in the morning, and when we pull up to meet Aurora, it's a pretty good way out of town.

I get out of the car and Aurora steps forward, and I'm surprised that she's what appears to be a natural blonde with blue eyes. I thought she was Italian.

"Hello," she says, smiling. "Where's the little one?"

"She's in the car," I choke out, feeling like something's wrong.

Suddenly, the world goes dark as someone puts a bag over my head and ties my arms behind my back.

I scream and slowly realize that Aurora isn't Aurora at all, but someone trying to kidnap me and my daughter. I fight and scream and bite but it does me no good. I'm still dragged into a car and I can hear Chelsea crying.

"Don't tie her up," I plead. "Just let me hold her. She's too little to help me."

There's just silence and I can't see anything because of the bag, but then Chelsea climbs into my lap.

Someone secures us with a seatbelt and I rest my back against the seat as we drive away. After a while, we stop and they take me out of the car. By the sounds around me, we are at an airfield of some sort, and I'm forced to climb some stairs while Chelsea holds my leg. Where are they taking us?

I have no idea where I am or what to do, my thoughts going everywhere. Do they have Angelo, too? Does Nico know that we've been taken? Surely he'll be suspicious when I don't answer my phone.

On the flight that seems endless but is probably just over a couple of hours, all I can think about is Angelo, and hope that he's all right and that he'll come after us. Even if his love for me is not real, I know how much he loves Chelsea.

"Don't worry, Mama," Chelsea whispers. "Papa will save us."

I move my head to press against hers, still with the bag over my head.

When we land, we are again put into a car and driven away.

As the car pulls to a stop a while later, all is silent around us. We are taken inside a building and I'm tied to a post or pillar while Chelsea climbs into my lap again. This must be a warehouse, but where, only god and my kidnappers know.

It feels like hours before someone takes the bag off of my head, and I have an instant headache from the sudden lights.

"Where's your husband?" the woman asks me, and someone barks something at her in what sounds like Russian. "Where is Angelo Bianchi?"

"What do you mean?" I groan. "I don't know where he is. I was looking for him."

"We captured him," she says, "But he got away. I knew you would know where he was. What woman isn't her husband's keeper?"

"I don't even know who you are," I whisper. "Why would I tell you anything?"

"My name is Anastasia Ivanov," she says, like that's supposed to mean something to me.

I do know of the Ivanovs, they're big in the Russian mafia, but I don't know an Anastasia.

She sighs. "Dmitri's sister," she says, and I gasp.

Dmitri Ivanov is head of the *bratva* in New York City, and he's known to be ruthless.

"My brother let Angelo slip through his fingers, but Claudio was the love of my life. I won't be so careless with Angelo's family," she drawls.

"Wh-what are you going to do to us?" I stutter out.

She smiles, coldly beautiful. "The same thing he did to Claudio," she says. "Slit your pretty little throats."

I start to scream and she nods at some man in the shadows and a big, scarred man puts a sock in my mouth, putting duct tape around my head to secure it.

I cough but eventually try to breathe out of my nose. Chelsea is cuddled up against me, crying into my chest, and now I can't even talk to her.

What the hell am I going to do? When are they planning to kill us? They could do it right now, and there'd be absolutely nothing I could do about it.

"Not yet, *sestra*," a man's voice says from the back entrance of the warehouse. "We're going to lead Angelo here to them, and for that, I want them alive."

"But Dmitri..." Anastasia protests.

"But nothing. I am *pakhan*, not you, *sestra*. Thank you for your help, but I'll take it from here."

Chelsea's trembling against me and I wish I could hold her.

It sounds like we have some time, at least, and I'm grateful for it, but I've got to make some kind of plan. My father has always been terrified this would happen to me, but so far I've done everything he taught me. I kicked and screamed and bit and it got me nowhere.

"If you're ever in trouble, cara mia, wait. Just wait for me, and I'll come and save you." That's what he said to me.

So now, all I know to do is wait.

ANGELO

Catarina and Chelsea are both gone. I had Nico ask his wife to go by the penthouse. Apparently Catarina took a few of Chelsea's things. All of Catarina's things were already packed for the honeymoon.

They're gone. Chelsea's favorite toy is missing, a stuffed giraffe she'd named Sophie.

My heart feels like it's being blended into paste.

"Listen, man, maybe she just needed some time. She called me, looking for you—"

I hold up my hand to stop him. "Don't pity me, Nico, I just...I need some time alone."

Nico nods and heads to his room quietly, and I immediately go to the kitchen and pull a bottle of tequila out of the freezer.

I take a couple shots right from the lip of the bottle, and I don't feel ashamed. If there's any time to drink, it's when your wife and child have left you.

But before I can get really drunk and pass out on, Nico is back.

I frown. "What now?"

"Something isn't sitting right with me," Nico says mysteriously. "Why would Catarina call me looking for you if she was just going to leave?"

I shrug. "I don't know, maybe she wanted to make sure I wasn't on the way back here."

Nico frowns. "Maybe."

He doesn't look convinced. "Did you try to call her back?"

Nico nods. "Several times. She's not answering her phone."

I swallow hard. I know it's probably just paranoia, maybe even a little bit of wishful thinking, but I can't stand the idea that something might have happened to my girls. Even if Catarina has left me, broken my heart, I still love her and Chelsea more than anything.

"What can we do? How do we know?"

"We wait for a bit. If this was them, nothing will happen, but if this was something else—" My phone starts ringing, interrupting Nico.

"Dante, do you have anything for me?" I'm desperate at this point, not knowing what to wish for.

"I got a text. Our friend Dmitri is claiming to have something of yours. I guess we know what that means."

"Fuck." I can't believe that fucker came after my family. He's a dead man.

"I'll send some men your way, but it will take time," Dante offers, and I couldn't be more grateful.

"Thanks, man. That means the world to me."

"Let me know if there is anything I can do to help, but for now I'm out. Gotta make some calls."

He hangs up and I turn to Nico. "Where do we look first?"

"Alleys, downtown near the industrial area where Tony picked you up. The Russians are crawling all over there."

I nod and put away the tequila, promising that I'll finish the bottle if after all this Catarina still leaves.

I hop into Nico's car and we go on a search. It takes hours, and at first, we find nothing and I should feel better that at

least we are doing *something*, but instead, it just makes me feel worse, knowing that she needs me and I'm powerless to help her since I have no idea where she is.

But then, Nico calls me over near by the river where men are apparently guarding a warehouse door.

My heart leaps into my throat and this is worse than the heartbreak. This is something like panic and abject horror all rolled into one, and I don't know how to handle myself.

Nico puts a hand on my shoulder. "We found them. This has to be where Dmitri's is keeping them."

I swallow hard, nodding, and then there's a whoosh of bullets through the air – silenced like the bratva and the mafia liked it – as they slam into the wall behind us.

Nico ducks and I roll to the ground, hiding behind his car and drawing my own gun.

There're too many bullets, and when we are able to see who's shooting, there's nearly ten men.

"We gotta get out of here!" Nico shouts, getting into his car and starting it.

"Not without my girls!" I yell back, but Nico opens the passenger side door and I have no choice but to get inside, panting, my stomach aching even though the doctor had put in eight stitches.

"What the hell are we going to do?" I gasp out, and Nico gives me a hard look as he peels out onto the street.

"We go back to the hotel, call Dante, regroup."

When we arrive, I sit down with a groan.

"Are you even supposed to be walking around?" Nico asks, and I glare at him.

"Would you be lying in bed when your wife and son are missing?"

"Good point," Nico agrees, sighing. He calls Dante and puts him on speakerphone.

I tiredly give him an update before standing up, bouncing on my heels to try and get more energy. I need to have my shit together for when we go for them.

“The problem is, I don’t have enough firepower there.” Dante says. “It will take me close to four hours to get everyone gathered and ready to fly out and then you still have the actual flight there.”

“Where can we get men faster?” Nico asks, but I already know.

I wish Catarina’s father was here, but he is also back in Chicago, so that leaves us with just one choice.

“My father,” I say firmly.

He traveled back last night, so I know he is back already, but I don’t want to do it.

However, I don’t think I have a choice. He’s the only person I know in New York City with the firepower that I need. “Drive me, Nico.”

“Are you sure?” Dante asks.

“I’m sure I want my girls back,” I croak, my voice breaking.

“I’ll send you every man I can regardless.”

“Thank you, *capo*,” I say, and I mean it. Dante’s always done his best for me, and this just happens to be a time where his help is just not fast enough.

I’m a prideful man, and an even more prideful son, but I can admit when I need help, and this time, I need it.

We arrive at my father’s house in ten minutes, not bothering to call, and he meets me outside.

“Son, what’s wrong?” he asks quickly.

I explain the situation, that the Russians have my wife and daughter, and he holds up a hand before I can even finish talking.

“Whatever you need,” he says, handing me the key to the armory. “And take all my men. I’ve got more than ten to offer.”

Tears spring to the backs of my eyes, from worry and fear or gratitude, I’m not sure.

“Thank you,” I say quietly, and he smiles at me.

“Anything for you, son.”

He pulls me aside while Nico is going through the armory, and I’m a little antsy but everyone is packing up and getting ready, and I know that we need to have this conversation.

“I’m sorry, son,” my father says. “I’m sorry that I left you and Theresa. I’ve honestly regretted it every day since.”

“Then why did you do it?” I ask, unable to keep my anger in check. “Why did you leave us?”

“I got wrapped up in the life,” he says quietly. “I got wrapped up in the power and the money and the women....can you say you’ve never done that, Angelo?”

I think about it, setting my jaw. I’d definitely gotten a little too into the life and ignored my personal needs, and that’s why I’m in the situation I am in now with Catarina.

“I can’t say that I didn’t,” I finally admit.

“Can we try again, son?” Andrea asks. “I don’t expect you to forgive me right away, but can we try?”

He looks at me so earnestly that it makes my heart ache. I do still love the old man, despite everything.

“We can try,” I say finally. It’s the most I can promise.

I take off for the armory before he can do something like hug me. I’m not ready for that yet.

I raid the armory, and Nico stops me when I try to pick up a rocket launcher.

“I know you want to blow the place up, but we need to be stealthy.”

I throw a couple of grenades in his trunk just in case.

We take off and I lead Nico and my father's men to the place where we were shot at.

There's fifty of us, so I'm hoping that we outnumber the Russians. I was stupid to underestimate Dmitri, and I'm not going to make that mistake again. Not when my girls are involved.

We see a few cars parked outside an abandoned warehouse, and I know in my gut that's where they are.

We surround the building, me and Nico going in quietly, toward the back.

Soon there are bullets rushing all around us. I don't care. I keep my course, knowing my girls are back there. Waiting for me.

I don't care if I get shot, as long as I get to see them again.

CATARINA

This is exactly what I've been terrified of happening my whole life, and especially since I've had Chelsea. She's becoming more and more traumatized, trembling on my lap, and I hate it.

I can't even talk to her, sing to her, calm her down. I mumble against the gag and finally, Anastasia rips it off. The pain makes me gasp.

"Water," I ask in a croak, and she brings me a bottle, pouring it into my mouth and then handing it to Chelsea, who drinks it greedily.

Everything's fine until Chelsea begins to scream.

"Shh, baby, it's okay—" I start, and then Dmitri comes out of the shadows and smacks me across the face. It hurts and feels like my brain is shaking against my skull.

"Keep her quiet or next time, it'll be her."

"Chelsea," I say. "Fairy princess. Just keep your faith and everything will be okay."

Chelsea looks at me, her brown eyes full of tears, shaking all over and hyperventilating.

"Papa will save us," she says quietly, brokenly, and I nod slowly, not knowing what else to say. She quietens and sticks her thumb into her mouth, regressing, and nuzzles against my neck.

I rest my chin on the top of her head and look fiercely at Dmitri.

“My husband is going to make you hurt for hours,” I warn.

He scoffs but then the sound of bullets whizzing has me shouting and ducking my head as far as I can.

“Stay down, Chelsea, right against me,” I tell her, and thank God, she listens.

Dmitri curses and runs off, but Anastasia stays right there, looking down at me and biting her lip, smiling.

“This is when the fun begins,” she says.

I squeeze my eyes shut against the screaming and the bullets and I hear a thud or two next to me and I can only hope it’s Dmitri and his men.

Finally, there’s a hand on my shoulder and I scream.

“It’s me, kitten. It’s okay, it’s me,” Angelo says, and I burst into tears, gesturing for him to take Chelsea.

“I knew you’d come, Papa,” she whispers, and Angelo crushes her into his arms, tears rolling down his face.

He looks heartbroken, and I can relate. I’ve been so worried about Chelsea. Someone unties me and my arms fall heavy onto the ground, having lost all feeling.

Angelo’s next to me in a second, reluctantly giving Chelsea to Nico. He rubs my arms down, kisses along the side of my face.

Angelo picks me up, carrying me out, and when he gets me into the car, he braces his hand against the car door, breaking down in sobs.

“It’s okay,” I say softly. “Chelsea’s okay.”

“Your lip is bloody,” he says brokenly. “They hurt you.”

“I’m okay,” I say quietly, shocked that he’s upset about me, too. I know he told me that he loved me, but I couldn’t believe it.

“I’ll never let anything happen to either of you again, Catarina, I promise you that,” he says fiercely, getting into the backseat with us.

I smile. “I know, Angelo,” I say, and I can’t help leaning against him, cuddling up next to him.

We go to Angelo’s father’s mansion because it’s safest. No one will come looking for us there.

Andrea meets us all at the door, tsking as he looks at my injured face.

“I’ve got a medic inside waiting,” he says, ushering me inside after kissing Chelsea’s cheek.

Angelo doesn’t protest, which is unusual. He passes off Chelsea to his father without complaint and follows me when the medic leads me into a bedroom.

“Did you make up with your father?” I ask, curious.

“Not exactly,” he says, his voice seeming oddly flat. He’s still wiping tears from his eyes.

“These your girls?” the medic asks.

“My angels,” Angelo says softly, smiling at me, and he’s looking at me in that way he had at the wedding, so soft and sweet.

I tremble all over when the medic cups my face, but I know I’m just jumpy because of what just happened.

“No permanent damage, just might have a real shiner.”

“Wish I could kill him twice,” Angelo growls, and I put my hand on his arm.

“I just need to rest,” I tell him quietly.

Angelo won’t let me walk. He carries me bridal style up the stairs, and he deposits me gently on the bed before leaving the room and returning with Chelsea, who’s already fallen asleep, terrified and exhausted.

He lies down with Chelsea in his arms, between us, and he winces a little when she shuffles.

I frown.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he says firmly, and I accept it at face value. My head is spinning with all of the trauma that just took place. I lie my head on the pillow but I whine, unable to sleep, hating the darkness.

Angelo turns the lamp on, looking into my face over Chelsea’s head.

“It’s all right, Catarina. You’re all right now. You’re with me, and I’m never going to let anyone take you from me again.”

I take in a deep, shaky breath and let it out slowly through my nostrils.

“I love you, Catarina,” Angelo says, but I’m already drifting off.

We spend two weeks at his father’s mansion, and the man takes great care of us. We eat every meal downstairs and all sleep together in a big king bed. Angelo can’t seem to part with Chelsea, holding her all the time, playing fairy princess with her on the floor in the foyer.

It’s lovely, really, watching them together. It makes me so sad that we’re going to have to leave. I know that Angelo loves her, but having Chelsea be in this much danger has only proven to me that I’m right. This lifestyle can’t be hers. She can’t grow up like I did.

So, I bide my time. I start packing away only the important things, my clothes and pictures of Chelsea, Chelsea’s favorite outfits. Angelo doesn’t seem to notice.

Dante meets with the *pakhan* that took over for Dmitri, and Angelo reports back that the Russians aren’t going to retaliate. Or at least they *say* they won’t. I’m not so sure.

I can’t trust anything in the wiseguy lifestyle. I can’t even trust Angelo when he tells me that he loves me every night.

He can't mean that, can he? It's just because of the wedding, because he has some idea that marriage means something. It's because he almost lost us.

It can't be because he really loves me. Catarina.

Can it?

I go back and forth about leaving from his father's place, but decide to bide my time. The money Angelo puts in my account each week is plenty to get me and Chelsea out of town.

I'm not worried about money, but I am worried about Andrea Bianchi's security. He's *caputo*, and he's very well protected.

I wait until we're back at the penthouse, right after the flight home, and I wake up Chelsea in the middle of the night but luckily, she's back asleep before we get to the car.

ANGELO

The morning my whole life falls apart starts like any other morning. Catarina and Chelsea aren't in their beds when I wake up, but that's not unusual. They usually get up earlier than me because I'm in no way an early bird.

I sigh, scratching my belly and going to the kitchen to make coffee. That's when I see the note, stuck in the coffee carafe.

Angelo,

I'm sorry. It's just not safe here.

-C

I throw the coffee pot against the room and it shatters against the back wall. I throw the kitchen table upside down, but nothing helps.

My girls are gone again, and this time it's not because of some outside enemy. It's because Catarina doesn't love me. She doesn't trust me to protect them.

I'm considering whether to run to the liquor store and buy about a case of tequila when Dante calls me.

"Do you have a job?" I ask in a bark.

"No," he says, sounding taken aback. "I wanted to check on the girls."

"They're fine," I say through gritted teeth. "They're fine, Catarina just left me. She fucking left me, Dante." My voice

breaks at the end and I take in a sharp breath, trying to keep it together.

“You let her leave?” he says in a low voice.

“Wh-what?”

“If Mia left me, I’d burn the world down to find her. Why are you being a pussy and just sitting at the house?”

I slowly straighten up. Dante is right. How am I going to let my girls just up and leave? That’s not how this works.

We’re famiglia, and we stay together. No matter what.

“Thanks,” I say, and hang up, putting on a T-shirt over my sweatpants. I check the credit card statements and see that she’s pulled money out of an ATM nearby.

I go to every hotel in the area until I find her, under the name Catherine Smith, at a nearby Motel 6. She could have afforded a much better place, but I know Catarina and I know that she’s frugal.

It only takes a hundred-dollar bill to bribe the attendant and I have the room number. I go up the elevator, bouncing on my heels with nervous energy.

I bang on the door.

“Let me in, Catarina,” I say firmly, but it comes out as more of a plea.

“No,” she shoots back, right at the door.

I stare at the door, bracing my hands against either side of it.

“Catarina, wherever you go, I will always find you,” I say.

“Is that a threat?” she asks.

“It’s a promise. We’re family now. You and me and Chelsea, and I’m not going to let you go.”

“Why?” she asks. “You know I’m not going to rat on you, so why won’t you let me leave?”

“Because I’m in love with you, kitten.”

She slowly opens the door and I just stand there, waiting for an invitation.

“What do you mean, you’re in love with me?” she asks stubbornly, her chin pointed up.

“I mean that I can’t stop fucking thinking about you,” I growl, frustrated. “It means that every single time I make a decision I think of you and Chelsea. I think of my family. It means, you’ve wormed your way into my heart, and I don’t know how to get you out.”

“Do you mean that, Angelo?” she asks shakily. “Do you really mean that?”

“I mean it with all my heart and soul,” I insist, and I do. I mean it more than I’ve ever meant anything else. Tears are burning in my eyes but I refuse to let them fall. Because if Catarina doesn’t take me back now that all my cards are on the table...

She breaks into a sob and falls into my arms, and I cradle her, kissing the side of her face gently.

“God, Catarina. You can never leave me again,” I say hoarsely.

“Never,” she promises, hugging me tight. “Never, Angelo. I promise.”

“Where’s my little fairy princess?” I ask, and Catarina sobs out a laugh.

“She’s sleeping.”

I walk into the hotel room and she’s asleep in one of the twin beds, looking so small that it makes my heart ache.

I swallow hard. “You can’t ever take her from me, Catarina.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Angelo,” she says, and then she puts her arms around my waist, holds me close, presses her face against my back.

I put both hands on hers, trembling. Turning around, I kiss her so hard I think our teeth gnash together.

I don't care. I want her so close it might burn me, because she's burned me so well before. It all comes spilling out of my mouth, all the things I feel.

"I'll hunt you down," I tell her. "I'll follow you to the ends of the earth, kitten. You're mine, you know that?"

"I know," she murmurs against my mouth and then she tightens her thighs around my waist, and I groan, dropping down with her onto the other twin bed.

I can't wait to get her clothes off, shoving at the T-shirt she's wearing, sliding down her panties after ripping them at one side.

I fumble with my own slacks, my hands shaking, and Catarina helps, deftly unbuttoning them.

I free myself with a groan and she takes my dick in her hand, guiding me into her. It's like coming home, pressing into her.

"You're mine," I growl, fucking her hard and fast. Rough the way she knows I like. "You're mine and I'm yours, Catarina."

"Yes," she moans out. "Yes, Angelo, I'm all yours."

"Maybe I'll get you pregnant again," I drawl. "Maybe I'll knock you up so that everyone knows you're all mine."

Catarina gasps, rocking her hips forward, and I know she's aroused by that idea. "Baby," she pleads. "Angelo, don't stop."

"Catarina," I moan, her name on my lips over and over as I get close to the edge. She spasms around me and that's all it takes. I groan low in my chest and come inside her.

"I'm sorry," she whispers when I pull out and lie beside her, and then she puts her head on my chest.

"I know you can feel my heart beating," I tell her. "It beats for you, Catarina. You and Chelsea. So don't ever leave me again, all right?"

My voice cracks near the end, and Catarina nuzzles up closer.

“Never again,” she promises.

I hope she means it, because I really will hunt her down.

CATARINA

Does Angelo really love me? Can all those pretty words he said be true? It doesn't matter, though, in the end, because we still have to work something else out. I can't be married to him, not like this. Not when he might get killed or we might get kidnapped again.

He takes off his shirt after we make love, throwing it on the ground, and I see the red, healing wound on his belly.

I gasp, sitting up in just his T-shirt. "Angelo, what happened?"

He looks down at his stomach and then back up at me, quickly. "It's okay," he assures me. "I was stabbed, but—"

"You were stabbed *but*?" I say flatly. "You could have been killed, Angelo. Do you know what that would do to Chelsea? Do you know what that would do to *me*?" Her voice breaks.

"Catarina, please, listen to me," he starts, but I cut him off.

"I can't," I say quickly, standing up and brushing down the T-shirt. "I can't live like this whether you love me or not, because—"

"What do you mean, or nor?" he demands to know, standing in the bedroom doorway so that I can't leave.

"I mean, you can't."

"I told you not to tell me how to feel," he warns. "I'm in love with you."

“Don’t you see, Angelo?” I ask in a whisper. “I’m so scared that it’s not true. Besides, I could never ask you to choose. I won’t ask you that.”

He puts my hand on his chest and his heart beats fast against my hand.

“You feel it too, Catarina. And how can you doubt my love when it’s written all over my face when I look at you. We’re meant to be together.”

I take in a deep, shaking breath. “Even if we are, Angelo, I can’t keep putting Chelsea in danger. I just can’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“You love this life, Angelo. You love being a wise guy.”

He sets his jaw. “That doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters, Angelo,” I cry. “You were stabbed. Me and Chelsea were taken!”

“I know that, Catarina. Don’t you think I know that?” he growls. “Don’t you think I wish every day that I could kill those bastards twice?”

“Did you kill them?” I ask in a low voice.

“Of course I did,” he insists. “I killed every last one of them.”

I breathe in deeply. “Good.”

“So, we’ll leave the life, Catarina. We’ll go wherever you want. Do whatever you want. I just want you and Chelsea.”

“What?”

“You heard me. All I care about is you. My girls.” His eyes are on mine.

“Do you mean that?” I ask, and he steps closer, cupping my face with his hands and looking intently into my eyes.

“With everything in me, Catarina. I mean it,” he insists, and god, I want to believe him.

I want to believe him as much as Chelsea believes in fairies.

“Please, Catarina,” he asks in a broken voice. “Please don’t leave me again.”

I can’t do this. I can’t decide whether or not he loves me, because in the end, it doesn’t matter. I have to take the chance. I can love him enough for the both of us, because I feel so much. I feel everything so deeply that I can barely stand it.

So, staring into his eyes, listening to all his sweet words, I make a decision.

I kiss him, and Angelo moans into my mouth, pushes me down on the bed. Before I know it, he’s got his head between my legs, pressing his face against my core and I’m biting my fist to keep from crying out. I don’t want to wake Chelsea up. She is asleep in the other twin bed.

He makes me come twice and when I am begging for more, he smirks at me and shakes his head.

“Not tonight, kitten,” he croons. “Tonight, I just want to take care of you.”

He runs me a bath, cringing a little at the lack of amenities in the Motel 6.

“We might have to stay at a few more of these,” I warn, and Angelo chuckles.

“That’s okay. I’d stay at a roach motel if it meant I got to be with you,” he says sweetly, and I kiss him again but he just lowers me into the bath, kissing my forehead.

He cleans me, limb by limb, and it’s almost erotic, or it would be if I wasn’t so bone tired.

I’m emotionally drained and still tired from what happened to me and Chelsea, and Angelo just takes care of me, pampers me. He washes my hair, towels me off when I’m done, puts me back into bed and climbs in with me. He throws an arm around my waist, pulls me close.

It’s the closest I’ve ever felt to him, and I love it.

“Should have known we were meant to be when we made such a perfect little girl,” Angelo murmurs against me, but I’ve already drifted away.

The next morning, Chelsea has climbed into bed with us and she's between us. I can't help but laugh.

Angelo grunts awake, wrapping us both in his arms.

"Papa, let me go, I got my wings and I want to show you how I fly," Chelsea grumbles.

"Oh, sorry, baby. I should have remembered my fairy princess can fly now," Angelo mumbles sleepily.

Chelsea "flying" consisted of her jumping up and down on the other bed.

Angelo cheers and claps for her. "Such a good job, baby, you're an amazing flier," he tells Chelsea, and she beams at him. I can't believe I ever wanted to take her away from him.

He makes her so happy, and I want to give him the chance to make me happy too.

"What will we do now?" I ask, and Angelo grins.

"Well, we're still married, so we'll just act like it," he says, and I snort out a laugh.

"Not that, Angelo, I mean about money. Now that you won't be working for Dante—"

"I have a trust fund," Angelo blurts out. "And you do, too, right?"

"Right," I say slowly.

"So, we swallow our pride and use them. We can still live the lifestyle that we're used to, still keep in touch with friends. Right?"

I smile. "You're right. I just didn't think you'd ever accept money from your dad."

He shrugs. "People make mistakes, right? He's trying to be a good father now."

"That he is," I agree. "And he's great with Chelsea."

His father cooked her breakfast every morning that we stayed at his house, eating with her quietly before we ever got up, and they had a cute little bond now.

Angelo smiles fondly at Chelsea who's still flying around on the bed. "Exactly. Chelsea deserves all the love in her life she can get."

I look over at Angelo, and I feel so much love for him and for Chelsea I don't know what to do with myself.

I grab Chelsea off the other bed mid-jump, making her giggle and I come back over to the bed and hug them both as tightly as I can.

"We're going to make it," I say, and Angelo smiles at me.

"Of course we are, kitten. We'll make it together. Family is more important than anything else in the world," he says, and I would never have imagined he'd say something like that.

"I love you, Angelo," I say, and his brown eyes widen almost imperceptibly, his breath coming faster before a smile stretches across his face.

"I love you, Catarina," he says, and for the first time, I believe it wholeheartedly.

Then he kisses me like it's the first time, and I'm lost.

EPILOGUE

ANGELO

I'm getting ready for another party.

Well, kind of a party. It's a kid's birthday party, my daughter is turning five.

Everyone is there, all of our family, but the weird thing is: my wife is missing.

I'm having a panic attack in the back room when Dante comes in, clapping me on the shoulder.

"I need you to breathe, Angelo. She's coming. Hell, Chelsea is here!"

"What if she doesn't get here in time, Dante?" I croak. "What if—"

"She would never leave you alone at Chelsea's party," Dante insists, and I know that he's right.

I'll never forget that sinking feeling in my chest when I woke up at the penthouse and Chelsea and Catarina were gone, but I also know this isn't even close to that.

We're buying a new house (goodbye, bachelor pad) and I'm happy and I *know* Catarina is happy, too.

"I just got a call from Aurora," Nico says, popping his head inside. "She's got Catarina. They're on their way."

All the breath goes out of my lungs in a whoosh and I feel a little light-headed, grinning.

"She's coming," I breathe.

“She’s coming,” Dante and Nico say at the same time, and we all laugh and my chest feels less heavy.

I’m still really nervous, for some reason, but maybe that’s because now I know I’d die for this woman.

Catarina Bianchi holds my heart in her hands, and if she wanted to crush it, she could.

I trust her not to, though, despite the little freak-out I had. It was just bad memories creeping up in the back of my mind. I had a really hard time after she left, and I have to admit I still have some lingering trust issues.

I love Catarina, though, and I’m working on it.

Doesn’t mean I’m not curious, though.

“What happened?” I hiss in her ear.

She laughs. “Met a cute guy, had second thoughts,” she teases.

She’s messing with me, right?.

“You’re kidding,” I say, shocked.

She laughs out loud. “Am I?”

I set my jaw. “Catarina, you better be kidding,” I growl, putting my hand on her waist, and she leans against me, looking up at me with playful silver eyes.

“Of course I am. Just like riling you up.”

“I’m going to punish you for that later,” I warn, and she giggles.

“Oh no,” she says, clearly unafraid, and she flits off to go and talk to my father. They dance for a bit and I just watch, sipping my mimosa, a little annoyed she wouldn’t tell me what happened.

After singing happy birthday and all the mingling, Catarina stands up and raps a fork against a crystal glass.

Everyone looks up and she gestures me over. I go over with a grin, looking at her curiously, but she clears her throat, clearly preparing to make a speech.

“Angelo and I had a different start to our life. Things happened to us in a slightly different order than it is usually expected, but our love for each other grows more and more each day.” I smile at him and his responding smile is bright. “Chelsea was a surprise that neither of us saw coming and for a while there, he wasn’t able to be with us. We didn’t know each other that well back then, but she is still the result of a love connection,” she says, and I couldn’t agree more. “Now we are a family and it is my greatest hope that this time around, we can share everything with each other and our families.”

Her words don’t penetrate my mind for a long moment, even when our friends and family begin to cheer.

“This time around?” I whisper down at her.

“I’m pregnant, baby,” she says, smiling, and puts my hand on her belly. “Found out today. That’s why I was missing.”

“Pregnant? As in we’re going to have another baby?” I ask incredulously, my head spinning. Am I happy or excited or am I going to pass out?

She raises an eyebrow. “What, you scared?” she asks in a playful tone.

I grin. “The only thing that scares me is losing you, kitten. And now for sure I know that’s never going to happen.” I lean down to kiss her and then whisper in her ear, “You’re mine, Catarina Bianchi.”

Leaning against me, she whispers, “Just as much as you are mine, Angelo Bianchi.”

Read [Nico & Aurora’s](#) story...

BEST FRIEND'S BROTHER'S
SURPRISE BABY

PREVIEW

My job was to keep her safe.

Instead, I ended up getting her pregnant...

Aurora Costa is my sister's best friend.

She might be beautiful and curvy as sin,

but she's not about to become one of my one-night stands.

Not if I can help it.

The only problem?

My sister's unique tendency to get into trouble.

When Francesca gets stuck in a predicament,

Aurora rushes to her aid, only to end up witnessing an execution.

All of a sudden, I'm stuck being her bodyguard.

And being in close quarters with her is turning out to be way more difficult than keeping her alive.

I want her in my arms, in my bed, and I'll do anything to keep her there.

Even if we have to move from safehouse to safehouse until things die down.

Too bad getting her pregnant with my baby has just complicated my plan.

Now, I have one more reason to kill every single person who's after her...

Continue to read [Best Friend's Brother's Surprise Baby...](#)

AURORA

I wiggle my toes in the clear, salt water pool, looking over at my best friend's perfectly manicured feet and then nudging her with my shoulder.

"Thanks for inviting me out," I tell her, and Francesca Andretti grins, nudging me back and brandishing her champagne glass full of half bubbly and half orange juice. I'm halfway through my second mimosa myself, and feeling a little tipsy.

But I don't get out much. I'm usually home taking care of my ailing father. He's not been the same ever since a heart attack when he was only forty, and I've taken over most of the household stuff. Luckily, as a low-level wiseguy, he made enough money before he got too sick to take care of us. I'm grateful to him for so many things.

Francesca is like the sister I've never had, my best friend ever since we were twelve and crazy about every boy in junior high. I look over at Francesca. Her long, bleached blonde hair is almost white with the sunlight streaming through the glass pool enclosure, and her eyes are the prettiest sea-green color. She's always been prettier and skinnier than me, but I'm not exactly jealous.

For a while, it made me a little sad, that most of the guys I wanted looked at her first, but it's not Francesca's fault that she was born beautiful. And soon I grew out of it. I don't need the attention of anyone who is shallow enough to only care about a pretty face and a nice body. I have many qualities, and if the right guy comes along, he'll see beyond the rounder

body and the average face. He'll see *me*. Too bad the right guy must be living under a rock, because all the guys that cross my paths have been wrong, wrong, wrong.

Marco Barone comes over toward us and I slide a little to the right side, trying not to grimace. Marco's attractive enough, but there's just something about him that makes me feel...uncomfortable. Francesca and I grew up around wise guys, around bruisers, were raised by them, but Marco can be *ruthless*. The stories I've heard... A shiver runs down my back.

I worry about my best friend sometimes, that her beauty may get her into real trouble someday, because unlike me, she revels on the attention her beauty gets her. She has no problem with guys only wanting her for how she looks, she just wants to live life and have the best time she can.

Marco scoops her up into his arms and Francesca giggles and drops her mimosa glass. I catch it in a truly inspired bout of reflexes, but neither of the lovebirds notice. Finally, Marco finishes kissing her and puts her down.

"I gotta go now, *belissima*," he says in a low tone, and Francesca pouts.

"All right, if you must."

Marco scoffs. "If you want me to keep you in diamonds, I have to."

Francesca grins and flips her damp blonde hair. "You bet I want you to keep me in diamonds."

"The staff will lock up when you leave," he says flippantly and kisses her fiercely once more before walking back into the house.

Francesca shrugs and comes back to the pool, slipping into the water and dunking her head before beginning to tread water, splashing at me.

I laugh and slide into the water with her and we swim and play for a bit before she gives me the most mischievous smile.

“Oh no,” I say, knowing what that means. “What are you doing, Francesca?”

“So listen,” she begins, and I already want to roll my eyes. I know this is going nowhere good, with that look on her face. “The Espositos are having a party tomorrow night.”

“You mean Bruno is having a party tomorrow night,” I say dryly, and she bites her lip, grinning.

“Exactly.”

“Marco’s only out of town for a couple of days,” I warn. “Don’t you think this is a bad idea?”

“What Marco doesn’t know won’t hurt him,” she says easily.

I hum. She and Marco aren’t exactly *exclusive*, especially given that Marco has been seen with several other girls over the six months they’ve been dating, but I would bet my life savings that he expects Francesca to be exclusive with him. That’s just the way wise guys are.

“I don’t know,” I hedge, and Francesca pouts.

“Come on, Aurora. I know you’re going to come with me to keep me out of trouble, so let’s not have this back and forth,” she says, and I hate that she’s right.

Francesca is my best friend and like a sister to me, and I wouldn’t ever want her to be in trouble or risk losing her. I don’t have many people in my life, so I want to keep the people I have close.

I sigh and heave myself out of the pool. I look at my empty glass of mimosa. “I guess I’ll get an Uber,” I say, and Francesca scoffs, coming up the pool ladder.

“No way. I’ll call Nico,” she says, and my breath catches in my throat.

Nico Andretti.

Same sea-green eyes as my best friend, but this time with the longest, darkest lashes, the strongest Roman nose, a square jaw, and the fullest mouth. Nico Andretti is absolutely

gorgeous and I've had a crush on him since before I was fourteen.

Not that Francesca will ever get that information out of me. And not that it matters anyway since I'm invisible to him.

"Sure," I say easily, trying to push down the lump that's in my throat.

Since I'm not driving or having to schedule an Uber, I suck down another mimosa quickly, needing the liquid courage to see and talk to Nico.

"So, Bruno bought me a tennis bracelet," Francesca chatters away and I'm barely listening. "But I can't wear it in front of Marco. So, I thought I'll get Marco to buy me one, too, then he won't know the difference!" She titters and I frown in her direction.

"Francesca," I start, but then I realize I'm still in a bikini when Nico's car pulls up, and I rush to put on a pair of shorts and my tank top. I manage to get dressed before he walks in, thank God, coming in the back of the pool house and waving, jerking his head as if he's irritated.

I hurry over to his car while Francesca takes her time.

"Thank you for the ride, Nico," I say, and he grunts in response, getting in the driver's side and revving the engine to make Francesca hurry up.

She takes her sweet time anyway, just to be a brat, and I chuckle as I slide into the backseat.

"You should have called shotgun," Nico says, and I can't help the blush that spreads across my cheeks.

"I don't mind the backseat," I say, and Francesca gets into the passenger side.

"You're driving us to the Espositos tomorrow night, right?"

Nico groans. "I've got to be there anyway. Dante is invited. So, I guess I'll drop you off."

Francesca grins. "Perfect."

Nico raises an eyebrow at her as he pulls out of the driveway. “You know, Marco isn’t going to like you going to Bruno’s.”

“Marco is out of town,” she says breezily.

“You’re going to get yourself in trouble one of these days, you know that?” Nico warns, but Francesca just scoffs.

“I’m just having fun,” she argues, and I look out the window so that I stop staring at Nico’s profile.

I had the biggest dreams of growing up and marrying him when I was a teenager, and it all seems so ridiculous now.

As if he would ever want me.

“I’m going to drop you off first,” Nico says to Francesca. “I’m on my way to Dante’s and Aurora’s place is on the way.”

I swallow hard. I’m going to be alone in the car with Nico, which makes the blush on my cheeks deepen and redden.

I know I should be over my little crush by now, but I can’t help it.

He’s just so...Nico.

He’s unlike anyone I’ve ever met before. I wish that I had someone like him in my life, like a boyfriend or a husband. I’ve always wanted a family, and I don’t feel like I’ll ever have one.

“You’re going to the Esposito party?” he asks me, looking at me in the rearview mirror.

I nod slowly, keeping eye contact. God, his eyes are so pretty, his stare intense.

“Keep her out of trouble,” he says, giving me a little smile, and my heart skips several beats.

“Trouble is my middle name,” Francesca chirps, and she waves her fingers at me as Nico pulls up at their place.

She lives in a pretty house. It’s just Francesca and their ailing mother living there now. Nico has his own apartment and comes to visit often. Their father had done pretty well for

himself before he was killed, so the house was all theirs. He hadn't ever wanted to be anything but low level, but still he provided for his family. Gave them a roof.

My dad was the same. And I wouldn't have it any other way. At least I don't have to worry about watching my back and having someone come after my family.

I'm glad that my father was just a low-level thug and not a made man.

"Get in the front," Nico says as Francesca makes her way to the front door. It's almost demanding and it sends a shiver down my spine. I do as he says and climb over to get in the front seat, my arm brushing against his.

"I'm glad you're going to be at the party," he says, and I blink, looking over at him as I buckle my seatbelt and he pulls out into the road.

"You are?"

"You always watch out for her. Gives me less work to do," he says, and I swallow, feeling slightly disappointed.

What else would he say? That he wants me to go because he's secretly in love with me? I feel stupid.

Nico's quiet the rest of the way home but when I get out of the car after we pull up, he calls my name softly. I freeze and turn.

"You're a good friend," he says simply, and I walk inside with the memory of his intense gaze, the way he'd said my name so softly.

I really have it bad.

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NICO

I can think of about five things I'd rather be doing (three of them women) that isn't standing around at Bruno Esposito's stupid party. It isn't even really a wiseguy party, just something that Bruno has thrown together for his birthday. I end up not picking up Aurora because Francesca insists on coming early and Aurora has to finish getting ready, so I just take my sister to the mansion. She runs off the second we arrive.

The mansion is huge, probably bigger even than Dante's. The Espositos are an old family, and Bruno is the next in line. I guess that's part of the reason that Francesca likes him so much. She's attracted to power, that's for sure.

I'm the guy that works for the men in power, and I like it that way. There's too much responsibility in being a made man. Too many people trying to take what you have. I'm glad I'm under the radar and don't have to worry about looking over my shoulder at every turn.

Esposito parties have a reputation about being a little wild, and while, sure, that's exciting, I prefer to do my partying in private. It's not like I can't let loose, but part of being under the radar means not drawing attention to yourself. I don't like being in the public eye because that's not what I want for my life. I want to just live how I want and not have to worry about looking over my shoulder all the time.

These made men and their heirs, they don't care what people think of them. They do whatever they want, when they want, and that's what draws women like my sister to them.

She wants that kind of freedom, the one we've never had since we come from the lower-level thugs and drivers. What my sister fails to understand is that isn't freedom at all – not when people are after what you have. I just want to protect what's mine.

We couldn't be more different, but I love Francesca with all my heart and promised my father I'd take care of her.

I sigh, looking around for said little sister, but she's nowhere to be found. She's probably off somewhere with Bruno. I'm grateful that Marco's out of town, because he's a bit of a hothead.

I'm probably being generous. He's more like a loose cannon.

Francesca is playing with fire, and she's bound to get burned, so I'm glad that her much more level-headed best friend is here to help me out.

Just like me and Francesca, Aurora and my little sister are very different, even though they're both still young and immature.

Opposites attract, I guess.

As I'm scanning the room yet again looking for Francesca, my eyes land on a woman coming down the stairs. Her legs are thick and tanned, leading up to a little white club dress that hugs her generous curves. Her hips are wide and I can't help licking my lips as I look up at her. Women could be my weakness, if I allowed them to mean anything to me.

I don't.

They are a liability. An anchor that forces you to stay in one place. A distraction, though that can be both a welcoming quality and a flaw, depending on the occasion. But most of all, they are a weapon that can be used against you. If you take a chance on love, you are giving someone else the power to hurt you, directly or indirectly, and I can't afford that. Especially as Dante's security man. I'd be putting both of us at risk.

But just because I'll never fall in love doesn't mean that I stay away from them. I love women and they love me, so we

have fun together but the stakes are always clear. I like to enjoy a nice pair of legs, ample cleavage, or a wide pair of hips for a night, but that's as far as it goes. They know not to expect more.

I've always been attracted to curves, and this woman has them in spades. Her cleavage spills out of the low-cut top.

As I'm staring, she stumbles, her hair falling down across her face.

I take the steps two at a time and steady her with a hand on one hip and she looks up at me with a smile.

Shit.

Aurora.

I blink at her, shocked that I've just been checking out my little sister's best friend, and I let my hand linger on her hip a little too long.

"Jesus, Aurora," I mumble. "That dress—"

She blushes and looks down at herself. "I know, it's too tight. Francesca talked me into it. I should have changed."

I shake my head fiercely, taking her chin in my hand and tilting it upward.

"No, you look amazing," I tell her, and her deep brown eyes search my face as if to see if I'm lying.

"You really mean that?" she asks softly.

"I do," I say in a low murmur, looking her up and down again, unable to help myself.

Aurora blushes and braces herself against the wall.

"I guess I should find Francesca," she says, and I let go of her hip reluctantly, watching her walk the rest of the way down the stairs, staring at her legs and ass.

When did Aurora Costa get so *hot*?

She's just a kid, I remind myself. Your little sister's best friend, you dog.

In my own defense, I *am* kind of a dog. I take advantage of my good looks whenever opportunity arises. That's one of the reasons I can't blame Francesca for playing Marco and Bruno, I guess.

Maybe Francesca and I are more alike than I realize.

A hand claps me on the shoulder and I turn, dragging my gaze off of Aurora's ample ass, and see Dante standing there, with a very pregnant Mia, smiling at me.

"You picked out your newest conquest?" he teases, and I shake my head.

"Nah, nothing like that. That's Francesca's best friend. She'll look out for her tonight."

"Good to know. I need you to focus on work tonight," Dante says in a low tone. Mia doesn't like hearing about business.

I nod. Dante wants me to corner Bruno Esposito and ask him how he feels about the Gallos. Between Dante and Luca Lorenzo, Mia's father, they'd taken out the Gallos recently.

I need to know if anyone is thinking of avenging the Gallos, but I really think Dante's just being paranoid about Bruno.

The Espositos were never friends with the Gallos and hated them as much as we did, as far as I know. But Bruno is the new heir and his father is ailing, not even coming down for the party, and I guess we need to know if the new blood in the family feels differently.

Dante and Mia make it down the stairs to mingle and I head up the stairs, looking around for Bruno. There are people milling around upstairs and I don't find him, but I do find Angelo Bianchi.

Angelo does some muscle work for Dante here and there. We've been friends since high school, when we played basketball together, but I haven't seen him a few months.

"Nico," he says warmly, pulling me into a brief hug. "It's been a while."

“Not long enough,” I say dryly, but then I break out into a smile.

Angelo laughs. “You bring a date?” he asks, and I shake my head.

“Do I ever? Need to keep my options open,” I say, and Angelo shakes his head, smiling.

“You never change,” he chuckles.

“Never will,” I say matter-of-factly. “Have you seen Bruno anywhere?”

Angelo shrugs. “He could be anywhere, you know Bruno. Probably partying somewhere in a bathroom.”

Bruno isn’t a stranger to hard drugs, so it’s not uncommon to find him doing lines in a bathroom. I let out a long breath.

At least he’ll be talkative.

“Thanks,” I mutter, and walk toward the balcony on the second floor. I look down at the people in the yard, seeing if I can catch sight of Bruno, but no such luck. I don’t see Francesca, either, so I assume they’re together.

I wrinkle my nose. I don’t want to walk in on that, so maybe I should just take a break. I pull out a pack of cigarettes from my jacket. It’s a habit I’m trying to break, so I only smoke once every blue moon, now, when things are really bad.

I put the cigarette in my mouth but don’t light it. I like to just feel it there. It satisfies the craving somehow.

I keep thinking about that body on Aurora. How come I haven’t ever noticed?

She’s too young for you, I tell myself. Stop it.

But the image of her tanned, thick thighs is tattooed beneath my eyelids when I close my eyes briefly.

I’ve got to get it together.

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