



AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS
MAFIA ROMANCE

SINFUL

honor

RUTHLESS ROGUES

KAT BAMMER

SINFUL HONOR

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Sinful Honor - Ruthless Rogues Mafia

A Kilo Bravo Sierra Press Book

*For the reader who likes their hero
overprotective, dominant, ruthless,
and morally grey.
This one is for you.*

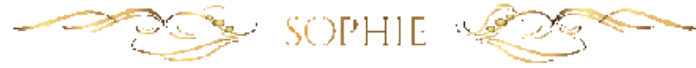


CONTENT WARNING

This book is intended for mature readers.

Please be aware that this book contains content that may be triggering to some readers like scenes of graphic violence and torture, as well as those of a sexual nature.

CHAPTER ONE



The heavy iron door to the dark and damp dungeon opened with an ear-splitting screech, and every single one of the remaining ten naked and shivering girls inside froze—including my two younger sisters, Jemma and Cara, my cousin and best friend, Fiona, and myself.

I pressed my back against the cold wall, stopped breathing, and closed my eyes in a futile attempt to somehow become invisible.

Damn.

How did our little trip to Italy—our little foray into freedom to celebrate my and Fiona’s twentieth birthday—turn into this nightmare?

Freedom—something I’d always known was something I’d never get to experience—not when your father was Craig Donnelly, the boss of the Irish mob in Boston. But the golden cage I’d always complained about back home in the US was infinitely better than this.

Kidnapped, naked, and held in a room in a basement, to be plucked out, one at a time, and used for—

Stop.

I stopped myself from ending that thought, but I couldn’t suppress my erratic heartbeat thundering away.

“You”—the guy at the door said.

Everything stopped.

I opened my eyes, ready to have him pointing directly at me since it was just a matter of time until it was my turn.

But he didn't.

Instead, I followed his outstretched hand and finger—which pointed directly at Cara, my second-youngest sister.

My stomach dropped.

Cara whimpered and cowered into the corner, trying to make herself as small as possible.

Shit.

Cara was the weakest of us four—shy, sweet, and kind. She lacked my stubbornness, Jemma's sass, and Fiona's real-life experience. She was a bookworm—a musical prodigy—and way too nice for her own good.

She would never survive whatever happened outside of these walls.

I gulped down a breath, steeled my spine, got up, and locked my wobbly knees.

My eyes met Fiona's, and I saw the same desperation, the same terror I was feeling reflected back at me.

I couldn't just watch.

I stared at the guy. I couldn't see his face, but he was built like a tank, clad in a black leather jacket—and I stepped right into his line of sight, blocking his view of Cara.

He would not take my sister, only over my dead body.

The guy looked me up and down, then back at my sister.

For a moment, I thought he would insist, but then his face turned into an ugly, grinning mask, and he extended his hand to me and beckoned me forward.

My skin broke out in goose bumps. I looked back at Fiona, who'd jumped up, as well. Her eyes were wide as she stared at me.

The fear I was trying so hard to resist washed over and through me. "Take care of them," I mouthed to her.

She nodded; her face tight.

We weren't in any position of power, but if I let that sink in—I would probably curl up into the fetal position and cry—not that it would help.

Neither myself nor my sisters.

All I could do was buy them some time.

Hopefully, enough time to be found.

Surely, they were already searching for us, right?

But what had happened to our bodyguards? Were they dead? How else would they—whoever they were—have been able to take all of us?

Why else was nobody coming for us—even hours later?

I kept walking until he grabbed my forearm and pulled me the rest of the way out of the room and closed the screeching door behind me.

I'd sealed my fate.

Now I needed to prevent whatever was waiting for me beyond this from breaking me.

I trudged along, the bruising hand never leaving my arm. "Where are you taking me?"

Leather-jacket-guy didn't react. Maybe he didn't speak any English. Did they speak English over here?

I suddenly felt incredibly ignorant.

Maybe if I'd known more about the Italian culture—more than my father's warning to stay away from those "damn Mafia bastards," I could've prevented us from getting into this situation.

He led me along a circular path upwards. Stoney walls surrounded us, the floor, the walls, the ceiling, we were at a slight incline, and the circle got smaller and smaller, like an upward spiral—just like my terror was spiraling out of control and squeezing my chest.

Was this what they used instead of stairs in Italy? What a waste of space—and what a freaking weird building.

Finally, we came to an open window. A hot breeze skimmed over my skin, and I could see the azure-blue sky beyond a couple of trees.

I shivered.

What a dichotomy to the dark, cold air downstairs.

It was light out.

So, they'd been holding us just a couple of hours, just overnight. It was probably too soon for Fiona's family to have located us.

Leather-jacket-guy's fist gripped me harder when we stopped at a huge, ornamental wooden door, guarded by a man whose face and short, bent neck gave him the resemblance of a bull, underscored by his ill-fitting suit, which threatened to burst at the seams any minute and his overpowering scent of sweat and garlic.

"*Questo volontario*," Leather-jacket said—and even though I didn't understand a word of Italian—apart from *buon giorno*, and *grazie*, even I knew what he'd just said.

I volunteered.

As if.

Bull-neck grinned, and I couldn't suppress the shiver when he ogled my naked body with beady, dark eyes.

I turned away, focused on getting my breathing under control—and avoiding the stench—and stared at the door. The intricate carvings made it feel oriental—as if out of one of my mother's sheik novels I'd found in a box in the attic.

At least, I thought they were her books, hoped they'd been hers.

I squeezed my eyes shut when the familiar pain created a knot in my throat.

If I were in a sheik romance right now, behind this door, I would find a harem, including a mosaic-tiled indoor pool and a

couple of eunuchs guarding the most beautiful women this planet had ever seen. And a beyond-gorgeous sheik.

The door swung open.

And I froze.

It was not a harem, nor a romance novel, and definitely not a sexy sheik.

The cold, harsh reality—in the form of a hairy, overweight guy, lying naked in bed—slapped me in the face and left me desperately trying to suck air into my lungs.

Like that one time during our martial arts training when our instructor threw me on the mat and I suddenly couldn't catch my breath.

I'd been temporarily scared then, but nothing compared to the horror gripping my chest right now.

Why the fuck was the guy naked?

Leather-jacket-guy pushed me into the room but didn't follow. Instead, I could feel—and smell—Bull-neck right behind me.

I took a sidestep. Put my back to the wall and some distance between us, and my eyes ping-ponged from Bull-neck, who closed the door with a final click, to the naked man.

He was hairy like an ape, his small dick flaccid and all wrinkly and ugly. His face was twisted into a lecherous grin that gave me the hives and he ogled me with dark eyes.

Bull-neck walked up to him, leaned down, and whispered something in Italian.

I shivered.

Oh shit.

What the hell?

My throat closed up, cutting off my airways—permitting me to draw a single breath. Black spots started dancing in my peripheral vision, and my knees started to give.

I was going to faint.

I turned around, dashed to the door, opened it, then froze.

I was face to face with leather-jacket-guy, who was still there, guarding the door—his weapon pointed directly at me.

The next moment, Bull-neck gripped my hair and pulled me back into the room.

I stumbled backward, forced by the burning pain of my scalp, and the door closed in my face.

No escape.

When Bull-neck turned me back around, naked guy stood—his dick still soft and wrinkly, still ugly as sin—and grinned.

A shiver ran down my spine, followed by another one when the cold, hard barrel of a gun pressed against my temple.

I took a shaky breath.

This was it.

I would either lose my life or my virginity by being raped by an ugly, hairy Ape with a pencil dick and his garlic-loving friend.

My choice.

Always my choice.

“Suck him,” the Ape said in broken English and pointed at Bull-neck next to me.

Bull-neck’s fist tightened in my hair while his other hand held the gun steady against my temple.

I didn’t move.

He drew me closer until his rancid breath touched my skin, then he turned me around until I faced him—like a puppet on a string.

His smile was menacing, and he was missing a tooth.

If the situation wasn’t so shitty, I might’ve laughed, because he really looked like a caricature of what a gangster in a bad Mafia movie would look like—including the broken nose, sans a fedora—but as it was, it took all my self-control not to vomit, sob or break down.

His eyes remained cold and black.

Lifeless.

Not an ounce of humanity there. The way he looked at me was weirdly twisted.

As if I wasn't even a human being.

I loathed him.

"Shoot me because I won't," I said to the hairy Ape.

From the corner of my eye, I could see anger reddening the Ape's face, then he immediately replaced it with a sneer.

"Feisty. I love to break feisty one." His broken English, together with the sneer on his face, and the fact he wasn't the one touching me, despite being naked, but instead was orchestrating this strange situation, had my heart racing.

Was I ready to die here? Like this? By the hands of these men?

Shit.

"On your knees," Ape said.

I stared back at Bull-neck defiantly.

Nope. Not gonna happen.

Didn't my father tell us that 'those damn Mafia bastards' liked to shoot people's kneecaps off?

I never thought I would get the chance to find out the truth behind the stories my father had used to scare us into obedience.

"No."

Bull-neck shifted his gun again until it pointed directly between my eyes. Then he released his grip on my hair, opened his pants, and lowered them until his dick sprang out.

I looked down and shuddered.

"On your knees," the Ape said again, and I could feel him come closer.

An uncontrollable shudder swept through my body and left my skin covered in goose bumps. I swallowed rapidly.

What should I do? What could I do?

Bull-neck spit in my face.

I shuddered, and bile rose in my throat.

Was I willing to die just to avoid sucking him off? What if I vomited all over him?

Not my problem.

Or maybe—I remembered the weapons training my father insisted upon.

We were taught how to disarm an attacker.

I'd had to repeat the drill over and over because I'd effed it up every single time.

Did I remember how to do it?

I needed to be quick and probably shoot the Ape first before taking down Bull-neck.

Would I be quick enough and strong enough to do that?

Would I get it right?

And was I willing to bet my life on it?

I looked down at Bull-neck's pot belly and his ugly half-hard dick.

And then I jumped into action.

Get out of the line.

Grab the barrel.

Grab his hand.

Rotate the gun toward him.

Bull-neck squealed, and I heard his wrist crunch when I forced the gun out of his hand.

Then a shot rang out.

The fiery pain in my arm took my breath away, and I dropped the gun.

Fuck.

What now?

I kicked Bull-neck when he tried to grab me, but I never saw the blow to my head coming from the side, before pain exploded and everything turned black.

CHAPTER TWO



“Stay sharp, Falcon,” Hawk’s voice crackled in my ear, pulling me back to the present.

“Copy that,” I replied.

I scanned the abandoned airstrip in the middle of nowhere USA through my rifle scope, searching for any signs of movement. Nothing stirred in my line of sight.

Positioned in the abandoned tower as overwatch, I felt a prickling sensation in my neck—a sense of unease. This wasn’t what I was used to doing.

I was a sniper—a hunter—a killer.

But Hawk wasn’t.

He was the boss of Raptor Security. He usually didn’t take on assignments on his own—at least not that I knew of.

He also almost never used me to pull security. And he’d never kept me in the dark about the details of the assignment either—unlike right now.

I did not like it.

At all.

Minutes dragged by like hours, and still, nothing happened. The airstrip remained empty and eerily quiet.

“Tell me again what we’re doing here,” I said into the radio, keeping my voice steady.

This felt like one of the tests my father and uncles used to make me do.

Like killing a friend to show if I had what it takes.

“Keep pulling security.” Hawk’s curt response came into the button in my ear.

A jolt of annoyance shot through me, and I ground my teeth. I loathed being kept in the dark, but I knew better than to question him further. We’d been through too much together for me to doubt his order or his judgment.

But the lack of information pissed me the fuck off.

My instincts told me this wasn’t an ordinary job.

There was something in the way Hawk had looked at me when he’d told me we were leaving for this mission.

And as much as I tried to suppress it, the small part of me—the part that was my father’s son, the part that had been groomed to be the next head of one of the most influential Italian Mafia families—still hated not calling the shots.

Even years after I’d left that life behind.

Even years after I’d chosen to work for Hawk instead of my family.

I focused back on the airstrip, the silence only broken by the distant hum of an approaching plane. I squinted through my rifle scope, searching for any signs of movement—nothing, then I focused on the sky—located the plane circling over us.

I adjusted my grip and kept my eyes glued to the scope. My heart beat a dull rhythm, but my hands remained steady.

“Looks like we got company,” I murmured into my radio, my eyes locked on the small plane drawing nearer. “Were we expecting someone?”

“Affirmative,” Hawk replied tersely. “Three planes, no one else.”

One plane landed, not a minute later, another, and finally, a third. They all taxied toward the hangar, their engines roaring, breaking the stillness surrounding us.

I continued to scan the area, knowing that unforeseen occurrences were the norm in our line of work. And they wouldn't have hired Raptor if there wasn't a threat.

I listened when the last engine fell silent.

I wasn't interested in whoever was disembarking.

Not part of the job.

But I narrowed my eyes when I caught movement coming from across the cracked runway.

"Three black vehicles approaching," I reported, my voice steady as I tracked their progress. "Are we expecting company?"

"Negative," Hawk growled. "Eliminate the threat."

Without hesitation, I adjusted the scope, exhaled half a breath, held it, and pulled the trigger, dropping the first driver with a single shot.

The vehicle swerved violently to the right before crashing into a nearby concrete structure that looked like a small bunker.

My heart hammered in my chest, adrenaline pumping through my veins as I quickly shifted my aim to the second vehicle.

"Number one, temporarily down," I said, then took out the second driver with a well-placed bullet. It was like plucking them off in a shooting galley—almost too easy. Couldn't they at least try some evasive driving maneuvers?

As men scrambled out of the wreckages, I picked them off one by one, with lethal precision, each shot perfectly placed. "Two vehicles, down. One more to go."

I focused back on the third vehicle, which had slowed down.

Satisfaction twisted in my gut, tainted by the knowledge of what I'd just done. These were people's lives I was snuffing out, and yet it had become second nature—had been second nature.

A necessity in my dark, dark world.

Still, a part of me—a very small part—still recoiled at the carnage, at the blood staining my hands.

Just like the first time.

“Good work,” Hawk’s voice cut through my thoughts, a hint of pride in his tone.

I nodded even though he couldn’t see me.

As I waited to see what the third vehicle would do—turn around, if the driver was smart—I continued to scan the area for any further threats.

Hawk was probably doing the same—our mutual trust and unwavering loyalty the only constants in this dangerous field of work.

The bond between us ran deep, forged in blood and fire. We owed each other our lives, and that kind of debt wasn’t easily forgotten.

I trained my scope on the last vehicle, my finger itching to pull the trigger and eliminate the final threat. But something caught my eye—a young boy in the passenger seat, oblivious to the chaos unfolding around him. My heart clenched, and I hesitated. “Shit, Hawk,” I said, my voice strained. “There’s a kid in the car.”

Hawk’s response was immediate, though his voice was tight with frustration. “Damn it.” He hesitated. “Eliminate the threat.”

Fuck me.

I hated it when kids or women were involved.

I trusted Hawk’s judgment—more than my own. But even as a ruthless killer, I had lines I never crossed.

The boy’s wide-eyed gaze burned into me from across the distance. I wrestled with my conscience, torn between my job and the life of an innocent child.

“Negative,” I finally admitted, my voice barely a whisper.

“They can’t reach the hangar, Falcon,” Hawk snapped. “If this goes south, we’re dead.”

His words echoed through my skull.

Dead? As in, someone would dare to kill the legendary Nathaniel Hawthorne if this went south?

Now that was the kind of interesting tidbit I would've loved to have before we started this job.

What kind of shady shit was this mission? And why did Hawk, who was a guy who valued morals over money any day of the week, agree to this security detail?

But no matter the situation. I couldn't ignore the truth within me. I may be a cold-hearted assassin, but even monsters had their limits.

"Give me cover fire," I told him, having made my decision. "I'm going in."

"Dammit, Gabe... Fuck. Just don't do something stupid."

With a deep breath, I fired at the tires of the SUV, sending it careening off course.

Heart pounding, I abandoned my post and exchanged my sniper rifle for my trusty 9mm semi-automatic and raced down the stairs, my boots echoing against the metal steps. I jumped behind the wheel of my Jeep, which was parked behind the tower, then gunned the engine and sped toward the wreckage, gun drawn, like a brain-dead knucklehead.

This was the kind of stupid shit that got you killed.

As I approached, armed men swarmed from the vehicle, weapons raised, shooting at me.

Adrenaline surged through my veins, and I picked them off one by one, with perfect aim.

Too late to turn back now.

I was almost at the vehicle. The driver's door stood open; the driver slumped back with a single bullet hole to the forehead—Hawk having my back.

"Keep your head down, kid!" I shouted as I pulled the emergency break, then threw the wheel around, stopping my

Jeep with screeching tires, at a perfect angle along the SUV's passenger side—gotta love those trusty old mechanical brakes.

“You're good,” Hawk said.

With every single enemy taken out, I flipped my door open, hopped out, then opened the SUV's passenger door.

The boy cowered in his seat, his small hands covering his ears.

I dove in and pulled him from the wreckage, his body shaking with terror.

“Easy, buddy,” I murmured, holding him close as I searched for any sign of further danger, then took him back with me to the Jeep, jumped in with him on my lap, and raced back. I looked into the rearview mirror, then at his dark-haired crown. “You're safe now.”

“Everything clear?” I asked into my radio.

“Clear,” Hawk's comeback was without emotion.

He would probably chew me out later.

But he'd worked with me long enough to know I was a wildcard.

Born into one of the leading Mafia families in Italy, he'd called me batshit crazy more than once.

I stopped the Jeep in the shadow of the tower, hopped out, put the boy onto the driver's seat, and turned around. “Come on, kid,” I said, coaxing. “On my back; we're doing this monkey-style.”

Better to have my hands free in case I had to shoot our way free.

He slung his tiny arms around my neck and crawled onto my back.

My muscles tensed as I lifted him up. “Are we clear?”

“Clear,” Hawk's voice came through loud and clear.

We rounded the corner, and I sprinted to the entrance of the tower while directing the boy's scrawny legs and the

uncomfortable pressure of his dug-in heels away from my dick.

“Bring him to the hangar,” Hawk radioed when we were just inside the tower.

For real now?

I changed direction and looked left and right before diving outside again and into a full-on run, with the little monkey on my back, toward the hangar.

Toward Hawk and three other, big, burly, dangerous-looking men, all wearing sunglasses, standing waiting as if this was a Sunday brunch at the park.

Next to those three, Hawk looked almost normal—which wasn’t an easy feat with his 6’6” heavily muscled frame.

As I neared them, I assessed the men.

One of them was older, dressed in a black suit, his short, black hair streaked with gray.

The second one was staring down at his phone, his long, red hair hiding his face.

The last one—a giant, dressed in all-black, including big, reflecting, green sunglasses that made him look like a bug with giant eyes—scowled as if something was bothering him.

Me or the attackers?

Were those assholes standing here watching the whole time when I was risking my life doing my best Rambo impression—fucking alone?

“*Qué pasa aquí?*” the boy asked in Spanish, peeking over my shoulder.

He was wondering what was happening over there. “*Todo está bien,*” Everything good—I reassured him, keeping one hand protectively on his leg.

As we neared, another man—a shorter guy with dark hair—stepped out of the hangar. One look at me and he grew visibly pale, as if he’d just seen a ghost—couldn’t be me, though. I

never forgot a face, and I sure as hell didn't remember this guy's.

But before he could say anything, the boy on my back began to squeal and jump and fidget...and got me right in the nuts with his heel.

White-hot pain flashed from my crotch upwards.

Fuck.

I groaned, slung him over my shoulder, put him on the ground in front of me, and cupped my crown jewels.

Not cool.

I had one hand on the boy's shoulder, holding him back, but he broke free from my—arguably loose—grasp and sprinted into the dark-haired guy's arms, burying his face in the man's stomach.

"*Mi hijo,*" the man whispered, tears streaming down his face as he clutched the boy close.

The boy was his son? I straightened, the pain slightly less excruciating, and exchanged an incredulous look with Hawk.

Even he didn't know what was going on.

Which made the hair on my neck stand up.

I'd never known Hawk as sloppy in any of the OPS he'd taken on.

This was not business as usual.

And it put me on edge.

"Ciao, Gabriele. Quite the impressive performance," a familiar voice called out, its owner stepping forward with a grin. "You always had a knack for theatrics—even as a child."

My heart skipped a beat as I stared at the older man with the gray-streaked hair who one, knew my real name, and two, whose voice was awfully familiar—especially talking Italian.

I walked closer, and he removed his glasses, and realization hit me like the gust of wind that inevitably hit you after you had your scope trained and dialed in on a target.

Alfredo Salvini—my old, childhood-best-friend’s father and current head of the Italian Mafia in the US.

What the hell was he doing here?

And what the hell was Hawk doing with those guys?

“Long time no see, Signore Salvini,” I replied cautiously, trying to mask my surprise. “What brings you to this neck of the woods?”

“Business, of course, *mi figlio*,” he answered. “We’re waiting for one more arrival.” He pointed at the small airplane which had been circling during the action and was now approaching the runway.

“Gentlemen. Shall we go inside? We have much to discuss,” Mr. Salvini said and gestured toward the hangar, apparently not intending to wait for whoever was in that last plane.

I hesitated, my insides tightened, and I looked at Hawk.

I was a sniper—my assignment was to provide overwatch, and I should get back to my position on the tower to do just that.

Hawk nodded knowingly, then activated his radio. “Birdie, overwatch position, tower. Now.”

I narrowed my lids. What the fuck? Birdie was here?

“Don’t look at me like that,” he said before he turned to follow Salvini Senior and the other three men, and the boy, into the hangar.

My brain worked a mile a minute.

If the Salvinis were involved, this operation just took a turn for the worst.

Getting mixed up in organized crime—my family’s business of choice—was not what I had expected from Hawk.

Not at all.

But there was no turning back now.

“Fuck,” I murmured, thankful nobody seemed to pay me any attention, but I grabbed Hawk’s arm and told him with a shake of my head to hang back.

I would not step a foot through the small door into the dark hangar, before getting some answers first.

Like...

What the fuck was going on here?

CHAPTER THREE



“Care to explain?” I asked Hawk when only the two of us were still outside, watching the last small single-prop plane land.

“Your brother called me when you wouldn’t return his calls.” Hawk threw me a dirty sideways look. “Apparently, your uncle is gearing up to take over all operations, and he’s announced he will marry your mother.”

“Fuck me.” I’d had some missed calls from my youngest brother, Cristo, over the last two days but hadn’t taken the time to call back. Though before that—after my father’s recent death—we’d talked more than in the last thirteen years combined—ever since I’d left my family, and the life of being part of one of the leading Mafia families in Italy, behind.

I’d contemplated going home for my father’s funeral but ultimately decided against it.

No reason to risk my life for something I’d turned my back on years ago. It would’ve been more for my mother’s sake anyway, and she’d told me it was better not to come.

“I’m still gathering data,” Hawk said and pulled my running mind back into the present, “but from the preliminary reports, your Uncle Fausto is bad news. Brutal, deceitful, and dangerous. Generally and especially for your mother.”

Fuck.

I never liked Uncle Fausto as a kid. He was always the one relative who managed to make you cringe. “But she’s a widow

now; she can just say no. She doesn't need to remarry—could just stay a respected widow.”

Because no way either one of my brothers would ever force her to remarry, or did she want to?

But why?

Hell, she was only fifty and beautiful—not that I'd seen more than a couple of family pictures they'd sent me over the years. But not Uncle Fausto. “Why would she even contemplate marrying him?”

“Rumor has it he's threatening to kill your brothers. But my source isn't particularly reliable. Infiltrating an Italian Mafia family is harder than I thought,” Hawk said.

I side-eyed him.

Of course, it was.

It was a family business, built on secrecy and honor. You were either born into it, dragged into it, or not in it at all.

“So, the first turf wars are starting. But what do they want from me? I can't fix the situation for them. Alex and Cris are in their mid-twenties—they sure as hell can take care of themselves and my mother.”

“They could, but he's made a power move already—they're not in a good position.”

“And my presence wouldn't help them one bit.” I'd deserted my family at the age of eighteen. Turned my back and never looked back.

Well, not intentionally.

You never really forgot your first kill, not when it was a friend your uncle chose for you. Not when it caused a complete mental breakdown.

Just my luck, Hawk had bought that house in Aruba—one of the more exotic outposts of my family's empire—and had been there that day.

I cracked my neck to get rid of the kink.. Whatever my brother had discussed with Hawk, they both knew I could never come

back. And I'd remained steadfast on that decision for the past thirteen years, ever since my father and uncles forced me to kill a friend—as my initiation ritual—celebrating my eighteenth birthday.

That's what you got when your famiglia wanted to ensure your loyalty.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Bile rose up my throat. I hadn't allowed myself to think about that day in a long, long time.

I'd shot him, right there on the cliffs, and watched him plummet into the sea.

And all I got for taking a life was a tap on the shoulder from my dad, a proud nod from my uncles, and a sick grin from the uncle who chose the “traitor.”

I'd held it together until all of them had left.

And then I'd puked my guts out and cried until I'd almost passed out.

When Hawk found me—his weapon drawn—I was a sobbing heap on the ground.

He'd taken one look at me and asked me if I wanted out. We never talked about what happened, though I knew he knew what I'd just done.

Instead, he took me to his house—a fort more like it—then flew me out of Aruba and to America. He gave me a place on his team and a new life. And somehow, he convinced my family to let me go.

I owed him my life.

Owed him everything.

To this day.

“What has my family got to do with this?” I pointed at the hangar.

Hawk shuffled one foot. Then looked down on the ground, then back at the airplane which was taxiing toward us.

Not good.

“Who are these men; why are they meeting? And why am I here?”

“You’re the rightful heir of the Falcone family.”

I narrowed my brows and stared Hawk down. I hated when he didn’t answer my questions. “Don’t forget a traitor who turned his back on his family when he couldn’t hack it.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“My father would’ve disagreed.”

“So?” Hawk shrugged. “You’re not that boy anymore. You would need to be ruthless, brutal, and lethal to take back what’s rightfully yours.” Hawk grinned. “So basically, just be yourself, and you’re golden.”

I shook my head. I never thought I would hear those words from Hawk. He’d been my moral compass, my mentor. He never compromised his values, not for money, not for power. He was the complete opposite of what I’d been groomed to be for the first eighteen years of my life. “And kill a lot of people fighting my way back in.”

Hawk shrugged. “Probably.”

“You saved me from that life.”

He pulled his brows in and looked down. “Did I? Maybe you just needed to grow up some more, and now, it’s time.”

“Time?”

“Time to step up for your family. Time to stop running.”

The last thirteen years hadn’t felt like running at all.

The shame after breaking down after my first kill, when all I ever wanted was my father’s approval and all I was groomed for was stepping into his footsteps, had been my constant companion. But I hadn’t been running.

On the contrary, most of the time, I’d been hunting bad guys all over the world for Hawk’s company, Raptor Security.

“That life isn’t for me—killing just for personal gain or as a test of loyalty. Ridiculous power struggles, ego-driven grabs for whatever you set your sight on. That’s not me, and you know it.”

Hawk nodded. “You wouldn’t do it for money or power. But would you do it for your family?”

And fuck me if he didn’t have me by my throat.

The one thing more important than anything in the world for Hawk, the one thing he’d instilled in me, was to stand by your team, your family. To do whatever it took to protect those standing next to you.

No matter what.

The other thing I’d learned was that family wasn’t necessarily made by blood. But by love, mutual respect, friendship, and brotherhood. A bond forged by shared values like acceptance, courage, and honor.

And you never turned your back on the ones you loved.

“So, you set this whole thing up?”

He nodded.

“And in there?” I nodded toward the hangar. “Who was that boy, and who else is waiting in there?”

“The boy, I have no idea what that was all about. In there are all the major players in the US.”

“Major players? What does that mean?”

Players, like Salvini Senior? As in all the major players in organized crime?

“You need powerful friends if you go back and take over.”

Was he delirious?

Powerful friends in the US wouldn’t mean jack shit back home in Italy. “Are you fucking kidding me? How about I shoot myself because I probably have a better chance of survival than doing the shit you just proposed.”

I turned around and marched toward my Jeep and the tower.

I would get my rifle and be out of here.

Fucking lunatic. I couldn't believe this.

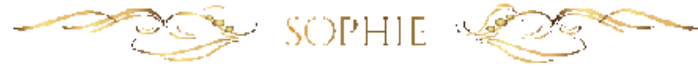
Was he seriously suggesting I go back to Italy as the fucking head of my Mafia family?

That had early grave written all over it.

And even worse than dying, I would have to face all the reasons I left in the first place. Face everything I'd escaped.

Fucking crazy man.

CHAPTER FOUR



I woke up naked and freezing and in a cage.

My head pounded as if a whole band of drummers were pummeling my skull from the inside.

My body felt heavy and sluggish, my arm on fire. I blinked my eyes open and squinted at the dim light filtering through a small window high up in the wall, then raised my head, but immediately lowered it again, which made the pain almost bearable.

Almost.

Then it hit me all at once.

The kidnapping. The room. My refusal to go down on my knees. Then the gunshot.

Damn.

I really screwed up; I should've just gotten it over with and sucked the ugly guy's dick. Maybe then I wouldn't have landed here.

I opened my eyes again, careful not to move my head.

The air smelled different. And this room—even though it was in the basement—felt more modern. I was almost certain I wasn't in the same building anymore. Though it was equally cold, especially the metal bars pushing into my skin.

My cold, naked skin.

Panic rose in my chest, choking me. My chest tightened, and my breathing started to saw in and out of me, faster and faster,

while at the same time, I felt like I was suffocating.

Calm the fuck down or you'll pass out again, eejit.

I turned to my back—waited for the bout of throbbing in my shoulder to go down, then forced myself to breathe deep into my stomach.

Empty your mind.

Focus on your breath.

Count.

Time for all that meditation Fiona forced on me to pay off.

After I followed my breath, and counted to ten for what felt like a gazillion times, I felt marginally better.

Ready to take stock.

I had been kidnapped, brought to a basement, held in a dungeon, forced with a gun to my head to suck Bull-neck's cock, shot myself trying to disarm him, got smacked in the head, and woke up naked in a fucking cage.

All in the last 24 hours.

Wait. How long had I been out? I couldn't even say what day it was.

Didn't know where I was.

Or who had taken me.

Fear coiled in my gut like a snake, and I started shivering.

I didn't know anything.

And I was completely alone. Not even in a position to protect my sisters anymore.

Jemma, Cara, Fiona.

I clenched my jaw and listened to my heartbeat thrash in my ears.

What would they go through now?

Fuck.

I fucked up—on all accounts.

I looked at my shoulder. There was a blood-soaked bandage around my upper arm, but blood crusted the area below it.

And my whole arm was throbbing.

If I lost my arm because of an infection, wouldn't that be the icing on the cake?

And then the door burst open, and I froze.

Nooo.

I was too terrified to move, too terrified to do anything but stare.

And even if my eyes would've been closed, I would've known.

Their scent alone was forever burnt into my consciousness.

Bull-neck followed by the Ape walked into the room. This time they were both dressed, though just as terrifying as I remembered them.

Bull-neck walked up to the cage and rattled it as if I was a dog and he wanted to get a rise out of me.

Bull-neck's dark eyes stared at me maliciously, sending chills down my spine. The Ape held a cane in his hand, tapping it against his leg impatiently, his eyes and lips distorted into a crazy mask.

"Prenderla," the Ape's deranged command rang through the room, and me, while he gestured towards me in the cage as if it was a daily occurrence, as if I was a dog.

Maybe it was for them. Maybe I wasn't the first woman they'd held like a dog.

Whatever he said spurred Bull-neck into action. He approached my cage, his sadistic grin widening as he unlocked it, caught my leg and dragged me out.

I struggled and kicked at him—to no avail.

Bull-neck whispered something in Italian through his clenched teeth and gripped my ankle tighter until I winced in pain.

Whatever he said, I could see the sinister promises of what he would do to me in the utter lack of emotion in his eyes.

My heart pounded in my chest, fear gripping every fiber of my being.

No amount of struggle would save me from whatever they intended to do to me.

I stopped struggling.

Bull-neck forced me up, grabbed my wrist in a bruising grip, then marched me across the room to where the Ape was waiting, tapping his cane against his leather pants in an ominous rhythm.

He handed Bull-neck thin, black, leather cuffs, which he fastened around my wrists, linked them together and lifted my arms to a hook dangling from a chain hanging from the ceiling.

My shoulder screamed, but I suppressed a groan and instead focused on the door when the room started to close in on me.

Please, whoever, whatever deity there is, please rescue me.

Would my sisters meet the same fate? Please don't let them suffer.

Bull-neck tightened the chain until my toes barely touched the ground, and my wounded shoulder throbbed mercilessly.

I clenched my teeth against the pain, and my eyes met the Ape's who was watching intently, a twisted smile playing on his lips. The sick fuck reveled in my torment and the power he held over me.

In that moment, realization hit and rattled me to the core as if I ran face-first into a glass door.

There was no way out.

Nobody would come and help me.

Nobody even knew where I was.

This was it.

Wetness gathered behind my eyes and spilled over. “Please,” I whispered, my voice cracking with desperation. “Please don’t do this.”

“Ah, ah, ah,” the Ape taunted and stepped closer, “already begging, and we haven’t even begun. Not so feisty anymore.” He dragged his finger over the skin of my stomach, then used more force until he scraped my skin. “Shut up and take it, slave.”

Slave.

A pressure settled on my chest unlike anything I’d ever experienced, and I turned my head away.

The Ape grabbed a fistful of my hair and yanked my head back to him, then he pointed at the security camera mounted in the corner of the room. “Smile for the camera, slave.” Tears blurred my vision, and my lips trembled.

The Ape let my head drop, then he slapped me across the face.

My head snapped to the side and my eyes landed on Bull-neck watching with sick excitement in his eyes.

Maybe if I had complied with his demands then, I wouldn’t be in this position now. But most likely not.

The Ape handed Bull-neck the cane, and with a cruel, twisted smile, instructed him to begin.

“Start with her ass,” he commanded—in English, his voice cold and heartless.

Bull-neck obliged, striking the cane hard against my exposed flesh.

I screamed out in agony, the pain searing through me like a wildfire. “Please,” I gasped between sobs, “please stop.”

The Ape sneered, taking sadistic pleasure in my anguish. He took a step closer until his face was in my face. “This is your life now. Learn your new place. And enjoy.” His deranged cackle sent a wave of despair through my body, and my heart clenched in terror.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block out his venomous words and the pain that threatened to consume me. But it was no use; desperation clawed at my chest, leaving me helpless and suffocating.

I was trapped in a living nightmare, with no escape in sight.

And I might not make it out of this alive.

The next blow was even worse.

I begged, whimpered, and cried, but none of it made a difference.

Bull-neck didn't relent, bringing the cane down on my upper back next.

My mind raced, desperately trying to find some solace or escape from the unbearable torment. I retreated into memories of happier times, tried to focus on all the fun I'd had with my sisters this summer, and for a few fleeting moments, I managed to distance myself from the reality of my situation, finding refuge within my own thoughts.

But the pain was relentless, and it became increasingly difficult to bear.

Until my screams turned into moans, and darkness crept into the edges of my vision and finally consumed me whole.

CHAPTER FIVE



“Gabe.”
I kept on walking.

“Falcon.”

I sighed, then stopped—when Hawk called me by my callsign, he usually meant business.

And he was still my boss.

Still the one I owed my life to.

But he was also the one who orchestrated whatever insanity was waiting in that hangar.

I turned back to him. “Even if I wanted to go back—and that’s not an if—it’s a fuck no. I would be dead as soon as I touch the ground.”

He caught up with me, and we squared off. “Maybe.”

I scoffed. “No maybe about it. My chances of seeing my forties are next to zero as is. But with this stroke of insanity, of yours, they are nonexistent.”

“I never pegged you as a wimp.”

I chuckled—the sound harsh to my own ears. “You literally picked me up lying in my own vomit, with snot and tears and piss running out of me. And you tell me you didn’t think I was a wimpy kid?”

I stared down and shuffled my feet before I locked eyes with him again. “Well, newsflash. This is a suicide mission, and I’m

not in the game of self-destruction, not anymore.”

He nodded.

The airplane engine stopped, and the sudden silence had us both looking at the plane. “Is anyone besides Birdie pulling security right now?”

“I took care of it,” was all Hawk said.

Of course. He always had backup plans. And backup backup—if I knew Hawk at all.

“So, who else are you expecting to see at this oh-so-fine meeting of yours?”

He remained silent, his eyes trained on the small airplane.

We waited.

And I caught a look at the pilot.

Holy fuck.

The door opened, and out stepped someone I hadn’t seen in more than a decade. Hadn’t spoken to in more than a decade. One of the few people, from my former life—besides my brothers—I’d longed to stay in touch with but didn’t.

Because he was a part of the life I failed.

The life I left behind.

I left him behind—though he was the hardest to forget.

Niggling guilt, I’d lived with daily, roared up into a full-blown inferno.

Would it be awkward? Would he shoot me on sight because I betrayed the family, betrayed him?

But my worries were completely moot.

Vincenzo Salvini crossed the distance in three seconds and pulled me into a hug—and squeezed all the air out of me—as if no time had passed at all.

Vincenzo Salvini, Alfredo Salvini’s son, heir to the most influential Italian Mafia family in New York, and my single best friend growing up, was not going to kill me just yet.

“Fuck, Falcone. How I missed seeing your ugly mutt.”

I hesitated, then hugged him back. “Vincenzo Salvini. I never thought I would actually see you again.”

“Well, it’s a small world, getting smaller by the minute.”

What did he mean?

He turned around, and my youngest brother Cristiano—Cristo—climbed out of the small plane.

No fucking way.

I hadn’t seen Cristo in person for just as long.

He’d grown into a man. A typical Italian Mafia man.

Dark hair. Dark suit. Dark soul.

I hugged him. Pressed him against me. I almost felt something in what I believed was an empty cavity housing the remnants of my blackened and tarred heart.

Unrecognizable. Insubstantial. But still beating.

“I’m sorry your growth spurt ended when you were only ten,” I said.

He chuckled.

He was taller than me, not quite so muscular, but definitely not a boy anymore.

Vincenzo patted me on the shoulder. “Let’s go inside and talk. We’re on the clock here. And you two have time to cuddle later.”

We made our way inside. I couldn’t believe Vince was here, or Cristo. Still didn’t understand what the hell was really going on here.

Either Cristo or, more logically, my second brother Alessandro, should take over as the head of the family without much fuss.

Why didn’t he? Why would Cristo come all the way here?

We entered the dark airport hangar through the door carved into the bigger airport gates.

I took off my sunglasses, glad I didn't need time for my eyes to adjust.

I hung back. Never a good idea to be first in the door—except as the point man—but Hawk blocked my way. “No weapons.”

I stared at him, then handed him my trusty 9mm, which he handed to one of the goons guarding the door from the inside.

Being unarmed wasn't something I enjoyed—not that I needed a weapon to wreak havoc.

Vince greeted the other guys like old friends.

They obviously knew each other.

“So, he's the one?” The small, wiry-looking guy's eyes glittered with a healthy dose of skepticism, but he was still holding his son's hand.

You can thank me later, asshole.

The brutish-looking, massive guy—sans the green glasses, sighed. I would bet money he was of Russian, or some other Eastern European, descent. “He's a show-off and a pussy, like all Italian wannabe-mobsters.”

Bingo.

Vince laughed. “Well, just because we have style and charm, doesn't mean we're pussies. It just means we get laid a lot and don't have to kidnap our women and force them to have sex with us, Zotov.”

Zotov narrowed his eyes. He looked like he was two seconds away from drawing his weapon—if he had one—and killing Vince.

“Can anybody tell me what the actual fuck is going on here?” I said, cutting the insults—or what was apparently considered friendly banter in this group—short.

Vince stared at me, then at Hawk. “You didn't tell him?”

Hawk shrugged. “Not my place to tell anybody all the bosses of the biggest crime syndicates are meeting up regularly to discuss world domination, is it?”

The Irish mobster—at least I assumed he was Irish with all the freckles and red hair—chuckled. “Now that you did, can we get on with it? There’s actually urgent business I have to get back to.”

On second thought, he looked a little on the pale side, and the way he shuffled around indicated he was on pins and needles.

“What’s going on, Donnelly? Did someone finally challenge your incompetence?” the boy’s father said.

“Nope, we compared dick sizes just yesterday, and I still came out on top, but I heard you’re getting the officials doing your dirty work for you, now. Getting lazy or scared?”

Hawk chuckled.

But the wiry guy just shrugged. “The Sormiza Cartel boys are a bunch of spoiled brats who needed to be taken down a notch. I’m just giving them a war they can’t win to occupy them for a while.”

“While you swoop in and take over their drug trade routes?” Hawk said.

The guy shrugged. “At least I’m not completely unhinged. And I’m not obsessed with your friend’s woman.”

Hawk narrowed his eyes. “So, it’s common knowledge old Sormiza has his eyes on her?”

Holy shit. They were talking about Hawk’s partner Carter’s wife Edith. And about old Sormiza, the head of the Sormiza cartel, who tried and failed to kidnap her.

The guy chuckled. “The old fuck and his obsession have been the inside joke for years. Some have lost an obscene amount of money, betting on if and when he will make a move.” He shook his head. “He should step down, but since you’re taking out his boys one after the other, that’s not likely to happen.”

I side-glanced at Hawk, who just shrugged. They were talking about George taking out the younger Sormiza son.

How did they all know this stuff?

It was as if they were all connected. Did they have a group chat where they were discussing organized crime around the world?

“So, let’s get the niceties out of the way,” Vincenzo said.

“Roman Zotov—head of the Russian Bratva—it’s cheesy, but he’s residing in Brighton Beach.”

Okay, apparently, I needed to brush up on my organized crime knowledge, ASAP. Because why would residing in Brighton Beach be considered cheesy?

“Pedro Alvarez, CDS, Craig Donnelly, head of the Irish Mob out of Boston, and Hawk, the global white knight who hasn’t gotten himself killed as of yet—but having his hands in all kinds of pots will surely lead to it.”

Wait. CDS? The wiry guy was the head of the Sinaloa Cartel? Now I got it.

“This is Gabriele Falcone—rightful heir of the Italian Falcone family. Ready to take over the throne,” Hawk said.

Wait, what?

“Wait.” I stared Hawk down, and he stared back, his eyes glimmering and hard. Daring me to contradict him openly.

Didn’t I tell him just minutes ago it was a fuck no? And now what—now he’d told every boss of every single crime organization in the US I would do it.

The fucker had played me.

Trapped me.

Fuck.

I should’ve known. Should’ve seen it coming. Hawk was a masterful puppet player. Pulling strings, thinking ten steps ahead. Always coming out on top. But why this? Why risk his reputation for me? “Seriously? That’s how you want to play this?”

Hawk grinned. “You needed a shove in the right direction.”

“And on second thought.” I turned away from Hawk before the urge to deck him right here became too strong to resist. “Can anyone enlighten me on why the Irish mob, US Bratva, the biggest cartel, and the head of the Italian Mafia in the US just meet up like this?”

Hawk sighed, in a you’ve-got-a-lot-to-learn-kiddo kind of way, I didn’t much appreciate.

I gave him my best shut-up glare—and it worked.

The asshole had earned my loyalty—didn’t mean loyalties couldn’t change.

“Power struggles are usually not very cost-effective. Global alliances make things much easier. And taking control of the trade routes and keeping things under control on a global level is easier when all the big players are in agreement,” Vincenzo said so matter-of-factly as if he was talking about business mergers or banking.

I almost laughed out loud.

I’d forgotten the business side of things. The power you kept up through intimidation, ruthlessness, and pure brutality. But the business side was similar to every other business conglomerate.

I had zero problems torturing and killing people—if they deserved it—had been doing it for Hawk all the time.

Maybe all those special assignments Hawk gave me were just his way of preparing me for this?

I glared at him some more. And the bastard just shrugged.

But business? I had zero interest in the business.

“So, organized crime nowadays is actually a monopoly—and you’re colluding?”

I couldn’t believe it, and here I thought it was all about who killed whom and who was more brutal than the next guy.

“Don’t get me wrong. These meetings”—Vincenzo made a circle with his hand—“are very few and far between. We’re not talking about every single shitty little thing that goes

wrong. And this truce doesn't translate to our day-to-day business."

I shook my head. "So, under different circumstances, this would end up in a Mexican standoff?"

All the other guys nodded. Actually, they looked excited at the prospect. "Doesn't mean this meeting couldn't end in one. But since Hawk invited us so nicely, I guess we should listen to what he has to say," the Irish one said.

Hawk shook his head. "Gabriele will go back and take over as the head of his family. And he might need some help to do just that. I think we're all in agreement that having someone as unstable as Fausto Falcone as the head of the most influential Italian family might create some bumps in the road we all could do without."

Roman Zotov looked me up and down. "Seeing him, I'm thinking he will last an hour after touchdown; who's taking the bet?"

I ground my teeth.

Being underestimated was usually my advantage. But the dismissive way turned my blood into ice.

I envisioned wrapping my arm around his neck and snapping it.

Hawk shot me a glare.

I relaxed. Like it or not, Zotov was probably right about my time of death, though.

"I'm giving him a solid 24 hours. I like a good underdog story," Alvarez said.

"Five," old Signore Salvini said.

"Three," Vincenzo chimed in and shot me a lopsided grin.

Great, not even my former best friend had any confidence in my survival skills.

At least my brother remained silent.

“He might be able to expand his lifespan if he has the right strategic partners in place to ensure his safe arrival.” Hawk glared at Vincenzo, who stared down at his feet.

“Why would you want to go back in?” Vincenzo asked, his face serious.

I sighed, then looked first at Hawk and then at Cristo. This was decision time.

In or out.

In.

“To protect my family.”

That was really the only motivation. I didn’t need it for my ego or even wanted it for money or power.

I always thought all that family-above-all-else shit wasn’t really my MO either—before I joined Hawk. Before I witnessed the family he built.

“My uncle is taking over—his first power move is to marry my mother, his second probably to kill my brothers,” Cristo said, speaking for the first time.

Zotov’s face cleared as if he had an epiphany, and he nodded. “Fausto Falcone. He’s the sadist who has a perverse obsession with having his people do these weird little tests. Even I’ve heard of him. He would make a good Russian.”

I bet. Deranged, brutal, ugly.

“Don’t forget the wives who die or disappear in mysterious ways,” Alvarez said.

My eyes shot to Hawk, then back to Cristo.

How could it be I was the only one who was in the dark about what my uncle had been up to?

“And who is rumored to have killed his brother to take over the family,” Vincenzo said, his eyes locking with mine.

My chest tightened, and I slowly turned to Vincenzo.

Uncle Fausto had killed my father?

Vincenzo shrugged, and my gaze slid to Cristo, who stared at his feet.

“Is this true, Cristo?”

Even I could hear the dangerous edge in my voice. For the past thirteen years, I’d warred between loving and hating my father.

I’d settled on indifference.

But something told me I’d fooled myself because the white-hot rage washing through me was not indifference.

“Cristo?”

He nodded.

Fuck me.

I sighed and forced myself to relax.

And suddenly, everyone else nodded.

Family was something every single one of them understood.

Same as revenge.

“So, what do we get out of it, then?” Zotov asked. And brought my mind back to the meeting at hand.

I shrugged. The hell if I knew what was in it for them?

“The Italians are all over the place right now, very much occupied with themselves and their internal power struggles,” Vincenzo said. “Leadership changes so fast, trade routes are constantly in jeopardy.”

Alvarez nodded. “It’s a fucking nightmare—you never know if you can even unload the cargo by the time a ship arrives, much less which port you can use or who to bribe. It’s a nuisance for sure.”

“So, we push him to the top—establish him as the new head, and create some stability there,” Vincenzo said.

The Irish mobster had remained silent for some time now, and it didn’t go unnoticed. “You got something to say, Donnelly?” Vincenzo asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t care much about Italy—though, according to my brother, it’s a fucking mess. I’m just wondering what’s in it for me. I don’t need the trade routes into Europe.”

“Then what is it you need?” Hawk asked.

He gave a one-sided shrug. “I’ll tell you when I think of something.” He turned to me. “Until then, you’ll owe me a marker.”

Laughter bubbled up within me with the pressure of a geyser. Did they even listen to themselves?

I was a fucking nobody—a sniper, a hunter. The one who did the kind of work you wouldn’t read about in the newspapers. Just moments ago, they’d betted on my staying alive—and their best bet was 24 hours. And now the boss of the Irish mob suggested I owed him a marker?

Hell, I was really not the one for the job. I was ruthless and morally compromised. But I was not a politician. I wasn’t diplomatic or willing to tread lightly.

All qualities I would need to take over.

I’d thought I was that guy once, had been groomed for the job until my first kill broke me—and ironically enough, I resurrected myself as a ruthless killer, unemotional, executing—never deciding on my own targets like I did that first time.

My eyes searched for and clashed with Hawk’s.

He was calm and in control, not even an ounce of stress visible in his face, and he calmed me down immediately.

It will be okay. Was that what he was saying?

But how could becoming a Mafia don ever be okay? I would need to prove myself over and over again. I would need to decide who to kill, maim, and slaughter.

I had the choice between losing the calm trust in my work or losing my family.

Become the monster I was born to be.

“Then it’s decided,” Vincenzo said. “Get the word out, put the plan in motion, and fucking make sure everyone knows to keep him alive and to support him.”

The rest of the guys nodded and dispersed to their planes.

The four of us watched them leave. Each and every one of them came with their own small plane.

They all came alone.

This was the elite of organized crime.

The top of the top.

These were the most dangerous and influential men in the world.

And they’d just decided I would be what? One of them?

“You’re ready,” Hawk said.

I grimaced. “Not sure about the whole politics part, though.” Or the part where I made the decision instead of just pulling the trigger.

“Do we have proof Fausto did it?” I asked Cristo.

“No, but there are rumors.”

I glanced at him sideways, then saw Vincenzo was motioning to me with his head.

“Give me a minute.”

Hawk nodded.

We left Hawk and Cristo behind and stepped outside.

“What are you thinking?” Vincenzo said.

“That you’re all fucking nuts, and I just signed my death certificate.”

Vincenzo nodded. “You’re probably right. There will be a lot of guys challenging your credibility and your commitment to the family.”

“I know.”

“I’ll do what I can, but you need to be careful.”

“I know, thanks for the vote of confidence.”

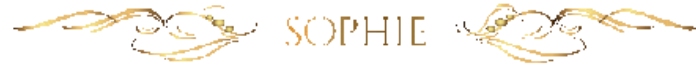
He nodded. “Say hello to home for me.”

I nodded.

I was going home to Italy.

I just hoped I survived long enough to take my mother into my arms.

CHAPTER SIX



Having my arm cut off couldn't be as bad as this.

I was back in my cage, a heavy metal ring chaining my feet together, and my whole body was on fire.

I was burning up, and at the same time, I was incredibly cold.

I wanted to die—something I never thought I would even think.

I couldn't believe I always complained about being locked in a golden cage—courtesy of being born into the Irish mob.

Truthfully, I had no clue about the true meaning of being caged.

Of having no way to escape.

Of pain.

I lay on my side in the cage—the only spot on my skin that wasn't in excruciating pain.

When they had come to get me, I'd hoped I could reason with them.

But I was wrong.

There was no reasoning.

No bargaining.

No escape.

“This is your life now. Learn your new place. And enjoy.”

The Ape's voice echoed through my mind.

I never thought losing my consciousness was a blessing.

Until now.

Until this.

This was a death sentence.

I'd tried to stay strong.

This is your life now. Learn your new place. And enjoy.

Tears gathered in my eyes. I tried not to let them penetrate.

But in the end, I lost.

Was losing. Falling apart. Breaking.

Those men broke me.

And they would do it again and again.

Until my death.

Which would be the only way to escape.

CHAPTER SEVEN



My arrival in Calabria after only a quick stop in Verona was a lot more civil than I thought it would be.

Civil and surreal at the same time.

After our private jet took the final parking position on the private airstrip in the very south of Italy, I watched a battalion of black Mercedes SUVs move in and surround our jet.

A horde of black-suited guys jumped out, armed with everything from fully automatic weapons to a real, live, shoulder-mounted rocket launcher.

Like in a very bad James Bond movie—Italian style.

“Why here and not stay in Verona?” I asked Cristo, who looked as tired and worn out as I was feeling.

Even though my family was originally from Calabria—and still kept the quite luxurious country home here—we had migrated to the northern parts of Italy decades ago—Villa Caliginis on the outskirts of Verona had been our home, for as long as I could remember. Except for when the school year ended. Then the whole family moved down to Calabria to spend the hot summer months down here to enjoy the crystal-clear waters and private beach of our country home.

“Mamma refused to leave after we buried Papa,” Cristo said.

“And are these our guys, or will we experience how good and fast this plane can burn?” I nodded toward the small window to the guys outside.

Not that I was really concerned. I already knew the fastest way outside, plus, I'd had enough time during the flight to make peace with my mortality.

This was the path I chose. Now I would see it through to the end.

"Our guys," Cristo said before he handed me a bulletproof vest and we disembarked the plane.

As soon as the convoy took off at breakneck speed, Cristo barked into the phone, then listened.

I took the time to assess my surroundings.

We'd chosen a secure, privately owned—and by privately owned I meant owned by our family—airport.

But apparently, we were expecting trouble, even here.

Being the hunted one didn't sit well with me. I was usually the hunter. I operated alone most of the time, and most of my targets never saw me coming.

But being in the Mafia was different. They didn't care about clandestine operations.

They cared about making a statement. So, if they killed me, they would do it publicly. Send a message and eliminate me at the same time.

"We're heading to Uncle Fausto's estate," Cristo said.

My chest tightened. "Why?"

Cristo's one-sided shrug wasn't very comforting. "He's invited us for dinner. He's being hospitable. Welcoming the lost son and heir with open arms."

I narrowed my eyes. Fucking politics had started already.

My uncle would be all friendly while trying to find an opportunity to stab me in the back at the same time.

Killing your own relatives was much more tricky than killing a rival.

But maybe it wasn't so bad.

Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

Hawk's words reverberated through my mind.

No better way to do that than to have a look around Uncle Fausto's house and get a picture of the situation and his depravity myself.

"Fine," I said and locked eyes with Cristo until he nodded. We wouldn't talk about our suspicions out loud. Not here. Not since about half of the family was on my uncle's side, and there was no way to know who to trust.

No way to know if we were being listened to.

I was operating in a hostile environment.

So, the only way to make sure my brothers and I survived was to play the role. And play it well.

And in the end, who knew, maybe we would even come out on top.

The drive wasn't long. I looked out the window and watched the achingly familiar landscape fly by. The heat turned my vision hazy. Even the unmovable mountains of my childhood appeared like a mirage in the distance.

We passed a fig tree—big enough to cast a decent shadow on the old guy and his donkey resting beneath it.

I'd operated all over the world in the past couple of years, but I'd never set foot in Italy again.

Not once.

And now I was home.

We drove up a long driveway, bordered by lean, tall Mediterranean cypresses.

My uncle's home was an old castle, not unlike our own country home, Castello dei Pietra.

Evidence of the long, rich history going back to the Greek emperors—and the wealth and influence of our family.

My family.

"Any last advice?" I asked Cristo.

"Don't let the slaves shock you."

I tightened my eyes. Was he being literal? “The slaves?”

Cristo nodded, his nose wrinkled in disgust. “Uncle Fausto has been known for his perverse proclivities. Now that Papa is gone and he’s gearing towards being head of the family, rumor says he’s not hiding anything anymore.”

“So, he has honest-to-god slaves?”

Cristo nodded. “Servants, sex slaves—you can think of it, he has it. He always harped on father to move into human trafficking, which is apparently very lucrative these days.”

Cristo’s face showed disgust. “Father always refused, though who knows where Fausto has his hands in? And not just because it’s a profitable business. He’s probably doing it to ensure his own supply.”

“His own supply?” I was sounding like a parrot. I’d encountered slavery. Encountered human trafficking all over the world. I knew this. But I hadn’t expected to find it here. In my family. Hadn’t expected my uncle to be that deranged.

“Allegedly, he never keeps them long—just long enough to break them.” Cristo shrugged. “Most of them die. At least, those are the rumors.”

Fuck me.

The car stopped, and I looked outside into the grinning face of my overweight but tiny uncle. He’d lost his black hair, and he’d aged much more than I’d expected—testament to an unhealthy lifestyle.

Slaves...

I waited until Cristo was outside before stepping out, as well.

I swiveled and scanned all the feasible positions for a sniper attack. Braced myself for the glint of the sun hitting the barrel or the scope.

But I found none.

So, my uncle would use something more underhanded to kill me.

But I had my guard up.

This was a battle of who was the most sly and the most ruthless.

And to survive, I had to be.

My last thirteen years had trained me for exactly this.

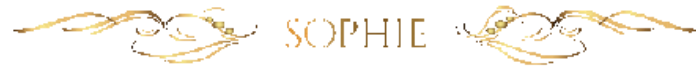
I had forty-nine black lines tattooed on my thigh.

Forty-nine kills.

Forty-nine lives I'd ended.

And it wouldn't stop there.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Before the evening came—and they came to get me—this day had seemed endless.

I'd gotten used to my cuffs. Gotten used to lying in my cage because it wasn't even high enough to sit.

The marks from yesterday had almost started to disappear—at least the ones where the skin didn't break.

The good thing was nobody took me for another whipping or commanded me to suck someone's dick.

The bad thing was they handed me a see-through gown—and started a different kind of torture.

When I thought the Ape couldn't take any more from me than he'd already taken, he found another way to torment me—not hurt me physically but mentally.

So here I was, in the Ape's huge dining room, that could easily be used to hold a ball because of the sheer size and grandiosity of it. Though right now, it was filled with men in black suits standing around the long and extravagantly set dinner table talking in Italian. They looked dangerous, though most of them seemed as if they'd enjoyed their mamma's pasta a little too much.

And I?

I was serving the Ape's guests in this thing that wouldn't be considered decent even as a beach throw-over, my naked body visible, including the angry red welts painted all over my body.

My eyes were glued to the floor when I served drinks, like an automaton.

I was broken. Dead inside.

“Thank you.”

The words—spoken in American English and without accent—registered, and my eyes shot up.

The clearest, cold, blue eyes hit me as if an icicle broke off the ledge of a roof and knocked me flat on my ass.

When our eyes locked, he didn’t look away. Instead, he narrowed his black brows and stared at me.

A blue-eyed devil.

Cold-hearted but intrigued.

And against my better judgment, I held his gaze.

He was different from all the others—bigger, bulkier, and instead of blending in with all the other black suits, he stood out like a sore thumb.

He wore blue jeans, a white T-shirt bulging over his heavily developed chest, a loose, open, gray shirt, and a dark blue tie that hung around his neck like an afterthought but which made his eyes pop.

His hair was long, tied back in a messy man-bun. A lesser man would’ve looked like a hipster. But not him, not even with the stubble covering his strong jaw.

He looked completely at ease, and he looked directly at me, causing butterflies to erupt in my belly.

I wasn’t broken after all.

There was still a little fight left.

He filled my body with life and my head with hope.

I inhaled. His scent was musky and pure male. Dangerous, but also fresh, like he was at home both on Earth and at sea.

His scent matched his blue eyes.

And he saw me, the real me.

I wasn't invisible.

I was still me.

We maintained our staring contest until someone stepped up to him, said something in Italian, and hugged him.

Only then, I slipped away.

Panting and shivering.

But suddenly awake again.

This was my chance to escape. No shackles, no cage.

On my way across the dining room, I avoided my tormentor, but I always made sure I knew exactly where he was.

The Ape was a big deal around here.

He was residing like a king. Jovial and friendly to everyone.

Almost everyone.

I caught him staring at the blue-eyed devil with a murderous expression.

Pure, unadulterated hatred.

It lasted only a second before he hid it behind a saccharine smile that made me shiver.

He'd had the same smile, right before it started.

Right before he told the Bull what to do to me and got off on watching me being whipped.

I'd held his gaze until I lost consciousness.

Damn.

I suppressed my thoughts and slipped out of the room and into the empty entrance hall.

I needed to function, and if I thought about what had happened, I couldn't.

I crossed the room, the marble floor cold against my bare feet and was almost at the heavy entrance door when I felt eyes on me.

I looked over my shoulder.

Sure enough. There he was.

Watching me.

Silently.

And his eyes...

His eyes I could feel on me like a physical caress, even from across the room.

Then he crossed the room in huge strides. The way he moved, all fluid and soundless—like a black panther in the night.

I couldn't take my eyes off of him, couldn't move until he stopped next to me.

And opened the door.

I stared at him. Was he helping me escape?

Suddenly, he grabbed my forearm, and I shrank back. “Wha—”

“What do you think you're doing?” The Ape's booming voice thundered through the room.

I froze.

But the blue-eyed devil didn't hesitate, didn't let go of my arm either. “I thought I'd sample the goods. Isn't that why she's here?” he said in perfect English.

I stared at him, but he didn't look at me. Instead, his intense focus was on my tormentor.

“No, that's not why she's here. *She's mine. And only here to serve my guests.*”

I shivered.

The blue-eyed devil squeezed my arm, then let go. “My bad, then.”

He closed the heavy entrance door right in front of my face.

And my heart sank with the resounding click reverberating through my skull.

So close to freedom.

So close to getting out of the house. Once out of here, I had a real chance to escape.

Both men waited for me to go back into the dining room, and when I passed my tormentor, he grabbed my shoulder and gouged—right where the bullet had grazed me.

I gasped and sank down to my knees, collapsing from pain.

The glimmer of satisfaction in his hard eyes and the evil smile in light of the pain he'd inflicted on me made me shudder. "Go, slave, and do what you're told."

I pulled myself together, got up, and without a backward glance, moved back into the dining room.

But I could feel the blue-eyed devil's stare burning a hole in my back.

I continued my serving-drinks duty until the guests got seated and the Ape took the head of the table.

Only men.

A sea of black.

Black suits, black-haired and black-eyed. Conversing in Italian.

Except for the blue-eyed devil who was sitting to the Ape's right, his back to me.

Even though he was black-haired, as well, and even though he spoke fluent Italian.

He stood out. Was different.

Everyone appeared to respect him—but there were sideways glances and murmurs, as well, like an undercurrent. As if everybody was wary of his presence, as if he was somehow an anomaly.

I looked away from his back, and my eyes got stuck on the Ape's hands.

He opened a vial and filled some kind of clear liquid into his own glass.

Drugs? Or was he spiking his wine with more alcohol?

But why would he do that?

Then the Ape nodded at a server with a big meat platter in his hands, who'd been hovering to the side.

I watched the short interaction, and then the server carried the platter toward the table.

He leaned forward and knocked some glasses over when he placed it on the table—the blue-eyed devil's glasses.

“Oh, *dio mio*.” The Ape jumped up immediately, pushed the server to the side, and dried everything with his own cloth napkin. “Gabriele, *my apologies. Here, take mine*,” he said and handed the blue-eyed devil his own wineglass.

The one he'd just spiked with something.

My heart raced. What the hell was going on? Was all of this staged? To get him to drink?

Damn.

I shouldn't care, but I did.

I grabbed a glass of wine from the tray of the server next to me, then approached the table.

Don't drink, don't drink. Please don't drink.

I stopped right next to him.

He looked up at me, and his eyes widened. I handed him the glass and shook my head slightly.

I didn't know if he understood what I was trying to tell him, but he took the glass from my hand, gave the other one back to the Ape, said something in Italian, and nodded at me.

Then he clinked his glass against the Ape's, and both took a sip.

At least the Ape pretended to do it.

Or had I been wrong?

I retreated, not without catching the murderous look the Ape threw at me as if it was a poisonous arrow.

Not mistaken.

But I'd just signed my death sentence.

Later tonight, he would retaliate.

But at least I'd saved the only guy who had even looked at me
as if I was a human being.

As if I still mattered.

CHAPTER NINE



Holy fucking hell.

I forced my eyes from her for what felt like the hundredth time. Somehow, for some reason, Fausto's beautiful little slave had bewitched me.

When Cristo gave me a heads-up about the slaves, I thought it was enough. Thought I was prepared.

Until her eyes met mine.

I'd never seen eyes like that. Green, like new leaves in spring, kissed by the sun.

At first, they'd been dull, then I could see the surprise, then the fire in them.

She was beautiful. Fair. Northern European, maybe? Though her reaction to my words made me think she caught my US accent. Was she American? But how could she be?

Would Fausto really be so stupid and hold an American hostage as a slave?

I couldn't believe that.

Couldn't believe any of it.

I scoffed, which earned me curious looks from the men around me.

I should be vigilant. Should assess the situation and them. Should be entirely focused on the dangerous undercurrents all around me.

Instead, most of my much-needed blood had left my brain and pooled in my crotch.

And what was left working in my brain was more focused on watching her move—or float—around the room, than increasing my chances of survival.

I couldn't even... Why the hell was I so obsessed with her?

Yes, she looked beautiful. Her pale skin, clear green eyes, the blond hair made her seem more like an angel than an actual human being. Like a blinding star in a sea of darkness.

The see-through gown she was wearing was revealing more than it was hiding.

And even though I only looked at her body for a second—before I felt my uncle's vindictive little eyes on me—I could see the angry red welts beneath.

And it took all my self-control not to go bat-shit crazy.

But when exactly had I ever lost my brains over a woman, any woman? No matter how ethereal, beautiful, alluring, or damaged.

Exactly never.

Not once.

Not until now.

Not until her.

I scanned the room and found her again. It seemed like she was hiding behind a potted plant. Trying to make herself invisible.

As if she could ever achieve that in a million years.

Some guy, one of Fausto's men, approached her and I could see the panic in her wide eyes as she froze, her back pressed against the wall.

Every single muscle in my body tightened. Every single fiber screamed at me to protect her.

Fuck.

Cristo elbowed me in the side—hard.

I flipped around, ready to pounce on him. “What?”

He scowled, then leaned closer and whispered into my ear, “You’re staring at her again. Stop that shit if you don’t want to get us killed. Or her.”

I clenched my teeth. Closed my eyes for a second. Then exhaled. When I opened my eyes again, she was gone from her place.

Fuck.

I needed to stop.

Right the fuck now.

“I need some fresh air—be back in a sec,” I said to Cristo.

“I’m coming with you.”

“No. Give me five; I’ll be just outside.”

He narrowed his brows. He’d been almost comically protective of me all evening.

“I promise I won’t run away.”

He nodded, though he didn’t seem to like leaving me out of his sight.

Being outside alone was a risk but a risk I was willing to take just to get one fucking minute alone to center myself.

I needed a minute away from this fucked-up house, my fucked-up uncle, and his fucked-up slave.

Five fucking minutes alone to get my head back on straight.

I crossed the room, forced myself not to look for her, then stepped outside into the cool night air.

The sound of the cicadas was deafening and reminded me so much of the lazy summer evenings of my childhood; my throat tightened.

I’d missed this so much.

Italy.

My family.

Home.

I walked along a stone path leading to the pool, then shortcutted through a meadow to the darker area of the extensive garden of Uncle Fausto's villa.

I'd staked out the house and the security system. Dodged Uncle Fausto's watchful eyes and those of his goons all evening.

Except when I followed her into the foyer instead of what I should've done—just blocked the door and hindered her escape.

Fuck.

I ran my fingers through my hair. Here I was back to obsessing. Even out here.

When I should be in there, focusing on getting a read on all the men in the room. Cousins of ours, capos, 'made' men who were most likely on Fausto's side of this war for power.

I was in enemy territory. And the only two men I could trust were Cristo and Alessandro—my brothers.

I replayed the evening.

There weren't any overt threats or strange situations.

She came back to mind.

The way she handed me a new glass after mine got knocked over.

She'd tried to tell me something, when she handed me the glass, though I missed what.

Fuck.

If this evening was any evidence of how coming back home had completely messed up my mind and fucked with my ability to focus on the important, I didn't know if coming back was such a smart decision.

There was a noise to my right, and I crouched down and froze.

Was this the attempt on my life I'd been waiting for all evening?

I waited, listened.

Movement, a muffled cry—female—when someone stumbled and fell.

I moved toward the sound, farther away from the lights. There were bushes separating the vast gardens into smaller areas which would make hunting someone incredibly fun.

I could hear her short gasps quite clearly now.

She was running, darting from hedge to hedge—trying to remain hidden in the shadows.

Escaping or playing?

I closed my eyes and calculated her distance and trajectory, then moved into position and waited until she was on top of me.

I stepped forward. “In a hurry?”

It took me a split-second to recognize her and cover her mouth to muffle her shriek. I pulled her struggling frame against my body and with me into the bushes, carefully avoiding her flailing arms and legs.

Her heartbeat thrashed against my arm.

“Shhh. Be quiet.”

But instead of doing exactly that, she took the flesh of my middle finger between her teeth and bit down—hard.

Fuck.

It hurt like a bitch. She’d probably taken a piece out of me.

She was a fighter.

I leaned down until my lips touched her ear. “Do that again, and I’ll take you over my knee, and paint your ass a beautiful shade of red, Stellina,” I whispered, then inhaled her scent. She didn’t wear any perfume. But her smell was bewitching—light, female, and utterly irresistible.

The American slave.

My obsession.

Stellina—little star because it fit her.

When she turned quiet and softened in my arms, I released her mouth. “Where are you going?”

“Escape.”

The word was almost inaudible. A silent sound floating on one long exhale.

Fuck.

“Who are you?”

She shrugged.

Why wouldn't she tell me her name? “How long have you been here?”

She shrugged again.

I clenched my jaw. “If you want my help,” I growled into her ear, “you better start talking.”

I could feel her vibrating with angry energy in my arms.

“You should help me because I helped you,” she said defiantly.

“You did what?” I couldn't hide the amusement in my voice. Didn't even try. In what world could a powerless slave like her have helped me?

“I saved your life. The drink the Ape offered you had poison in it. If I hadn't stepped in, you would be dead by now.”

Poison? Was she serious? I hadn't seen anything. And who the fuck was the Ape? Uncle Fausto? “Who put poison in my drink?”

“Not your drink, his drink, the one he gave you after his lackey spilled yours.”

I replayed the situation in my head. Uncle Fausto handed me his wine after the spill. Would he be crazy enough to poison his own drink and then hand it to me?

“Wouldn't he be dead by now? I gave him back the drink. I saw him sip.”

She shrugged.

Fuck.

I didn't know what to believe, had no evidence of her claims.

"You can always check the tapes."

"Tapes?"

"There are surveillance cameras everywhere. He's deranged; he gets off on watching."

"Watching what?"

She snapped her mouth shut.

I gathered her see-through dress and bunched it up in my hand until I could reach beneath it.

Touch her soft skin.

I let my fingers skim over her thighs, then her stomach. Could feel the welts and the scabs where her skin cracked. "Watching what, Stellina?"

She'd been whipped or caned. I once witnessed an informant of mine getting whipped in Afghanistan. I'd seen his dead body—similar marks.

She winced when my finger skimmed over another scab.

White-hot rage torpedoed through me and left a blazing fire behind. "Did he do this to you?"

A single sob escaped her throat, and the sound almost killed me.

Something inside my chest suddenly shifted as if giving way to make space for her where there'd only been emptiness before. "He did this." I didn't even need her answer. I just knew. "What else has he done to you, Stellina? Trust me, and I will take care of you."

She sighed and lowered her head. "I can't."

"Can't what?"

"Trust you. You're one of them."

I pressed my lips into a tight line, then nodded once. She couldn't trust me, but I wouldn't leave her.

“You’re wrong,” I whispered into her ear, could feel her shudder, which made adrenaline rush through me. “I’m not one of them. I’m far worse. But I’m willing to make you a deal.”

She shook her head. “Just let me go, please.” Her voice was shaky, and my dick stirred to life.

Never.

I would never let her go.

Deep in my chest, possessiveness awoke like a sleeping dragon breathing fire, and one word reverberated through my skull.

Mine.

I wrapped my arm around her neck and squeezed. She struggled until she lost consciousness.

Mia Stellina.

She was mine, if she wanted to be or not.

And I would take care of her—if she wanted me to or not.

CHAPTER TEN



After she lost consciousness, I took her in my arms. She was way too light.

Skin and bones.

Anger formed into a big, burning ball in my stomach.

Fausto would pay, even if he wasn't my father's killer.

Nobody was allowed to treat her like this.

He had his death coming. And I would be the one to take his life. While looking into his eyes—up close and personal.

A calm expanded through my body, and I exhaled.

There it was.

The beast inside of me.

I'd hidden it well these past thirteen years. I thought that making sure I was only the executioner and not the judge would kill it.

I'd trusted Hawk's judgment, trusted his morals.

But nevertheless, the seed of darkness was within me.

The beast was a part of me.

And I would rain hell on everyone who crossed me.

I chuckled.

I'd been hesitant if I could go back.

Now I knew.

Darkness was my natural environment.

I was born for it. Bred for it. And I signed on with my first kill of an innocent man.

And if my soul was damned anyway, I would make sure at least hers would stay bright like starlight.

I took her listless body into a fireman's carry and silently made my way through the dark garden.

Once we arrived at the driveway, I dumped her behind the garage.

Getting her into one of the vehicles without being seen would be tricky.

My only hope was to find one that was unlocked or pick the lock—without triggering the alarm.

I tried the last vehicle in the long row of black Mercedes SUVs.

Locked.

Fuck.

Same as the next one, and the next.

I was coming awfully close to the two guards standing by the first vehicle, smoking and chatting.

Fuck.

There were only two ways to follow someone—or hide someone.

Stay invisible or make sure they only notice you.

“Hey.” I stepped into the light and waved at the two guards.

They both drew their weapons, but I kept my hands up and out when I walked toward them.

They came closer.

I didn't look back—erased her from my memory completely.

Make sure they only notice you.

“Who are you?” I said in my best authoritative voice. My Italian had been a bit rusty, but it was coming back with usage. Like muscle memory.

“We’re with you.”

“Why?”

The taller one looked familiar. But in a sea of black suits, it had been difficult to memorize all the faces.

“I’m Matteo, Cristo’s friend,” the tall one said.

That was all that was needed to jog my memory.

Matteo and Cristo had been inseparable as kids. Annoying as hell—like little brothers used to be—but they’d always been together.

“It took me a moment to recognize you, Matteo.” I hugged him and kissed both his cheeks.

I still couldn’t be one hundred percent sure. But I needed his help. “Can you give me the keys to the last vehicle, please? I need to make a private phone call.”

“Of course, Signore Falcone.”

I chuckled. “Gabe.”

Matteo shuffled through a bunch of key fobs.

I needed to get used to my new role. Signore Falcone. Soon they would call me Don—if I survived that long. Was Stellina telling the truth?

Had Fausto attempted to poison me?

There was only one way to find out, but first, I needed to hide her.

Matteo handed me a key fob.

“Grazie, mille.” I bowed, then made my way back.

I opened the trunk first, let them think I intended to sit there.

I waited, watched them, and pretended to talk to my mother on the phone—while recording my voice.

At first, they looked at me every now and then, but when they finally turned their backs on me, I sprang into action.

I left the phone in the trunk, replayed the recording, then bridged the distance to the garage, and hoisted her up against my body.

Luck was on my side because they still had their backs to me when I dumped her into the trunk.

I searched for some rope and found one.

Mafia 101: always have your trunk stacked with all the things you might need to hurt, kill, or threaten.

I looked at her in the dim light. I'd put her to sleep, but she wouldn't stay that way for long, and once she was awake, she damn sure wouldn't stay put—the exact opposite of what I needed her to do to remain undetected.

I tied her hands behind her back, slung the rope around her feet, and tied both together.

She wouldn't be able to get up.

Then I wrapped her into a fleece blanket I found so she wouldn't get cold staying immovable for so long.

I pulled my tie over my head and made a double knot.

I skimmed her milky white skin, then forced my finger inside her mouth, opened it, and placed the knot between her jaws, and fastened it behind her head in a makeshift gag.

I ensured she could still breathe, then grabbed my phone, stopped the recording, closed the trunk, and locked the vehicle.

The tinted windows should obscure the view inside—should anyone look.

But if she made too much noise or started rocking the vehicle, I couldn't guarantee her safety.

We needed to leave.

ASAP.

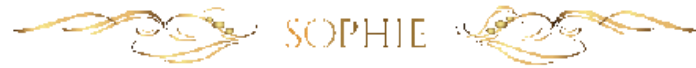
I put the fob into my pocket.

Over my dead body would anyone else but me open that vehicle again.

Over my dead body would anyone ever own her.

Except me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



I woke up with a start and a crick in my neck.
What the fuck?

I tried to move my arms—which was not happening.

Neither could I move my legs.

I opened my eyes, but there was complete darkness surrounding me.

I shut them again and tried to get a feel for my surroundings.

There weren't any bars pressing against my body.

Not the cage.

Instead, I felt warm, almost cozy—besides the chafing around my wrists and ankles.

There was a strange cotton-ey feeling in my mouth. I swirled my tongue—at least something I could move—and found a gag.

What the fuck?

Panic flooded my body, and I sucked in air through my nose.

What the hell had happened?

Then it all came back to me in a rush.

He happened.

The blue-eyed devil caught me.

I'd almost made it.

A sob tore from my chest.

So close.

And now?

Now I was a prisoner again.

A prisoner of him.

Which might turn out even worse.

There were voices coming in from the outside, and I froze.

I could hear car doors open and close.

Then the beeping of the vehicle I was in.

Fuck.

I tried my arms again. I'd learned in my self-defense classes how to get rid of all kinds of bonds, but it all required at least wiggle room, which I had none of, and a little bit of space between the arms—which was also non-existent.

The car shook when someone sat down.

"I'll drive," someone said, then they turned the motor on.

We started to move, and I started to panic.

Where would they take me?

Would I ever be free again?

Would I ever see my sisters, my family, again?

Would it be worse?

The Ape never let anyone touch me there. Wasn't even interested in anything sexual—except when he told me to suck the Bull's dick.

He was more interested in my pain. So, I was still a virgin—for now. Which was a miracle in and of itself.

But I'd seen how the blue-eyed devil looked at me, how he touched my skin.

He wouldn't content himself with whipping me.

He would swallow me whole.

Take me—even against my will.

If the Ape was a hellhound. The blue-eyed devil was the devil himself.

And he wouldn't show any mercy.

“Remain quiet, Stellina, and soon we'll talk.”

It took me a few seconds to realize the words had been spoken in English. And it took me a couple of seconds more to realize they were directed at me.

Stellina. He'd called me that before.

Made up a name because I refused to tell him mine.

And I would keep refusing.

Because whatever I could control, I would control.

I might be a prisoner. A slave. But I needed to hold on.

Needed to hold onto the hope that my uncle and my father would move Heaven and Earth to rescue me.

And wasn't my father more powerful than anyone else?

“Have you lost your mind? Who are you talking to?” another voice said—also in English, also without accent.

“I might've taken something of Uncle Fausto's.”

“You might've?”

“Mhmm.”

“Fuck, Gabe, what did you take?”

“It's more a who.”

“A who?” The guy sounded completely dumbfounded.

“*La schiava.*”

“*La schiava?* You took the slave? Are you completely nuts?”

They were back to English, so I could at least understand what they were talking about.

Me—they were talking about me. I was *la schiava*—the slave.

“He allegedly already tried to kill me, so giving him one more reason doesn’t change the outcome.”

“He did what? When? But why?”

“Why not?”

“I know you, Brother; we’re not taking slaves.”

“Well, I do now.”

“Incredible.”

“Believe it, Cristo. Now I need a good hiding place for her.”

“*Cazzo.*”

I didn’t catch a lot from their conversation from then on, but it sounded like they were trading insults in Italian.

Actually, I only caught two things. The one named Cristo was not happy.

And they were brothers.

A family.

An Italian family.

All men, all dressed in black suits, holding slaves as if they were above the law.

As if they were the law.

Which could only mean one thing.

I was a slave to the Italian Mafia.

Our archenemies.

So, getting me back would mean my father had to start a war.

Or I would never get back home again.

CHAPTER TWELVE



“I need you to cut off the video feed of the underground parking and then take her up to my room, but keep her tied up,” I said to Cristo as soon as we entered the grounds of Castello dei Pietra, my family home...castle... fortress. I opened the window and inhaled the familiar scent of burnt earth, pine trees, and salty air.

Home.

“I’ll go say hello to Alessandro and Mamma and be there as soon as I can.”

“You’re not staying in your room,” Cristo said.

“I’m not?”

He shook his head. “Mamma moved out of the suite. You’re the new boss—you’ll be treated like it.”

The suite, my parents’ suite.

I rubbed at the heaviness settling in my chest. My father was gone. I was back to replace him.

I let myself feel the pain of that loss sink in.

Never again would I see his face, never again hear his voice, or walk into the library to smell his unique blend of cigar smoke and aftershave. I’d never get the chance to tell him... what...I didn’t even know.

We’d had a love/hate relationship growing up. He’d been hard on me—as hard as you needed to be on the heir of one of the leading families in the Italian Mafia.

And I'd been a major failure and disappointment—which became abundantly clear by losing my shit after my first kill and failing to live up to my father's expectations.

We never spoke after I left. I was too ashamed. But that didn't change my love for him and Mamma.

I rubbed my neck.

I'd been a failure in my father's eyes...and in my own eyes.

Was that why I came back? To prove something to a dead man?

I exhaled and stared at the building illuminated by security lights.

No time like the present to face what I'd avoided for years.

I exited the car without looking back, praying Cristo would do what I asked of him.

I didn't want to think we had traitors in our own home, but before I had a firm grip on the situation and threat level, I had to assume the worst.

Everywhere was enemy territory.

And nowhere was safe, not for me and not for my pretty little captive.

"You should help me because I helped you."

Just remembering her throaty voice was enough to make my dick stir.

Fuck.

She was practically a child. I should let her go. Help her to get back home.

But not yet...I wasn't ready just yet.

Intuition told me to keep her, at least for a little while.

Intuition or want.

Because I wanted her by my side, wanted to find out who she was and how Fausto had gotten her.

Curiosity then.

And as soon as I knew, I would either send her home or use her as a bargaining chip in my fight against Fausto.

It was always good to have something up your sleeve. Especially playing a game with life-and-death stakes.

I took the stairs from the underground parking into the house two at a time. Eager to get this reunion over with.

I bypassed the family room—a room we never used—and made my way straight to the kitchen.

The kitchen was the soul of every good Italian home.

And it was the soul of ours.

I stopped when I saw my mother. She was still beautiful—even though her jet-black hair was streaked with gray strands, she didn't look a day older than she did when I last saw her.

That morning of the day I'd tried so hard to forget.

No wonder my father had snatched her up as soon as he'd laid eyes on her. She'd been barely eighteen when they met in Rome—her first stop starting out her gap year.

“Mamma.”

She froze, then very carefully put down her wineglass and turned toward me.

I could see the uncertainty in her eyes—uncertainty and joy.

A perfect mirror of my own feelings.

But I shouldn't have had any doubt.

She opened her arms, tears gathering in her eyes, and I crossed the room and took her in mine.

Home.

It took a while until her sobs subsided, and I just held her in my arms.

I'd forgotten how it felt. Forgotten how much I loved my mother. How good and whole she was—despite being the wife of an Italian Mafia king.

She leaned back and skimmed my cheek with her thumb. “I’m so happy you’re back, Gabriel. Happy and sad.”

Her eyes clouded again.

“What’s going on, Mamma?”

She sighed, struggled out of my arms, and took a healthy sip of her wine.

“You’re a widow. You should be perfectly okay to stay that way and never marry again,” I said. “I’m sure Alessandro and Cristo are beyond happy to have you cooking and caring for them. So, what’s this I’m hearing about you marrying Uncle Fausto?”

She sighed, avoided looking at me.

No fucking way. I’ve changed the whole trajectory of my life to be here. I at least deserved some answers.

I softly took the glass from her hand, then grabbed her chin until she looked at me. “Talk to me. Make me understand.”

I didn’t like the uncertainty and the fear glimmering in her eyes.

“Your uncle has some information. Information that—if it came out—would destroy this family.”

“So, you’d rather sacrifice yourself than have this family go to hell. That’s beyond fucked-up.”

She hit my upper arm. Hard enough to get my attention. “Don’t cuss. Have you forgotten your manners, Gabriel?”

I loved how she pronounced my name. Gabriel—the American version of my name. Nobody else ever called me Gabriel.

When Hawk took me in, he called me Falcon from day one—that’s who I’d been for the past fifteen years.

Falcon or Gabe.

Cristo and Vincenzo had called me Gabriele—the Italian pronunciation—or Gabe.

My mom was the only person who called me Gabriel.

“If I can prevent hurting someone I love more than anything in the world, I will gladly give my life,” she said.

Fuck.

If it was only her life to give. My thoughts immediately turned back to Cristo and my little captive.

Did he accomplish what I’d asked him to do? Or did word already get out?

Did Fausto already know I stole his slave?

And what kind of sadistic punishment would she receive if he ever got her in his hands again—or my mother?

I turned around when I heard footsteps approaching, shifted my mother behind me, and grabbed a knife from the knife block.

But lowered it as soon as I saw my brother step through the doorway.

“Alessio.”

My brother stared at me as if he’d seen a ghost. Then his face transformed into an ugly sneer.

Not happy, then.

“So, you’re really back.”

I raised a single eyebrow. Didn’t Cristo mention Alessandro was on board with me coming back, even wanted me back?

“I was wondering if you had the guts to do it.” He was speaking English with me—which all three of us—thanks to our mother’s insistence—spoke without an Italian accent.

“Yes, apparently, I’m stupid enough to have come back.”

Alessandro nodded. “So, the old man was right, after all,” he said, before turning around and leaving.

“Give him time,” my mother said and caressed my arm. “He has had the hardest time adjusting to your papa’s death.”

I nodded, opened the fridge, grabbed a platter of cheese and a glass of olives, then went to the wooden box and grabbed a

loaf of bread. “I’m beat. I’m going to bed. Let’s talk in the morning.”

My mother smiled at me. “You always needed a nighttime snack.” She sighed. “I prepared the suite myself. I hope you feel as safe and happy there, as I always did with your papa.” Her voice turned hoarse, and her eyes turned watery.

Oh fuck.

I grabbed her and pulled her against my chest.

This was it. This was what I’d successfully buried for years.

My heart.

My soul.

And with it all the people I loved.

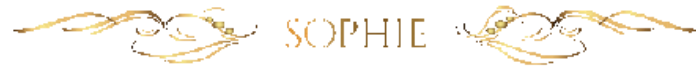
My family had been my weakness.

I didn’t think it still was.

Didn’t think I still had it in me.

I was wrong.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



I sighed against my gag.

At first, I'd hoped the brother wouldn't be as ruthless as my captor.

I was wrong.

He just hoisted me into an elevator, then into a room, and threw me on the bed. And since then, instead of leaving, he was staring at me from across the room as if I was some kind of lab rat.

And I was throwing daggers back.

Fucking asshole.

I'd lost feeling in my hands a while ago. My shoulders ached, and I had the headache from hell.

My mouth was dry, and my throat hurt.

I pretty much felt like crying—not that I would give him the satisfaction of showing any weakness.

The door opened. "Cristo."

My whole body tightened and started to buzz when I heard his voice.

"Everything okay?" Cristo said and straightened.

I craned my neck. There he was again.

The blue-eyed devil.

A shiver of awareness and fear ran down my spine.

The two moved to the door, and I couldn't see them anymore.

"You can go now. I'll take it from here."

"You can't hide her forever."

"I know." He sighed.

"If Fausto finds out, he'll kill you. You and her both."

"I know."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because I wanted her."

He said it with so much force. As if I was Helena of Troy and he a Greek conqueror who took what or who he wanted. My skin broke out in goosebumps.

"You could've bought her from him."

My throat tightened.

You could have bought her from him.

As if I was nothing more than a thing to be bought. Not a human being. What kind of barbarians talked like that?

"Maybe he would've sold her. Or maybe he would've used her for one of his insane little tests. Forget what you saw. Forget what you know. I will take care of it," the blue-eyed devil said.

It. Not her.

This sounded a lot like I wasn't going to live much longer, that, or he was going to let me go soon.

The one or the other.

I heard the door fall closed, then silence.

Was he staring at me? Thinking about what he would do to me?

I tried to move, tried to get him into my field of vision.

But I wasn't strong enough.

I pulled on the ropes but cried out when a white-hot spear of pain shot up my arms.

“Stop fighting.”

He was next to me, behind me. Close, so close.

And I still couldn't see him.

My breathing turned ragged.

And then he moved into my sight. Squatted down next to the bed and in front of my face, and the full force of his blue eyes hit me.

Rendered me frozen.

“You will not scream if I remove the gag.” His finger skimmed my skin alongside the gag. His voice was dark and low. Too quiet. He smiled, but his eyes remained cold, dark, and threatening.

“You will not try to escape when I remove your binds.”

He fisted my hair until my scalp prickled. Then leaned forward until his nose touched mine.

“If you scream, I'll gag you again; if you escape, I'll drag you right back, and if you get caught—” He leaned sideways and inhaled at my neck, like an animal sniffing its prey. Then his lips touched my ear, and my breath got stuck in my throat. “— You will go back to Uncle Fausto and his whip. Do you understand?”

He leaned back again, and I could finally catch my breath.

“I can't guarantee your survival outside of this suite. If anyone finds out you're here. That's it. Do you understand?”

I closed my eyes, tried to buy myself some time to get my breathing and my erratic heartbeat under control again.

He waited, still only inches from my face.

I steeled myself, opened my eyes, then rolled them at him.

What else could you do when your captor intimidated you to the point of panic but at the same time wanted your cooperation?

His eyes turned darker, a menacing stormy blue, like the wild Irish Sea.

Hell.

My father always told me my rebellious streak would be the death of me.

I didn't think he meant my literal death.

But it just might.

He gripped my jaw and squeezed.

"You're playing with fire, little one. Don't test me, Stellina. Because you will get burned. And if you thought my uncle was cruel." He looked down at my body; I could feel his eyes on my breasts, my stomach, my thighs as if he was touching me, then he looked back up and stared into my eyes as if he could see inside of me.

"You have no idea what cruel really looks like."

His growl caused my skin to break out in goose bumps. When he caught me in the garden, I thought he hesitated, thought he might want to help me. But now I knew better.

Out of the frying pan into the fire.

I'd escaped my captivity, only to be caught again.

I'd been a slave. Been beaten and hurt. But all that only had an effect on my body.

With him, it wouldn't be like that.

He still held my gaze, a cold fire burning in his eyes.

His presence was calm but dangerous, all-consuming.

If he wanted to destroy me, he would.

He would destroy me, body and soul.

"Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"Good." Then he opened the knot on the back of my head.

"Open." He waited until I opened my mouth before he slipped the tie out of it, his eyes never leaving mine.

Then he got up, walked around me, and untied my hands and feet.

I yelped.

“Stay still; don’t move.”

He crossed the room and disappeared through a door. I tried to move, and the pain in my muscles hurt so bad, I couldn’t suppress my whimper.

In the blink of an eye, he was back—undressed except for his boxers—and lifted me into his arms.

Holy shit.

I only caught a glimpse, but I’d never seen a man built like him.

His skin tone was dark olive. He had a broad, tattooed chest, his stomach rippled with muscle, and a thin line of dark hair disappeared into his pair of black boxers.

When my shoulder touched his naked torso, my throat tightened. “What are you doing?”

He froze for a split second before he continued to carry me through the same door he’d disappeared through just a minute ago.

“You’re probably sore. Have you lost feeling in your arms or legs?”

I exhaled, then nodded.

He was all business—no sexual, creepy vibe at all even though this see-through thing I was wearing did not conceal anything.

“This will help,” he said. He stepped—with me in his arms—through a glass door onto a deck.

I heard the bubbling water and smelled the chlorine a split second before he stepped down into a hot tub with me still in his arms.

Liquid warmth surrounded me and loosened a sob from deep in my chest.

“Shhh. It’s okay, try to relax,” he murmured into my hair, his strong arms still wrapped around my torso and thighs, my skin touching his.

He sat down with me on his lap, keeping me only half-submerged in the water, then started to massage my shoulders, arms, and hands.

“It will take a while, but the warm water will help.”

I stared at him but didn't move, didn't try to get away either. Instead, I closed my eyes and relished in his ministrations, while listening to his murmurs and the calming voice of the jets.

It was as if the devil who threatened me just minutes ago, who told me I didn't even know what cruel looked like, had disappeared—replaced by this gorgeous man who cared about me, who massaged my sore body and rubbed away my pain. Not in any sexual way, but in a deeply caring way.

Tears gathered behind my eyelids, then spilled over.

He was my captor. Evil.

I hadn't expected kindness. Wasn't prepared.

Wasn't prepared for any of this.

Nothing made sense anymore. As if I was caught in a sick game—and I didn't know the rules.

Rules.

I shook my head. Right now, I longed for the rigid rules that had controlled my life. Longed for the overbearing and rigid protectiveness of my father.

At least I had been safe.

At least I knew what was right or wrong.

Now nothing was clear anymore.

And nothing was safe.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Holding her in my arms was a new level of torture. But getting rid of that see-through gown was another thing entirely.

She just let me—completely motionless—probably because every micro-movement hurt, but she’d already lost the initial stiffness. It was replaced by a suppleness that had my head spinning and my body tight, and my dick...

I rearranged her position on my lap, made sure to keep the wound on her shoulder and the one on her upper back above water. And I kept her at a safe distance so she wouldn’t come in contact with my hardened dick pushing against my boxers.

I was at war with my body, longed to show her how much I wanted her. But no. Not tonight. Tonight she needed to be taken care of. Needed to heal first.

She wiggled.

Dangerously close.

“Don’t move.”

She turned her head, looked at me, her eyes just inches from mine, and defiance shone in them.

Burned into my soul.

“Why not? At least there’s no permanent damage from your sub-par bondage skills,” she said, sarcasm dripping from her voice.

Madre di Dio.

My dick tightened, and I clenched my jaw.

“What would you, little girl, know about the quality of my bondage skills?” I caressed her hair, and for a moment, she leaned against my hand before she straightened again and tightened her eyes.

I waited for whatever smart-ass retort she would come up with.

But when uncertainty entered her eyes, white-hot desire shot through me.

Holy fuck.

What a dichotomy of defiance and vulnerability.

A vision—her on her knees with my dick in her mouth and uncertainty clouding her eyes—settled in my mind.

My dick throbbed.

I held her gaze—until she looked down, her cheeks tinged in red.

Just as I thought. Nothing, she knew nothing about that side of sexual fantasies.

The kind I’d learned and practiced in the club back home that Hawk and I frequented. The kind where whippings happened for the pleasure of both, and slaves desired to be just that for their Dom.

I stroked her hair on the back of her head, then let her strands of hair slide through my fingers, then tightened my grip and pulled until she leaned back, a throaty cry escaping her mouth, and her eyes locked with mine.

I leaned forward, let my eyes glide down to the creamy skin of her throat, before staring back into her eyes.

“You’re out of your depth, Mia Stellina,” I whispered, then tugged, and she sighed. “It’s time to lose the attitude.”

I could feel her body stiffen, could feel her silent defiance without her having to say a peep.

She was a fighter.

My little fighter.

“Or I’ll help you lose it by taking you over my knee.” I leaned even closer until my nose touched her ear. “And prove to you how a spanking can be both painful and pleasant.”

I inhaled her scent like the animal I was, and the primal urge to take her burned high like a flame suddenly fed by pure oxygen.

I exhaled.

Calmed myself down.

Not yet.

Not just yet.

I stood and took her with me. Pressed against my chest, I lifted her out of the water, then carried her inside.

I grabbed a towel on the way and the ointment I had pulled out of my backpack earlier when I undressed.

I put her down on the bed and sat down behind her so her back was to me.

She squealed—but it sounded drowsy and tired. “You’re getting the bed all wet.”

I clenched my jaw to prevent a chuckle and stared at her delicious neck.

Here she was, naked, hurt, a captive, and she cared about the bed.

I shook my head—this woman.

“Hold still.”

The satiny white skin of her back was like a canvas before me—if it weren’t for the angry red welts and the blue-tinged spots marring the perfect picture.

I held my breath, my finger hovering above one of those welts.

I wanted to touch her. Needed to touch her.

But not yet.

“How long were you there?” I took the towel and blotted her skin dry.

Inch by precious inch. Carefully avoiding putting too much pressure on her or chafing her skin even more.

“I can do that myself.” Her voice sounded hoarse and sleepy.

She was probably crashing from an adrenaline high that had kept her upright for who knows how long.

I nodded but kept on doing what I needed to do. “Answer my question.”

She sighed, then shrugged a single shoulder. “Four days.”

Four fucking days she’d been in captivity.

Had been abused.

Until now.

I’d forced myself not to focus on the multiple marks on her body. But now I focused on nothing but the fresh whipping marks on her back, especially the one scar on her upper back where the skin had broken. Several not-so-deep but angry red precisely placed lines on her ass—a cane—as well as those on her breasts.

“This will help with healing and disinfect the wounds.” My voice was husky, but it was all I could do to keep the anger out of it. I held up the little container so she could see it, waited for her nod, then dipped my finger inside and started to spread the ointment.

I’d had my fair share of scrapes and injuries, the occasional knife wound and even a stray bullet wound once. I knew they healed better by taking care of them—at a minimum, disinfecting and keeping them clean.

Her wounds hadn’t been tended to.

A storm of fire flushed through my body—hot enough to burn me from the inside. My heart pumped faster—a furious beat—and I ground my teeth to keep those emotions locked inside.

She didn’t need to see my anger, didn’t need the fury—what she needed was to feel safe and heal.

But I would kill my uncle for what he did to her. I didn't even need to know if he was the one who had my father killed.

Hurting her alone was enough.

He'd signed his death certificate the first time he'd touched her.

The first time he'd touched what was mine.

I shook my head.

I tended to the wound on her back, closed it with a couple of steri strips, then focused on the oozing wound on her arm. This one was deeper, not caused by a cane or a whip. It looked cauterized and slightly infected.

"What happened here?"

I tapped on her red skin next to the gaping wound.

She bowed her head and looked sideways. The silky strands of her hair shifted. "Bullet."

I went rigid.

"Bullet?" Did someone use her as target practice? What the fuck?

She nodded. "I tried to disarm one of them, but I did it wrong." She chuckled and shook her head. "I couldn't even get it right even though my life depended on it." She sighed. "So, the bullet grazed my arm."

I raised a single eyebrow. The way she said it—the self-deprecating tone in her voice.

"Do not ever talk about yourself that way," I growled.

She stiffened.

Fuck.

Coming on too strong. Tone it down, idiot.

"Disarming someone safely is something you need to train a lot for, to get it right under stress."

She nodded.

"You need stitches."

She looked down at the wound, bending her long neck like a beautiful mare.

The wound was an angry red, gaping, still oozing blood.

Her inhale sounded shaky.

“I promise it won’t hurt too much.”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “Can’t you just take me to a hospital?”

There it was.

“Haven’t I made it clear before? If you leave this room, you’re dead.”

She inhaled.

“But what if you took me? I wouldn’t try to escape. I promise.”

I chuckled. She didn’t understand, thought I was the only threat.

She thought I was the one deciding on her life.

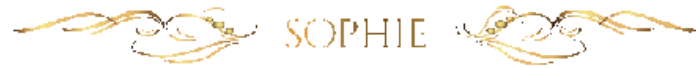
And maybe it was better that way.

A dark, twisted mass settled into my body, filled the familiar emptiness with a feeling of lethal power that took over, right before the kill.

Let her fear me.

Only me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



How could the touch of someone so cruel, so cold, feel so soft?

He gave me whiplash.

He tended to my wounds, and his touch felt almost caring—but then he said things like, *“If you leave this room, you’re dead.”*

I shivered.

Was this a threat?

Probably. Then why did I still feel like he cared for me?

Was this what Stockholm syndrome felt like?

Probably.

But I was stronger than that.

Strong enough to resist whatever net of lies he’d woven around me.

He stood and marched across the room. Even the way he walked was all dominant and determined.

I turned around so I could see what he was doing.

He unzipped a suitcase. Did he just arrive?

“Where did they take you?”

He was still asking questions, but I was done talking to him. I folded my arms over my chest—aware of my nakedness.

He'd seen it all—but I hadn't received a single creepy vibe from him. Not when he carried me into the hot tub. Not when he tended to my welts.

And not now when he looked up, his eyes narrowed when I didn't answer his question.

But the more information I gave him, the more he could use against me. "Why won't you let me go?"

He retrieved a bag and made his way back to the bed.

"Because I can't."

He turned me sideways so my wounded shoulder faced him. "Can't or won't?"

"Both."

"I'll kill you in your sleep then."

He chuckled, then he touched my hair and brushed it to the side. "You can always try, but just know"—he leaned forward—"once you lay hands on me"—his hot breath hit my skin like a caress—"all bets are off. I won't hold back. And I won't be nice." His voice had changed into a growl. Dark and hard and laced with a dangerous promise.

My core quickened.

Holy shit. This was crazy with a capital C.

How could I be turned on by threats of violence?

What the hell was wrong with me?

"Understood?"

I nodded.

"Now, tell me your name."

He opened a package and wiped across my wound.

Hot pain shot up my arm, and I inhaled sharply.

"It will only sting a little. Try to relax."

Relax? Was he serious?

He put on gloves, then opened another package—I only caught a glimpse at the suture kit before he pulled out the thread and needle.

Who had things like that in their suitcase? Was he a doctor?

I shook my head, inhaled deeply through my nose, then exhaled through my mouth.

“Your name?”

I shook my head.

He held all the power.

But I wouldn't just roll over.

I braced, expecting more pain, but he just kept on talking.

“Will you tell me where they caught you?”

“A nightclub,” I spoke without thinking first. I bit my lip. Would giving this away give him more power? “Why won't you release me? You can drive me to the airport, and I'll be gone in an instant.”

“Do you have your passport?” There was no emotional inflection in his voice.

I flinched, and not only because he took that moment to pierce my skin with the needle. “No.” A painful lump in my throat made the word come out inaudible, and I hung my head.

“So, then you'd be stuck at the airport.”

He finished the sutures and opened another package of antiseptic wipes.

I hardly felt the sting this time, hardly felt anything at all when he put a dressing on my arm.

I didn't have my passport. I didn't have any clothes.

I had no way to escape.

“I want to make a call.”

He sighed. “I can't let you do that right now.”

“Why not?”

He pulled the gloves off his hands and wrapped everything together. Then he got up and threw it away.

I watched him go back to his suitcase—take out a pair of shorts and a T-shirt—which he handed to me.

“Let it rest for tonight. And tomorrow, we’ll talk.”

Tomorrow.

He took another pair of shorts from his suitcase and stripped out of the wet ones he’d been wearing.

And I lost every little bit of spit I had left in my mouth.

Holy hotness.

His ass was a piece of art—not that I had a lot of—or any real-life experience—but damn, he could give Michelangelo a run for his money.

I closed my eyes and shook my head. Great, just great. Now I was ogling and salivating after my captor’s body.

Hello, Stockholm syndrome—could you please leave me alone?

I hung my head and sighed.

“Let me.” He was by my side again, took the clothes out of my hands, then he helped me into the shirt.

Carefully.

First the arm he’d just stitched up, then the other one, then my head. He even pulled my hair out, combed through it with his fingers, and straightened it.

Then he squatted down, averted his eyes, and held the shorts out for me.

My heart throbbed, but again, he wasn’t leering or anything. Didn’t even look.

Why wouldn’t he look?

What the hell? Why would I even want him to?

This whole situation was twisted enough, I should be glad he didn’t treat me like his uncle had and used me to fulfill his

depraved desires.

Instead, he was almost gentlemanly—that is, until he urged me to stand, pulled the shorts up over my ass—and took a deep whiff at my core while doing it.

I froze.

He froze.

His eyes snapped to mine. Dark, stormy, almost black. Pure unmasked desire.

My breath stuck in my throat; my heart suddenly galloped away like a herd of wild horses.

The moment ended just as abruptly as it had started.

He stood, walked toward the entrance to the room, then came back with...

Food?

I stared at him.

Who the hell was this guy? Who could go from sniffing me like a wild animal to providing food, like...

...A caring human being?

“When was the last time you ate? You’re skin and bones. Unhealthy.”

He said it with a sneer—as if my body disgusted him.

Was that why he wasn’t fazed at all by my nakedness? Because I wasn’t sexy enough?

I lowered my chin to my chest, suddenly insecure. What the heck?

So, he wasn’t attracted to me. Thank god for small favors, right?

Even though it stung a little. But that was my ego talking, right? Or maybe that pesky Stockholm-thing again. Because I sure as hell wouldn’t want my captor to find me physically attractive, right?

Right.

He laid the food on the bed.

“Hmm?” He skimmed his finger over my cheek, then settled it under my chin and lifted my head until I looked up into his eyes.

“When was the last time you ate, gorgeous?”

Gorgeous? Now it was gorgeous?

“I don’t know.”

He sighed, got up, and brought me a bottle of water, which he twisted open for me. “I should’ve fed you first, Mia Stellina. Drink.”

I took the water and drank while his eyes never left mine.

After I was done, he took the bottle from me and placed it on the nightstand, then settled down opposite me.

He tore a piece of bread from the loaf and held it to my mouth. “Open.”

It sounded like a caress and an order rolled into one.

I kept my mouth closed.

He leaned forward, right into my face. “Does everything have to be a fight with you, little one?”

I shook my head.

“Then be a good girl and open your mouth for me,” he whispered against my cheek. “And I’ll reward you later.”

A lightning bolt of lust shot through me when my gaze clashed with his, and my body screamed “yes” while my mind blanked completely.

I opened my mouth, and he fed me, his eyes never leaving mine.

Again and again, he fed me torn bits of bread, then delicious cheese. When he held an olive to my lips, I recoiled.

He just laughed, then popped it in his own mouth.

And at no time at all did he look away.

He was a devil.

Held me captive with his eyes alone.

And if I didn't watch out, he could make me crave his attention.

Crave him.

Crave to be his captive.

I broke eye contact, turned, took the bottle from the nightstand, and took a sip. I needed to shield myself. Needed to regain my equilibrium. Needed to plan my escape.

"I'm tired. Thanks for the food." I scanned the room. "I can sleep on the chair."

I got up, but he forced me back down with his hand on my shoulder and growled, "You take the bed. I'll take the chair."

My head shot around.

"No back talk. Whatever it is, I don't want to hear it." His voice was back to forceful, dark—commanding.

I complied.

He got up, put the food into a small refrigerator built into the big desk, then dimmed the lights and came back to me.

He took my upper arm—helped me up, then walked me across the room.

"There's a toothbrush for you next to the sink. The door stays open, and if you try to escape"—he paused and squeezed my arm—"I'll hunt you down. And trust me," he growled, "you won't like what I'll be doing to you then."

I shivered and nodded.

He let go of me, and I stumbled into the bathroom.

My gaze swept over the pile of his clothes on the floor, then darted to the shower—big enough for two, the toilet and the sink. There was a neatly packed toothbrush right next to it.

I brushed my teeth.

Then peed, praying the whole time he was somewhere across the room and not listening in.

Apparently, being a captive wasn't the most humiliating thing on Earth—it was peeing in front of a sexy devil—with the door open.

I looked out the glass door. Steam still rose from the hot tub into the air.

He'd pretended to care.

Stitched me up, fed me.

But he wouldn't let me go.

What kind of twisted game was he playing?

Oh, how I hated him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



I put fresh linens on the bed and listened to her in the bathroom.

What a twisted kind of satisfaction I got just to hear her pee—and cuss me out at the same time.

I'd always gotten off on power.

Had sought out relationships—however brief—with the kind of power dynamics I craved.

Dominating a woman got me fired up. In contrast, plain vanilla had never quite scratched the itch.

But I'd always taken consent seriously—until now.

She never asked to be here. Didn't want anything to do with me. But somehow, in my twisted, depraved mind—that made it even more fulfilling.

Her more desirable.

Not that I would act on it.

I would keep her here a couple more days until I had a firm plan in place and a better understanding of the underlying dynamics going on in my family. I needed to gain support and supporters. Otherwise, I would be dead in the near future—and so would she.

I looked up when I sensed movement.

“Can I take a shower?”

I shook my head. “Tomorrow.”

She sighed.

Then I raised the bedsheet. “You need to sleep; you look dead on your feet.”

For a moment, I thought she would fight me, but then exhaustion took over.

She dragged her feet across the room, passed me, then slipped under the cover.

I tucked her in, feeling protective and possessive at the same time.

I watched her for a couple of seconds until her features relaxed and she was asleep.

Just like that as if someone had knocked her lights out.

I pulled the recliner between the bed and the two exits—the one through the house and the one through the bathroom.

I didn’t expect trouble. Not here. But one could never be too careful.

I laid my phone and the gun, which Cristo had handed to me after we landed, on my lap, then forced my body to relax.

I’d learned to rest without sleeping. Or have a light enough sleep to be awake at the drop of a pin.

And I would do so, however long it took for my position to be secured.

I turned my head a little—just enough to have her in my peripheral vision.

I focused on her breathing—deep and regular.

She still hadn’t told me her name, hadn’t told me how she got into Fausto’s clutches.

Hadn’t told me anything really—but then again, I’d kidnapped her.

She had no reason to trust me, no reason to think I was anything better than my uncle.

My phone vibrated, and I looked down at my screen.

Hawk.

“Hey.”

“Hey. Just checking in to see if you’re still alive.”

“I am.”

“How’s the jet lag?”

I snorted. So much had happened that I hadn’t had any time to even think about jet lag. “I’m good.”

“Any incidents?”

I sighed. My first instinct was to keep quiet—not tell anyone about my beautiful captive. But Hawk was probably the only person on Earth I trusted implicitly.

Even with this.

He’d earned my trust. Had never once let me down. Not in all those years. Well, except for screwing with me at the airport meeting. “I picked up a little trouble and might need an extraction.”

“You’re already quitting? Didn’t expect that.” Disappointment laced his voice.

Even though Hawk was barely a decade older than me, he’d been a mentor from the start, almost more a father figure than a big brother. Earning and keeping his respect had always been important to me. “Not for me.”

“Who then?”

“The little trouble I picked up.” I turned my head again so I could see her. She’d turned around and was lying with her back to me now. She’d bunched up the cover between her legs, and my too-big shirt was covering only half her back. A deep throbbing of fury settled into my stomach. The marks visible on her lower back were red and angry. Everybody knew you had to be careful on the lower back, careful not to damage any organs.

“Where did you pick up trouble?”

Hawk pulled me out of my mental tailspin. “My uncle’s.” The words tasted bitter in my mouth.

“And I assume that trouble has a name?”

I rubbed my neck. She had—not that she would tell me—which fucked with my head far more than it should. On some—very twisted level, I wanted her to trust me.

“Yes.”

“Okay, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks, Hawk.”

“Stay alive long enough to thank me in person later. A certain employee of mine is driving me crazy—so I might need some vacay on a beautiful Italian beach soon.”

I chuckled. There was only one person on Earth who had the ability to drive Hawk crazy—Elizabeth Bennett, aka Birdie. Incidentally, Hawk had been Birdie’s guardian before she came to work for Raptor Security as soon as she turned eighteen.

From day one, there had been a certain chemistry between those two—though after Birdie went rogue and hunted down a cartel princess who caused her brother’s death on her own—that chemistry had grown into an explosive mixture just waiting for combustion.

What they needed was a good, old clear-the-air romp in the hay.

Not that they’d acted on it—not yet. But I knew Hawk. He was a fellow Dom, and one thing that made his motor run more than anything else was taming a brat. And Birdie was the biggest brat of all.

My eyes skipped back to the bed.

Maybe the second biggest.

“Will do. And I would love to welcome you here.”

“Great. I’ll be checking in with you.”

“Ten-four.”

“Ten-four.”

I ended the call.

Hawk and working for Raptor Security had been a big part of my life. Was leaving it all behind the right decision?

Maybe. Yes.

My family was more important.

My beautiful captive stirred, and I focused back on her.

She murmured something, started to toss and turn.

When her murmuring turned into cries, I got up.

She was having a nightmare.

Reliving the horrible things done to her.

A wave of coldness washed through my body and settled into the empty cavity inside my rib cage.

He would pay.

I would make him pay.

I put my gun on the nightstand, then sat down on the bed beside her, grabbed her good arm, and gave it a good shake.

Her instinctive recoiling and whimper hit me like a blow to the solar plexus.

Poor baby.

“Wake up. You’re safe. I will not let anyone hurt you ever again.”

She shivered, then moaned, her voice hoarse as if she’d exhausted herself with crying.

I shook harder.

I needed her to wake up, couldn’t bear to witness her suffering.

She opened her eyes, unfocused.

She blinked, but was still light years away, caught in the hell she’d experienced.

“Wake up. Now.”

My commanding voice did the trick, and her eyes snapped to me.

“You were dreaming; you’re okay.”

Her lips trembled and tears made her eyes watery until a single one spilled over and made its way toward her temple.

And I was fucked.

I grabbed her torso, hauled her into my lap, pressed her head against my chest, and held her.

And then the dam broke.

I’d never witnessed such misery. Deep, heart-wrenching sobs—ripped out of her chest—shook her whole frame.

And I held her, as tightly as I could.

She didn’t even try to get away; instead, she pressed closer as if she wanted to crawl inside of me.

I stroked her hair, let the silken strands glide through my fingers.

And I gave her the time and place to let out the horror stored in her body.

Fausto would die for this, slowly, as slow and as painful as I could make his death.

I hummed, soothed her, kissed her head, and held her.

It took a long while before she calmed down.

Her sobs trailed off, and her breathing pattern turned regular and deep again.

I thought she was asleep when she whispered. “I don’t think he can get it up.”

My hand on her head paused, and I looked down at her face. “What?”

“I think he’s impotent. He just gets off on afflicting pain and watching. His face—it turns into this ugly grimace as if he isn’t really human.”

My whole body tightened, then exploded with rage.

I let out a breath, forced myself to relax—even though it did nothing to the storm raging inside of me. “You’re talking about...”

“The Ape.”

Fausto.

Fuck me.

“Was he the one who kidnapped you?”

She shook her head.

The small movement sent ripples through my chest.

“I don’t know. We were in this basement. It felt like an old castle or something. The walls were of stones, and instead of stairs, there was this strange kind of circular way up.”

I swallowed around the lump forming in my throat.

Stonewalls and a circular way up.

I knew the place—actually there was only one building I’d seen like that—my family’s home in Verona.

She’d been captured and held there.

In my family’s home.

Who did it? Cristo? Alessandro?

My father had always been against human trafficking. It was his golden rule, the moral high ground he wouldn’t budge on—absurd since he had no problems with drugs, weapons, extortion, or killing someone to send a message or increase his power.

“The girls got picked, one after the other. Then they picked Cara.”

“Cara?”

“My sister. I couldn’t let them take her.”

Her sister Cara. I needed to find her. “So, you volunteered?”

She nodded, then sniffed.

Fresh tears soaked my already wet shirt.

“That’s when I tried to disarm that guard—” Her voice broke.

“And almost shot yourself?”

I stroked her head and pressed her tighter against my body with my other hand.

She nodded. “They took me out with a blow to the head. I can’t remember anything after that until I woke up in the cage.”

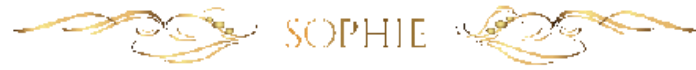
A spear of unadulterated hatred zipped through me.

“The cage?” My voice was barely above a whisper.

She nodded.

Then I heard something and froze.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



He suddenly went ramrod straight and eerily still.
Was telling him about the cage too much?

Did he suddenly realize he was holding his captive in his arms, stroking her head, and letting her tears soak through his T-shirt?

I looked up.

He wasn't focused on me, though. Instead, his eyes were glued to the door.

“Wha—”

“Shhh.”

I snapped my mouth shut, and my body tightened—as if his tension was contagious.

He wove his arm under my armpits, then lifted me up until we both stood—me flush against him.

He leaned to the side and grabbed a gun—that I hadn't noticed before—from the nightstand.

What the hell was going on?

He motioned to stay silent and then to the other side of the room.

He slung his arm around my waist, and together, we slowly walked over there.

When he removed his arm from my side, a sudden feeling of cold abandonment came over me.

Ridiculous since he was still standing right next to me.

I watched him open the floor-to-wall closet door, then he pushed the clothes to the side and signed for me to get inside.

We were hiding in the closet? That's what was happening?

He stepped in behind me, his front pressed against my back.

He closed the door, and we were engulfed in complete darkness.

I could feel my heartbeat—accompanied by his—throbbing in my ears.

I tried to get my breath under control—a futile attempt—which I completely failed at.

Because one realization settled into me like a big rock sinking through water and settling into the riverbed.

If my blue-eyed devil was hiding in a closet, something was seriously wrong.

He slung his left arm around me, pulled me to the side, and did something with his right hand right above my head.

There was a slight shift, then a bout of fresh air hit my skin and made me break out in goose bumps.

He pushed his crotch against my ass, pushing me forward.

I took a hesitant step and felt for the wall.

But where the back wall of the closet should've been was only empty darkness.

I stepped forward, feeling my way with my hands on both sides.

After stepping over the threshold, the area widened.

What the hell was this thing?

He still had one arm slung around my waist, his hand resting on my stomach—grounding me enough to move forward in complete darkness.

I trusted him to keep me from falling to my death or running into a wall.

“Stop,” he whispered.

I froze. Felt the shift in the air when the door behind us silently snatched back into place.

Then he turned a switch, and two rows of red fluorescent lights illuminated the room.

I looked around at a row of monitors on the one side, a door on the wall farthest away from us, and a sofa to our right.

The room wasn't big, just big enough to have a little bit of walking room between the desk by the monitors and the sofa.

“What is this?” I turned around and came flush against him.

He grabbed my arms.

“Listen to me. I need you to be silent and stay here. Can you do that for me?”

I stared into his dark eyes. I couldn't see the blue, could just see the urgency.

I stared back. “Why?”

He left me, walked toward the monitors, and powered them on.

The black surface transformed into a wall of CCTV streams, twelve in total.

What the ever-living hell?

He pointed at one in particular.

I watched two men in black ski masks coming through a door.

There was a recliner positioned right next to the bed—the same bed I'd slept in just moments ago.

They were in the bedroom.

I snapped my eyes to him.

He shrugged.

“Are they here to take me back?”

I didn't know why my mind went there—maybe because my biggest fear—even bigger than being the blue-eyed devil's

captive—was to go back to my tormentor, back to the cage, back to the pain.

He shrugged. “Maybe. Or, more likely, they’re here to kill me.”

My breath got stuck in my throat.

There to kill him? Why?

Wasn’t he powerful? At dinner, before he captured me, I got the feeling he was the most feared guy in the room.

Revered. Side-eyed. Respected.

“Will you stay in here until I’m back? Or do I need to tie you up again?”

A smile played around his mouth as if he liked the thought of tying me up.

“I’ll stay.”

“Great, park your ass on that sofa, and do not move.”

I nodded, shuffled to the sofa, and plonked down.

He watched me with narrowed eyes, then bridged the distance and leaned over me. “If you move a muscle while I’m gone, you’re gonna pay for it.”

My stomach tightened, and pressure developed in my chest.

Pressure I knew all too well.

Pressure that had caused me more trouble and punishments during my teenage years than I cared to remember.

I glared at him. “Stop threatening me.”

He leaned closer. “Or what?”

His masculine scent hit my nostrils, and my core quickened. I suddenly felt turned on instead of angry. “Or you’ll regret it.” It was barely more than a whispered challenge, my voice hoarse with need.

What the hell was going on? Why was my body betraying me like this?

“Oh, sweetheart.” He cupped my cheek, skimmed his thumb over my bottom lip.

Again and again.

His gaze locked with mine.

I opened my lips; my breath came out in short bursts.

I wanted him to kiss me.

Needed him to devour me.

He leaned forward, and I let my eyes fall closed.

Yes, please, yes.

I waited to feel his lips touch mine. Instead, his breath hit my ear, causing my skin to break out in goosebumps. Then his lips touched my earlobe. “I already regret it.”

Then he leaned in and bit my neck.

Marking me as his.

Electricity zinged through me—making every single nerve in my body tingle.

Air rushed out of me, and when he swiped his tongue over the place he’d just marked, my whole body convulsed.

Oh. My. God.

And then he went through the door.

And I was alone.

I stared at the monitors, watched the two black figures methodically search the room.

What if they found the closet?

What if they found the mechanism to the door?

I looked around.

But my eyes got stuck on movement on one of the other monitors. A lone person darted through the dark corridor, then stopped at a door.

He wouldn’t just go in there and face the two thugs, would he?

I grabbed the armrest with both my hands. My heart thrashed in my ears, and I gasped for air. But I couldn't move my eyes from the monitors.

A sinking feeling settled into my stomach. Don't do it. Don't open that door.

A sob broke out of me when I could see one of the thugs turn to the door.

Did they hear something?

Did they know he was coming?

I shot up. I couldn't sit here and watch.

Couldn't watch him die.

My gaze flitted through the room.

There was a fire extinguisher. I raced toward it, ripped it from its mounting point.

Then I crossed the room to the secret door.

If they got in here, I was toast.

And if they killed him first...

I removed the safety from the fire extinguisher.

I wouldn't go down without a fight.

I turned my head, stared at the screens.

And I would not stand by and watch him get killed.

I thumped on the secret door.

Both intruders turned to the closet.

They'd heard me.

I braced myself.

For the attack that never came.

At least not the one I expected.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



I hovered at the door and braced myself to breach it. I didn't notice anybody else. So, I hoped, at least for now, I could surprise the two intruders before the next wave.

Did my uncle send them?

Most likely he did. He wanted to be king, craved the power. I'd seen it in his greedy little eyes.

"I woke up in the cage."

Her words, spoken earlier, invaded my brain and stoked my anger.

Then I forced them from my mind. Forced every single emotion from my body, exhaled, and went calm.

My grip around the handle tightened.

There was a knock from somewhere inside the room—but I was already in motion.

I crouched low, then pushed the door open.

It took me a split second to locate both of them. They were both facing the closet.

Holy shit.

I aimed—one went down with a bullet to the chest while the other met his end with a bullet to the head. It was over in seconds though it felt like time had slowed.

As the bodies hit the floor, I couldn't help but think of her—the woman I'd kidnapped.

I'd put her in the hidden safe room, tucked away behind the closet. The safest place in the house—or so I thought. Was that knocking sound coming from her?

Did Uncle Fausto know about the safe room?

Fear gripped me as I kicked away the dead men's weapons, then rushed toward the closet, praying that she was still alive. I hadn't seen anyone else, but what if I was wrong? What if someone saw me coming out through the other secret door and was now in there with her?

Fuck.

I flung open the door to the closet and activated the mechanism. The door swung open, and instead of finding her dead in a pool of blood, or still sitting on the sofa—as I told her—she attacked me with a blood-curdling scream, fire extinguisher in hand, ready to take on any intruders who came for her.

Her eyes widened as she saw me—realization setting in too late, because before I could stop her or even take a breath—thank God I couldn't—a cloud of white foam exploded in my face.

I was instantly blinded but instinct took over.

I pressed my eyes closed and turned so she only hit my back and held my breath.

Fucking crazy woman.

I gave her a beat, thought she would maybe stop after the initial barrage.

But I was wrong.

I did a foot sweep to dislodge the fire extinguisher from her hands, then attacked.

My arms shot out, and I grabbed her, then tackled her to the ground, the fire extinguisher clattering away from us.

I got my hand under her head a split second before we crashed to the floor—with me above her—covered from head to toe in white powder.

It took us both a couple of seconds before each of us took a shaky breath.

“Jesus Christ, woman!” I gasped, wiping the powder from my eyes, holding her pinned against the floor with my full weight on her. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Relief momentarily replaced the fear that had been etched on her face—before it turned to anger.

“Get off me!” She struggled beneath me, her wide-eyed gaze locked on mine. “I thought you were one of them!”

She expected an attacker, not me.

“Clearly,” I muttered, easing my grip on her hair but remaining poised above her. I hovered over her, my face just above hers.

Our lips just inches apart.

The proximity of our bodies sent a jolt of electricity through me.

Her breath came in shallow pants, and her chest heaved with each exhale, pressing against mine. The urge to kiss her was overwhelming, and I wasn’t sure how much longer I could restrain myself. “You’re safe.”

“Safe?” she scoffed, lowered her eyes to my lips, and huffed. “You’re suffocating me.” Her chest heaved against mine again, and I couldn’t help but let my eyes roam lower.

The shirt I’d given her had a wide hem, so her creamy shoulder and milky white cleavage were clearly visible.

My dick stirred.

Even in the midst of this chaos, she was a force to be reckoned with—her fair hair framing her face like a halo and her eyes burning with defiance.

The way she’d been ready to fight off intruders with nothing but a fire extinguisher and a shit ton of grit stirred something deep within me.

I wanted her.

Plain and simple.

“I’m protecting you.”

She stared at me with narrowed eyes, then relaxed. “Fine,” she agreed, her voice unsteady. “But if any more of them come for us, I won’t stand back and wait—no matter what you tell me.”

“Neither will I.” The words came out rougher than I intended, betraying the desire that ran through my veins, threatening to consume me.

But now wasn’t the time for that.

I had to focus on keeping us alive and finding out who was behind this attack.

And how they got inside undetected.

Or who the traitor was who helped them.

“Are you going to let me get up?” she asked, her voice wavering with vulnerability beneath the bravado.

“Can I trust you not to attack me again?” I countered, searching her eyes for any signs of shock or terror.

“Only if you promise to be good,” she retorted, a hint of a smile breaking through.

Feisty and resilient...and borderline funny.

A heady mixture.

Fucking irresistible.

“Deal,” I whispered, then eased off of her but hovered over her.

The remnants of the powder clung to us like snow, a stark reminder of what had just happened, and how easily it could’ve gone wrong.

I helped her up, and a zing of energy shot up my arm when she grabbed my hand.

Her pupils dilated when she was upright, the sexual tension between us palpable, filling the air with a charged energy that threatened to ignite at any moment.

“Stay close,” I commanded, my voice hoarse with barely restrained lust. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Likewise,” she replied, a sassy smile playing at the corners of her lips.

And in that moment, I knew that despite the danger I was facing.

Despite me holding her hostage.

Despite all obstacles.

I would make her mine.

There was a connection between us that couldn’t be denied—one forged somewhere between me rendering her unconscious and her crying in my arms.

And whatever lay ahead, I would do everything in my power to keep her safe—and explore the passion between us that burned hotter than any fire.

I looked down at her.

Her eyes were dancing with mischief.

“What?”

“Nothing.” She chuckled.

I couldn’t believe she had the nerve to laugh at me. I tried to wipe the powder from my face. “You think this is funny?” I growled, struggling to keep my anger in check.

“Maybe a little,” she admitted, biting her lip to stifle her laughter. “You look like you’ve been caught in a snow globe.”

“You’re enjoying this a little too much, Mia Stellina.”

Then I remembered the knock I’d heard right before I breached the door. “Did you knock on the door to the closet?”

Her face turned serious, and she avoided looking at me.

My heart pounded in my chest, furious that she had put herself in danger for such a ridiculous reason.

I raised her chin with my finger until her eyes met mine.

“What about ‘DO NOT FUCKING MOVE,’ don’t you

understand?”

Her eyes narrowed, and she jutted out her chin, dislodging my finger.

“I don’t take orders from you,” she said, suddenly serious. “And by the way, you can thank me later for saving your bacon—again. I did it to get their attention away from the door—and you. I thought if they were focused on me, you’d at least have a chance not to get killed as soon as you walked in as if you were bulletproof.”

My breath caught in my throat as I realized what she was saying. She’d risked her life to save mine.

Again.

Somehow this made me even more angry.

My life didn’t matter.

Hers did.

I leaned down until our noses touched. “You shouldn’t have done that,” I said quietly, my voice dark. “This wasn’t my first ambush, and it will likely not be the last. What you did was dangerous and plain stupid.”

“Maybe,” she agreed, her voice softening. “But I couldn’t just watch and let you die.”

I narrowed my eyes, then grabbed her chin so she couldn’t look away.

She should hate me, shouldn’t she? I’d kidnapped her, made it clear she was my captive. She should’ve been happy to see me dead. Not help me.

“Why?” I asked, unable to keep the disbelief from my voice.

“I don’t know,” she whispered, reached out, and touched my cheek. “You showed me kindness when I least expected it.” She shrugged. “I’m just paying it back. You protect me, and I protect you.”

Her words sent a shiver down my spine, and I found myself leaning in closer, craving the warmth of her touch. Our lips were inches apart, and I could feel the heat radiating off her

skin. The attraction I felt was undeniable, but I couldn't give in to it—not when there was still so much at stake.

“You need to understand something,” I warned her, my voice low and dangerous. “This changes nothing. And if you ever disobey me again, I'll wrap my hands around your neck and kill you myself.”

“Even if it means risking your life?” she challenged me, her eyes flashing with defiance.

Why wasn't she scared of me? She should be fucking scared.

Because I was. The magnetic pull she had on me, the force of attraction. It was as if she cast a spell over me. One I didn't know how to escape.

“Especially if it means risking my life instead of yours,” I echoed her words, my resolve hardening. “Do not ever risk your life for me again.”

She searched my face for a long moment, her expression unreadable. Then she sighed. “Fine,” she agreed. “But just so you know, I still don't take orders from you.”

I chuckled. How could she still be under the illusion she had any say in what exactly was happening here? “Are you sure about that?” I held her gaze, then pulled away, my fingers trailing across her jaw as I let her go.

I took her hand and pulled her with me to the monitors. I watched each one carefully, took my time.

“What are we looking for?” she asked.

“Anything out of the ordinary,” I said.

She sighed but kept her eyes trained on the surveillance images.

When I was sufficiently certain a second wave wasn't coming, I pulled her with me across the room, grabbed the fire extinguisher, and dragged her back through the closet and into the bedroom.

The sight that greeted us stopped her in her tracks.

“Oh God,” she whispered, staring wide-eyed at the two lifeless intruders sprawled on the floor.

Fuck.

“Stay behind me,” I commanded, shielding her from the grisly scene.

Dead bodies didn’t faze me. I’d seen my fair share of death and violence all around the world. Inflicted enough of it on my own. But it wasn’t something I wanted her to witness.

“Are they...” She couldn’t finish the question, but I knew what she meant.

“Dead? Very,” I confirmed, my voice cold and detached. I slung my arm around her waist and pulled her against my body. “Close your eyes and stay still while I handle this.”

I pulled out my phone and dialed Cristo’s number. “Get up here, now, and bring Alessio,” I barked into my phone and immediately hung up again.

Cristo should’ve recognized the urgency in my voice.

I turned to her, grabbed her around the waist, pulled her against me, and dragged her past the bodies. “Go hide in the bathroom,” I ordered and released her but stayed between her and the bodies—blocking her line of sight.

I did not want her to see, and I did not want her to be present when my brothers arrived.

Cristo knew about her, but until I had a better grip on where Alessandro’s loyalties lie, nobody else would.

I was playing a dangerous game, hiding her here as it was, and the fewer people knew about her, the better.

“But—”

“Go!” I growled and gave her a little shove toward the door.

She stumbled, then stopped, turned back and glared at me.

I was in her face in one stride. “You got exactly one fucking second to follow my command.”

Her eyes widened.

“And if I hear so much as a peep, I will take you over my knee and make sure to show you your place.”

The delicious images of her naked upturned ass on my lap stirred my desire.

Her sharp intake of breath and widening pupils were music to my ears—and went straight to my dick.

Desire danced in her eyes before she caught herself and narrowed her eyebrows, and her eyes flashed with anger.

But at least she turned around and disappeared into the bathroom without another word.

Her luck because my self-control around her was running dangerously low.

As I stood alone in the room, I couldn't help but replay our earlier conversation in my head.

“You protect me, and I protect you.”

She had risked her life for me—twice—despite having been caged, despite the marks on her body proving just how dangerous my world was. I shook my head. It was equal parts infuriating and endearing, and I couldn't deny the way it made my heart thunder in my chest. And my dick throb for her.

“Focus, dimwit,” I muttered under my breath, forcing myself to concentrate on the task at hand.

I needed to find out who sent these men and how they managed to infiltrate our home. And more importantly, I needed to make sure it never happened again.

The sound of footsteps in the hallway snapped me back to reality. I glanced at the bathroom, then focused on the door. It was time to face the music and find out what happened tonight. For her sake, for my family's sake, and it was paramount to survive the next few hours, or days, or however long we still had. Because the next attack would come. And it might just be fatal.

No more than a second later, Cristo and Alessandro burst through the door followed by a few of our men who flooded the room, guns drawn and ready to kill.

Cristo's and Alessio's eyes widened as they took in the scene before them—the two dead intruders on the floor, their weapons cluttered on the floor, and the mess of white powder that covered me from head to toe and made my skin itch.

“Merda!” Cristo cursed, his eyes darting between the bodies and my powder-covered form. “What the hell happened here, Gabri?”

“Two uninvited guests decided to pay me a visit,” I replied tersely, my voice tight with anger. “I dealt with them.”

“Clearly,” Alessandro muttered, his gaze narrowing as he studied the carnage. “How did they get in? Our security is supposed to be impenetrable.”

“‘Supposed to be’ being the key phrase here.” I watched him closely. Was he the traitor? Would my own brother betray our family like this? I clenched my fists, feeling the rage boiling inside just thinking about it.

But the facts were undeniable. They'd breached our defenses. Someone had managed to slip through whatever security we had in place, and it was only by sheer luck—and the hidden safe room—that I was still standing here.

“Who sent them?” Cristo demanded, holstering his weapon as he approached one of the bodies, nudging with his foot. “Any idea?”

“None yet.” I shook my head, frustration gnawing at me. “But we'll find out. And when we do, whoever is responsible for this will pay.”

My thoughts drifted back to the woman hiding in the bathroom, the fear I'd seen in her eyes as she stared down at the dead men. They would pay for putting her in danger, too.

“Of course,” Alessandro agreed, his dark eyes flashing with a mixture of concern and fury. “But first, we need to figure out how they got past our security. This can't happen again.”

“Agreed,” I growled, crossing my arms over my chest and locking eyes with Alessio, staring him down.

Was he the one?

“Let’s go through the surveillance footage, talk to the guards, find out if anyone saw anything.” I turned to Cristo. “And I want a full security audit done by morning. We need to know if there are any other weak points we’ve missed.”

“Understood.” Cristo nodded, his expression grim. “We’ll get on it right away.” He nodded at the men behind him, who holstered their weapons and surrounded the bodies.

As they moved to obey my orders, Cristo paused, his gaze lingering first on the bodies, then on me. He swiped through the white powder clinging to me. “What the hell happened to you? You look like a snowman had a bad day.”

“I had to improvise,” I snapped, irritation getting the better of me. I gestured to the fire extinguisher on the floor, its canister empty and discarded. “Just focus on finding out who did this and how they managed to get into my bedroom without being detected.”

Cristo raised a single eyebrow, then chuckled. He suspected something—since I was the only one covered in the stuff—but at least he kept his mouth shut.

“Enough,” I growled, clenched my fists at my sides, and glared at him.

I was in no mood to dodge questions right now. Especially not in front of the men. Especially not with the powder slowly burning my skin.

The memory of her pinned beneath me, our bodies pressed together, her breath hot against my skin—flashed in my mind.

Too fresh, too tempting.

I shut down the memory.

Cristo was still looking at me, but I didn’t need his teasing right now. “Identify those bodies and send them back to where they came from. I want answers by morning.”

“Alright, alright,” Cristo conceded, holding up his hands in surrender. “We’ll get to the bottom of it, don’t worry.”

“Make sure you do,” I warned, watching as the men carefully lifted the lifeless forms of the intruders and disappeared from

the room.

“Alrighty.” I glanced towards the bathroom door, the memory of her body against mine still burning on my skin. “Now get out. I need to clean up. This stuff is burning my skin. Keep me updated, and let me know as soon as you learn anything.”

“Will do,” Alessandro assured me. He hesitated for a moment and exchanged glances with Cristo before they finally turned around and left the room, their weapons held at the ready as they disappeared into the hallway.

Nobody was safe.

Not anymore.

As the door clicked shut behind them, I let out a long, slow breath, trying to calm the storm raging inside me.

Then I scanned the chaos before I started cleaning the bedroom.

I did a battle assessment and retraced my moves and those of the intruders.

When I skimmed the closet, my heart started to pound, and my mind raced with the knowledge of how close I’d come to losing her tonight.

“You protect me, and I protect you.”

I was prepared to fight. Prepared to die.

But I wasn’t prepared for her to be in danger, for her to get hurt, or for her to die.

“Damn it.”

She made me weak, and I hated weakness.

I shouldn’t be feeling like this. Not about her.

But one thing was clear. I would do whatever it took to keep her safe.

And as much as I tried to resist, the image of her face—flushed, scared but dead set on not showing it, beautiful in her fury—kept replaying in my mind.

The way she attacked me. The way she defied me.

The undeniable pull toward her that I couldn't explain.

Get a grip.

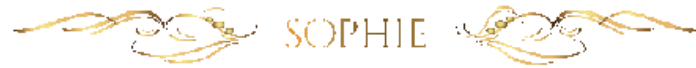
But as I stood there, covered in white powder and grappling with reality.

I knew one thing.

Ignoring the growing attraction I felt for her would not make it go away.

And as much as I hated to admit it, a part of me, a big part, didn't want it to.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



When I only heard silence from the bedroom, I inhaled deeply.

I'd been so scared, hovering in the corner of the bathroom. Bracing for someone to come inside, someone to find me.

How stupid was I? My eyes darted to the glass door leading outside.

Why didn't I take the chance to escape?

I should get out right now.

I took one step before the door to the bathroom swung open, and I froze in mid-motion.

"Going somewhere?"

The words, spoken in his deep voice with a hint of an edge, whisked over me like a breeze, and I swung back.

The fire extinguisher powder clung to his skin, stark white against his olive complexion.

My heart thudded as he strode into the bathroom, all predatory grace and menace.

I moved back until my back hit the tiled wall, then sunk down, my knees shaking and my stomach queasy—surely from the adrenaline crash and not from the way his gaze, molten and intense, locked with mine.

"No?" He held my gaze and slowly stripped off his boxers. "That's what I thought."

I sucked in a breath. Kept my eyes on his face for as long as I could before the temptation got the better of me.

At the sight of him, all hard planes and rippling muscle, my mouth dried up like a desert under the midday sun.

A map of scars marred his chest, intertwined with the black ink of his tattoo there.

Heat flooded my cheeks when I lowered my gaze even more—six pack, sexy V, strong, muscular thighs, one covered in ink—angry black lines, as well, and his cock, thick and hardening under my gaze, nestled in dark curls.

Shit.

I averted my eyes, my pulse racing.

I'd never really seen a naked man before they'd kidnapped me.

The twenty-year-old virgin. But none of those apes had looked like him.

The unfamiliar ache between my legs both thrilled and terrified me.

This was not right. Feeling this was not right. His being naked in here was not right.

“Look at me,” Gabe commanded, his voice velvety rough.

I forced myself to meet his gaze, acutely aware of his nakedness.

“I need you to undress and get into the shower. This powder is like acid, burning your skin.”

I shook my head.

“Have I given you a reason to fear me?” His eyes gleamed with something I couldn't decipher.

I licked my lips, then cocked my head. “You kidnapped me. You're holding me prisoner.”

“Yet I never harmed you.” Gabe took a step forward. “Never forced you against your will.”

Another step. I pressed my back into the wall, heart in my throat. “Well, that's debatable.”

He smiled—a predatory, dark smile.

My heart raced, but I forced myself to meet his gaze unflinchingly. “I’m not afraid of you.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up. “No? Maybe you should be, Stellina. Especially if you don’t follow my orders.”

My stomach hardened, and I narrowed my brows and folded my arms over my chest. Didn’t I make it abundantly clear I wouldn’t follow his orders?

What exactly in the sentence, *I don’t take orders from you*, didn’t he understand?

But before I could open my mouth to tear into him, he abruptly changed course and stalked to the shower, turning the water on.

I sagged against the wall. What was I thinking? I was no match for him. And as long I was his captive, I was in no position to bait him, or defy him.

Gabe took a step back, turned, and looked back at me, arms crossed over his chest. “Well?”

I gritted my teeth, stood, and marched past him toward the steamy shower. “I prefer to keep my clothes on.”

He caught me just as I passed him, crowded me until my back hit the shower wall.

“Either you undress yourself, or I do it. Your choice.” His voice was a low rumble against my ear.

I hesitated, then reached for the hem of my shirt.

“Let me help you with that.”

I started to protest, but his hands were already sliding under my shirt, fingers skimming up my sides.

It felt like heaven.

I sucked in a sharp breath at the sensation, my skin tingling where he touched me.

Gabe slowly lifted my shirt, his knuckles grazing the sides of my breasts.

My nipples tightened almost painfully, and I squeezed my eyes shut. I didn't want to feel this way. I didn't want him to affect me like this.

He slipped, first the uninjured arm, then pushed it over my head before he carefully guided it over my injury.

I held my breath and kept my eyes closed.

His hands slid down to the waist of my pants, his pants. "Step out of these, little one."

I opened my eyes to find him watching me intensely.

"I can undress myself, thanks." My voice only shook a little.

"Not today." He gripped my hips, then bent down, guiding one foot after the other as I stepped out of my pants. "Today, you're mine to undress."

I shivered, a mix of apprehension, arousal, and fear swirling inside me.

Gabe straightened again. Then he focused on my arm. "Getting the stitches wet, isn't ideal, but we'll keep it dry as much as we can. There could be toxic powder on the wound, which would be worse. We'll make sure to clean it properly and apply a new dressing later.

Gabe slid his fingers around my arm and prodded against the wound.

His fingertips on my skin felt so different from before.

Before, his touches were almost clinical, detached; now, he spread heat and desire wherever he touched me.

Or maybe it was just me.

I straightened.

"All done; hop in."

I shook my head.

He cupped my chin and stepped closer until he was flush against me.

I gasped at the feel of his hard length pressed against my belly.

Holy fuck.

“Eyes on me,” he commanded softly.

I dragged my gaze up to meet his, my cheeks flaming. His eyes were dark and hungry as they roved over my face. “So beautiful,” he murmured. “And all mine.”

One of his hands slid around to skim up my side, his thumb just grazing the underside of my breast.

I sucked in a sharp breath at the sensation, heat pooling between my legs. I didn’t want to feel this way, didn’t want to crave his touch. But my traitorous body wasn’t listening.

Gabe dipped his head, nuzzling my neck. “Relax. I won’t do anything you don’t like.” His lips brushed the sensitive spot under my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. “But you have to trust me.”

I huffed out a laugh. “Trust you? You kidnapped me!”

“Shh.” He turned me in his arms and urged me forward under the warm spray of the shower.

I gasped as the water hit my overheated skin, droplets trailing down my body.

He switched to the manual showered.

“Lean back.”

I did, and he sprayed my hair, then poured shampoo from a dispenser into his hand before he spread it with his fingers.

He massaged my scalp, gently but firmly, then he rinsed it as if he’d done so millions of times.

Having longish hair himself, he probably had plenty of experience.

After finishing with my hair, he switched back to the overhead shower head, then grabbed a washcloth and lathered it with soap. “Hold still.”

He began to gently wash my skin, starting at my neck.

I tensed at the intimate touch, and my heart pounded.

No one had ever bathed me before—not since my mom’s death. But his hands were sure and unhesitating, gliding over my back with a kind of possessive reverence that made my knees weak.

He bypassed my welts, reduced the pressure where I was still sensitive or hurting.

“You’re so pale,” he murmured, stepped forward, and pressed against my back. “Beautiful and innocent.” He skimmed over my breast with the washcloth.

I bit back a moan at the sensation, heat flooding my cheeks.

I leaned back—involuntarily—my head resting on his chest. I turned until my lips almost touched his throat. Somehow my body was taking on a life on its own.

His eyes flicked down and locked with mine, a smug smile tugging at his lips. “But not for long.”

His promise sent goosebumps along my skin, and a sharp spear of desire left my core aching for more.

CHAPTER TWENTY



He handed me the washcloth. “Your turn.”

I stared at him, my mouth going dry. He wanted me to wash him? To touch his naked body with my bare hands? I didn’t know if I could do it without combusting on the spot.

Gabe arched a brow. “Don’t make me ask twice.”

I steeled myself, took the washcloth, and soaped it, trying to ignore the way my hands trembled.

I started at his shoulders, gliding the cloth over smooth, tanned skin, hard muscle, and black ink. He was all rugged power and predatory grace, and being this close to him had my heart beating as if I was running a marathon—in a wet suit.

I moved lower, soaped his chest, and the cloth grazed one of his nipples.

He sucked in a sharp breath.

My eyes shot up.

His eyes met mine. Almost black. Hungry.

Emboldened, I did it again, circling the tight bud with my fingertip. A low growl rumbled in his chest.

“Don’t play with fire if you can’t handle the heat,” he bit out, grabbing my wrist. He was breathing hard, and I could feel the evidence of his arousal poking against my belly.

I looked down. The rigid line of his cock, long, thick, the head flushed a dark red, stood out proud against his dark curls.

I couldn't look away. Wanted to touch him there, too, explore every inch of him.

The forbidden desire shocked me. Made fire run through my veins while making me shiver at the same time.

Gabe tilted my chin up with his free hand and forced me to meet his gaze. "You want to play?" He pressed closer, pinning me to the wall, the hard length of his body trapping me in place. "Do you want to touch me, Stellina?" His voice was a dark purr against my ear. "Because I would let you. I would let you do whatever you wanted with me."

My heart stuttered. I didn't know how to respond to that, was torn between longing to touch him and be touched and the knowledge that this was wrong.

But in that moment, with his hard body against mine, his lips brushing my skin, and his seductive voice in my ear, turning my insides into a raging inferno, I couldn't remember a single reason why this was wrong.

All I could focus on was the aching need inside me, and the man who had put it there.

I swallowed hard, my mouth dry. "Why did you take me? Why save me?"

His gaze sharpened, eyes gleaming in the dim light. "You allegedly saved me first."

"That's not an answer." My pulse raced as I searched his face. He was like stone, unreadable. "Why didn't you just leave me there?"

For a long moment, he was silent. Then he sighed and ran a hand through his wet hair, pushing it off his forehead. "I don't know." His lips twisted wryly. "Old habits die hard, I guess."

"What does that mean?" I pressed my hands against his chest but not to push him away.

His heart beat steadily under my palm.

"It means you're a distraction I can't afford." His eyes darkened. "But one I can't seem to resist."

“I don’t understand you,” I whispered. “One minute, you’re threatening me; the next you’re...” I shook my head helplessly. “Why am I here?”

“Because I saw what I shouldn’t have.” He caught my chin again, forcing me to meet his gaze. “And took what I wanted.” He sighed. “And now I can’t let you go.”

I searched his face, noticing little details I hadn’t before. The scar through his right eyebrow. The flecks of silver in his stubble. The tiny crease between his eyes that deepened when he frowned. “Who are you?” I whispered.

For a long moment, he just looked at me. Then he huffed out a breath, shaking his head. “The better question is, who are you?”

I snapped my mouth shut.

I still hadn’t told him my name. Why?

His gaze dropped to my mouth. “Right now, all you need to know is that I’m the man you desire to kiss you breathless.”

My heart skipped a beat. “I don’t think so,” I said, but the protest sounded weak even to my own ears.

His lips curved. “No?” He leaned in, his breath feathering over my mouth. “Are you sure about that?”

I tried to pull away, but there was nowhere to go. He had me caged between his body and the wall. “Gabe,” I said, his name coming out in a breathy gasp.

“All you have to do is say no and mean it, and I’ll stop.” His eyes gleamed. “But we both know you don’t really want me to stop, do you?”

Heat flooded my cheeks. I pressed my lips together, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a response.

“That’s what I thought.” He nudged my legs apart with his knee, sliding one thigh between them.

I bit back a moan at the pressure, the ache inside me intensifying.

“You can lie to yourself all you want, little one,” he said softly.
“But your body doesn’t lie.”

I shook my head, clutching at the last remaining threads of my control. He was wrong. I didn’t want this. Didn’t want him.

Then he covered my mouth with his, and I was lost.

A groan rumbled in his chest as his tongue slid past my lips. He kissed me like he was starving, like I was the only thing that could satisfy him.

His hands were everywhere at once, tangling in my wet hair, gripping my neck, skimming down my back to squeeze my hips.

I kissed him back with everything in me, years of pent-up desire and secret fantasies exploding to the surface.

I fisted my fingers in his hair, my tongue dueling with his. I rocked my hips against his thigh, chasing the building pressure inside me. I was drowning in sensation, lost to the feel and taste of him.

And when we finally broke apart, chests heaving and eyes wild, I knew with a bone-deep certainty that no was not an option. I was already his.

He stared down at me, eyes dark and smoldering.

I could feel his breath hit my skin, the rigid length of him pressed against my belly, and I swallowed hard. I didn’t know what came next, didn’t know how far this was going to go, but my whole body thrummed with need for him.

“Tell me you want this,” he said hoarsely. “Tell me you want me, little one.”

I licked my lips and watched his gaze track the movement.

He wanted the words, but I didn’t know if I could give them to him. Admitting how much I desired him would be crossing a line I wasn’t sure I could come back from.

“This is insane.” The words were torn from me before I could stop them.

He froze. His eyes searched mine, expression unreadable.

“It’s not right,” I said, shaking my head. “I can’t be here with you, doing this.” My chest ached. “You have to let me go.”

His eyes narrowed. “I’m not going to hurt you, or do something against your will—”

“But you are,” I said, and my voice broke. “Holding me hostage is against my will, and you’re putting me in danger, by forcing me to stay here with you. You said it yourself. This wasn’t your first ambush.”

“No, it wasn’t.” His eyes turned hard.

“I’m not made for this. Why can’t you just let me go?” My throat was so tight it felt like I was choking. “What’s the point of keeping me?”

“For some of us,” he said tightly, “that’s the wrong question to ask.”

That said, he stepped out of the shower.

I watched him.

He took a towel, slung it around his waist, then he took another one and held it open for me. “Come on, princess.”

I could hear the shift in his mood in his voice.

Somehow the sexy devil, who’d just tried to seduce me under the shower, was gone. Instead, he was broody, dark and standoffish.

“I can do that myself.”

His eyes flashed. “Step out of the fucking shower right the fuck now. I’m done with being nice. Done with you defying me at every turn. Move your pretty ass, or I’ll make you.”

Holy shit.

I turned off the shower and stepped into the towel. He blotted my skin dry, his motions efficient, back to clinical.

He fixed up my arm again. Left me cold and shivering in the bathroom, only to come back with another pair of shorts and a T-shirt.

He helped me dress, as if I was, in fact, a little girl. Then walked me back to the bedroom.

“I don’t—”

“Not another word.”

“But—”

He crouched down in front of me and threw me over his shoulder.

My face bumped against his lower back, right over the hem of his towel.

“What are you—”

His hand landed on my ass—hard.

And instead of sending me into a tailspin, I felt a resounding quickening deep in my core.

Then he lowered me onto the bed.

“That was not very gentlemanly.”

He raised one eyebrow, leaned down, and caged me in with both arms next to my head, his voice turned low and dangerous. “You’re assuming wrong if you think I’m a gentleman.”

He covered me with the blanket. Then leaned down again.

“Don’t mistake caring for your basic needs for anything else. You’re my captive. Nothing more, nothing less. I’ve put up with your antics and backtalk thus far. But I have no problem chaining you to the bed and gagging you again.”

He skimmed his thumb over my jaw, then over my lips, and let his eyes roam over my body. “You should fear me instead of constantly testing me, little one. Because if I want to, I can become your worst nightmare.”

His words left me unsure and shaking.

“Now close your eyes and go to sleep.”

As if I could sleep. But for once, I followed his order.

I closed my eyes and listened to him roaming around before the door to the bedroom fell into place with a silent click.

And I was alone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



I stopped in the doorway to our command center, taking in the sight of my brothers bickering like an old married couple.

The tension in the room was thick enough to cut with a knife.

Alessandro paced the length of the room, his hands balled into fists.

They hadn't noticed my presence yet, and I took a silent step back into the dark corridor and pressed my back against the wall. This way, I could see without being seen.

Because whatever they were talking about—I wanted to hear.

“How the hell did they get past our security? This is unacceptable!” Alessandro said.

Cristo's chair squeaked. He was probably leaning back, propping his boots up on the desk—a move so typical-Cristo, I could still—more than a decade later—easily pull up the picture. “Calm down. Getting your panties in a twist isn't going to help anything,” he said.

I inched closer to the door—until I could see both my brothers.

They were both talking in English—one line of defense we'd used growing up to not be overheard and understood by just anyone—at least not instantly.

Alessandro whipped around, eyes blazing. “Don't tell me to calm down! If I wanted to hear your opinion, I'd tell you.”

Cristo barked out a laugh. “Still sore that Pap left everything to Gabe, huh? Get over it already.”

Alessandro surged forward, his hands reaching for Cristo’s throat. Cristo moved faster, dropped down on the floor, performed an expertly executed foot sweep, then tackled Alessandro and pinned him to the floor, forearm pressed against his windpipe.

“Enough!” I snapped, my fists clenched when I entered the room.

They crawled apart, identical looks of anger and guilt on their faces. After all these years, they still couldn’t get their act together. I stifled a laugh, and a spike of longing tightened my chest.

I’d missed them.

“How did they get in? And what have you done to fix it?”

“Relax, Gabe.” Cristo tried to soothe my anger, keeping one eye on Alessandro. “We’re working on it.”

“Working on it isn’t good enough! They targeted me, got into my room. This can’t happen again.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t waltz in here like a bull in a china shop,” Alessandro retorted, his eyes narrowing. “You never know who you might piss off by doing that.”

“Is that a threat?” I demanded, stepping closer to him, my voice low and dangerous. The tension between me and Alessandro was palpable—I loved him; we’d stuck together growing up since he’d been much closer to me in age than Cristo. But right this moment, trust was another matter entirely.

“Of course not,” he said, holding up his hands in mock surrender. “Just a friendly observation.”

“Guys, come on,” Cristo intervened, stepping between us. “We’re family, not enemies. Let’s focus on finding out who did this and make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“Fine,” I spat, my eyes never leaving Alessandro. “What do we know about the intruders?”

“Nothing yet,” Cristo admitted. “No identification—their fingerprints aren’t usable—acid, most likely. But we’ll find out soon.”

“Damn right, we will,” I said, turning on my heel. “And when we do, whoever is responsible will pay for this.” I stared down Alessandro and watched for any signs of insecurity, any signs of deception.

His jaw was set in a stubborn line, but his gaze remained steady.

For now, I’d have to give him the benefit of the doubt. But I would keep my guard up.

“Any idea who wants me dead—apart from Uncle Fausto, that is?” I looked between them, my brothers, the family I came back to protect.

Who else had the resources and motive to infiltrate our security and attempt to assassinate me?

Uncle Fausto was the obvious choice. He coveted control of the Falcone family, and with me as the rightful heir out of the picture, he’d have no obstacle seizing power. I’d seen it in his greedy eyes last night.

But this seemed too stealthy, too understated. Fausto was many things, but subtle wasn’t one of them. If he wanted to kill me, he would have done it in front of as many eyes of the family as he could manage—like poison my drink in front of everyone.

My mind went back to my beautiful captive. Would she have nightmares again?

Fuck.

I mentally slapped myself. Here I was, thinking with my dick instead of my head again. Even though our lives were at stake.

“There’s a few families who might seize the opportunity for a power grab,” Alessandro said.

“I need names and background information.” Time to get up to speed with all the enemies I’d made before even setting foot in my homeland. “How did they get in?”

“Seems like they had a little help,” Alessandro muttered darkly, his eyes narrowing. “They had the blueprints of our property. They knew exactly where the motion detectors and cameras were, and they even knew where your bedroom was located.”

“Son of a bitch,” I cursed, feeling rage bubble up inside of me again. My heart raced as my mind processed the information. Someone close to us had leaked this intel to our enemies, and that betrayal stung more than the actual security breach.

“Does Fausto have the plans of Castello dei Pietra?”

Alessandro and Cristo both shrugged. He was my father’s brother; it was very likely he knew everything there was to our home.

“Take a look at this,” Cristo said, beckoning me over to the monitors and restarting the surveillance video. The three of us watched as the intruders scaled the wall surrounding our property, expertly avoiding detection until they reached the mansion itself.

Cristo rewound to the point where the two dark figures climbed the wall surrounding our family castle. “They found the one spot on our wall not covered by motion detectors.”

I frowned. “Why didn’t you know that one spot? You were always the one who could get in and out undetected.”

Cristo grinned. “Who said I didn’t know the spot?”

I scraped my hands through my hair, then retied it. “You should’ve fixed that a long time ago.”

Alessandro, who came up to Cristo’s right, snapped his fingers against Cristo’s ear. “Yes, bro. You’re putting us all in danger.”

Cristo flipped him off.

Brothers.

“How about the house—how did they breach security?”

Alessandro sighed. “As it turns out, someone forgot to activate it, after taking a trip out of their private suite and onto their

deck. Or was it the hot tub?” He turned to me and looked at me with one eyebrow raised.

Fuck me.

My chest tightened with guilt as I realized my mistake could’ve cost me my life—or worse, the lives of my family members. Or hers.

It didn’t even occur to me to set the alarm again after carrying my beautiful captive inside.

What a rookie mistake.

“Fuck.”

Alessandro chuckled. “Well, it’s reassuring to catch the oh-so-perfect Gabriele Falcone making a mistake.”

“What makes you think I’m perfect?”

“Well, Papa—”

Alessandro cut Cristo off with one swift look. “Just assumed you thought you were. What with that giant ego of yours.”

I stared at Alessio. Silence stretched between us. What else was he thinking about me? What else was he planning? “Well, you assumed wrong.”

“Relax, Gabe,” Cristo tried to reassure me, placing a hand on my shoulder. “None of us are perfect. Besides, we’ll find the bastards responsible for this and make them pay.”

“Right,” I agreed, taking a deep breath. “Let’s focus on tracking down whoever fed them our blueprints and insider information. I want them found and dealt with immediately.”

“Of course,” Alessio said, clearly still annoyed with me. But as much as I wanted to believe he had nothing to do with the leak, I couldn’t shake my doubts completely.

“Look, we’re in this together,” Cristo reminded us both, trying to diffuse the tension. “We might not always see eye to eye, but we’re still family.”

“Family,” I echoed, forcing myself to meet Alessandro’s gaze. In that moment, I prayed that my instincts were wrong and that

my brother was truly on my side.

Only time would tell if our bond was strong enough to withstand the storm brewing all around us.

“What do you know about Uncle Fausto’s surveillance system?”

“Fausto’s? Why?” Alessandro asked.

“Why weren’t you with us this evening?” I retorted.

“I had some business to take care of,” Alessandro said. “There was some trouble in one of our nightclubs a couple of days ago. The situation needed some hands-on attention.”

I narrowed my eyes. Cristo had briefed me on our family’s business on the flight over. Papa had been aggressively expanding the holdings over the past decade. He’d always been a savvy businessman, a good networker, and he’d used his talents and influence to make our family one of the leading families in all of Italy.

I sank into one of the chairs, my eyes sweeping over the monitors displaying various angles of our property. It was evident that I had to up my game if I wanted to keep my family safe. “What do you guys know about Fausto’s? I checked out his security—it’s tight. But what about his surveillance?” I asked, hoping they had some inside information.

I came into this game with a serious disadvantage—a lack of knowledge. But I would soon catch up.

And this cat-and-mouse game would turn into me trampling our enemies like ants.

Alessandro raised an eyebrow at me suspiciously. “Why do you want to know?”

“Curiosity,” I responded, avoiding his gaze.

Cristo smirked, clearly amused by my evasiveness. He knew about my little captive.

I silenced him with a look. “We need more intel on Uncle Fausto.”

But instead of being intimidated, Cristo winked at me and said, “Let’s just say we’ve heard Fausto has a pretty tight security and surveillance system. And since he’s most likely our biggest threat, it’s in our all interest to find his weaknesses.”

At least he didn’t spill the beans. “We need to know what he has planned, don’t you agree, Alessio?” I stared at my brother.

“Fine,” Alessandro agreed reluctantly, still eyeing me with suspicion. “I’ll see what I can find.”

“Good,” I replied, trying to keep my voice steady despite the tension between us. I needed to trust my brothers, but there were cracks in our bond—cracks I’d caused. Cracks caused by time and distance. Cracks I couldn’t ignore and needed to fix.

“Alright, let’s wrap this up for now,” Cristo suggested, then yawned.

Was he sensing the underlying unease in the room?

“We’ll gather more intel and reconvene later.”

I gave a curt nod. “Try to catch a few hours of sleep. We’ll meet again at”—I looked down at my watch—“0700 sharp.”

I turned toward the monitors but looked back up when neither Cristo nor Alessio moved. “What?”

Cristo frowned. “You sure you shouldn’t try to catch some sleep? You look like hell. Maybe you should go, and we’ll stay here.”

“Jet lag,” I lied. “Can’t sleep anyway. No point in all of us staying up. I’m going to catch up on zees later.”

Alessandro’s shoulders hunched, a flicker of guilt in his eyes. “Gabe, I’m sorr—”

I held up a hand, cutting him off. “Not now. Let’s talk later and focus on finding the bastards who are behind this. And making sure Fausto doesn’t take the power.”

Alessandro nodded, and they both left the command center.

I couldn’t shake the feeling that there might be a traitor in our midst, someone else who wanted me dead.

My thoughts raced, trying to piece together the puzzle and protect not only myself but also my beautiful captive lying in my bed.

I focused on the monitors. It was an additional risk keeping her close to me, but I couldn't deny the desire that burned within me.

The desire to own her. The desire to have her.

"Family first," I muttered under my breath—the one thing my father had repeated again and again.

My resolve hardened.

No matter the cost, I'd protect those I cared about—even if it meant confronting Uncle Fausto and all the enemies lurking in the shadows alone.

My brothers might drive me insane, but I'd be damned if I let anyone else hurt them.

Once I was alone, I dialed Peaches, a hacker I'd worked with when I was part of Raptor Security. He answered on the second ring.

"Gabriele Falcone, as I live and breathe," Peaches teased. "I've been wondering what the hell happened to you. One day you're here. The next, you're gone without a word."

"Family business," I replied tersely. "Sadly, it's more like a life sentence."

"Ouch," Peaches sympathized. "So, what can I do for you?"

"Can you hack into someone's home network?" I asked. "I need everything you can get me on my Uncle Fausto Falcone. Security System, surveillance videos. Blueprints. I need to know what he knows, and find me the footage from earlier this evening—there might've been an attempt on my life."

"Fausto Falcone?"

"Yes." I could hear Peaches work his keyboard in the background.

Peaches whistled. "Nice family you have there. Never pegged you as coming from such an illustrious background."

I sighed. Peaches was one of the good guys, as were all the guys from SOG and Raptor Security. Former military. Strong moral code. Values beyond reproach. But every now and then, even the good guys needed someone to do the dirty work, someone who could blend into the gray areas, someone who was born into that world—and that’s where I came in. Morally gray, bordering on pitch black. “Never thought I would go back to my roots.”

Peaches chuckled. “Got the address. Give me 24 hours, and I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks, Peaches,” I said gratefully, my heart beating dully at the thought of finally getting a step ahead of Fausto and finding out the truth about my pretty little captive’s claim. “I owe you one.”

“Damn right, you do,” he agreed before hanging up.

As I sat in the dimly lit command center, I couldn’t shake the feeling that danger was closing in on me.

I wasn’t used to this.

I was a hunter. Moving alone—without leaving a trail.

Now I was the target, waiting to defend my fortress and my family.

Bound by blood and family obligations.

Hours later, I left the command center, my thoughts racing as I made my way through the halls of the old mansion. The home of my childhood had still retained its medieval grandeur—high ceilings and intricate frescos loomed overhead, a testament to our family’s storied past and extensive wealth. But beneath the opulence, the Falcone stronghold was equipped with state-of-the-art security systems and cutting-edge technology—at least that’s what I’d thought my whole life.

Maybe it was time for an upgrade.

As I approached my bedroom suite, I couldn’t help but imagine my beautiful captive sleeping in my bed.

Mine.

I should've asked Peaches to look for videos of her.

Anger surged through my body.

Maybe not.

I wasn't in a position for a quick vendetta. And if I saw her hurting, I would probably lose my head and go on a killing spree.

But there were too many factors, too many unknowns.

I needed to be strategic in my actions, and superior in my show of force.

This was a war, not a battle.

But how good would it feel to kill him with my own hands? Face-to-face revenge for what he'd done to her?

I controlled my exhale.

So, what if she'd been Fausto's slave?

Now she was mine.

And she would stay mine.

I stopped with my hand on the doorknob. What was it about her that drew me in so powerfully?

That made me want to own her?

How had she so firmly embedded herself into my thoughts, my flesh, into my blood?

I quietly opened the door, not wanting to disturb her slumber. Her chest rose and fell gently, and her dark lashes fanned out against her cheeks. A cascade of blond hair framed her face, making her look almost angelic.

"Who are you, Mia Stellina?" I muttered under my breath, and anger surged when I thought about how she refused to tell me her name.

My desire for her was strong even while I watched her sleep.

And even if keeping her close put her in danger, I wasn't ready to deny myself, wasn't ready to let her go.

Because something deep within me urged me to protect her at all costs.

And besides the need to protect her, there was something else that told me to keep her close.

Something I didn't want to examine too closely.

That strong, irrational knowledge. That she was the one thing who kept me grounded, kept me sane in this dive back into insanity.

The weight of responsibility settled heavily on my shoulders.

I'd been alone and untouchable all my adult life, and now suddenly, as head of the Falcone family, I was a target—and those I cared for were at risk, too.

It was a complete reversal. And despite the knowledge, she was at risk.

She was mine.

And nobody would harm her but me.

I brushed a stray curl from her face, gently, careful not to wake her. She looked so young and innocent but undeniably beautiful.

My dick hardened with longing. I replayed how she looked naked, how her wet skin had felt pressed against me. How she kissed me with so much enthusiasm and longing.

She would be mine, and I would have her in my bed.

Soon.

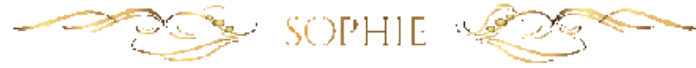
I just needed her to want it, too.

"Rest, *cara mia*," I murmured before settling down in the recliner again. "You'll need your strength soon enough."

I settled the gun on my lap, closed my eyes, and steeled myself for the battles that lay ahead.

The Falcone family would rise above our enemies, and I'd be damned if I let anyone—even from within the family—stand in our way.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



I woke up with a start but kept my eyes closed and stayed completely still.

I couldn't believe I had actually slept after everything that had happened last night. But I did—like the dead—no nightmares, no dreams. The last thing I remembered before drifting off was the soft click of the door as Gabe was leaving.

Was he here now?

My body tensed with anticipation. I held my breath, listened for him.

There was only silence—a clock clicking and muffled noises from outside, but nothing else. There was still a hint of him hanging around, mixed with the scent of coffee and something else...cleaning agent, maybe? What a strange mixture.

I opened my eyes.

Then looked around.

No Gabe—instead, a coffee table laden with a delicious-looking breakfast caught my attention—and made my stomach grumble in response.

I sat up in bed. And immediately looked to where he'd shot the two intruders the night before. I expected to see bloodstains, but where they'd been last night, only two wet spots remained—no more blood.

Did someone enter the room to clean it while I was sleeping, or did Gabe do it himself?

And how the hell did I not wake up when all of this happened?

Did he drug me again? I wracked my brain to think about what happened after our shower, but somehow, my mind got stuck on how he'd looked at me, how he'd touched me, how he'd been clearly aroused and impossibly sexy but held back at the same time.

With a sigh, I pushed those thoughts aside. How could I be attracted and appalled by someone at the same time?

Stockholm syndrome.

Definitely.

I got up and traipsed across the room.

I tried the door—locked.

Asshole.

I could try to escape through the hidden room behind the closet.

Instead, I grabbed a brioche from the table and explored the luxurious room. It resembled a hotel suite—a presidential one at that. I liked the style. Modern but cozy. The dark gray of the furniture should've made the room feel more crowded—which it didn't. The high ceilings and floor-to-ceiling windows helped.

It was a beautiful room...and my prison.

A gust of wind sent the scents of burnt grass and pine trees inside.

I made my way through the bathroom and onto the deck, feeling the warm sun on my skin as I stepped outside.

"Such a perfect day," I muttered, taking a bite of the deliciously sweet brioche. The sunlight filtered through the huge pine trees, and I could already feel the beginning waves of oppressive heat the day would bring.

I studied the hot tub. Memories of Gabe bathing me and of his strong hands working out the kinks in my muscles brought a flush to my cheeks.

Even though he'd shown me care and tenderness, I couldn't forget that he was also the one who kept me captive here.

He'd cared for me, yet he didn't let me go.

He wanted me, yet he didn't take me.

How could I not be flabbergasted by a man sending such mixed signals?

The gentle chirping of birds filled the air as I pondered these thoughts. But as I stood there, lost in my musings, I heard voices from somewhere beneath me and froze.

Listening intently, I recognized Gabe's voice. He was talking to a woman—in perfect English.

"Thank you for coming back, Gabriel," she said, her voice frail but filled with warmth. "I wish it were under different circumstances, but I'm happy regardless."

"Me too, Mamma," Gabe replied, his voice softening in a way I hadn't heard before. "It's been too long."

His mother.

He was talking to his mother.

I crept closer to the edge of the deck, trying to get a better read of their conversation while staying hidden.

"I've missed you so much. Tell me about your life in the States."

The States? I remembered the suitcase. So, he did just arrive.

"Have you found happiness?"

Gabe hesitated, then sighed, and I immediately missed my own mother. She'd died shortly after Jemma's tenth birthday—my thirteenth. My throat constricted. She'd fought so hard to stay with us, but in the end, cancer won.

I wiped at the tear making its way down my cheek, then tiptoed to the opposite side. The deck was framed with wooden planks and big pots of cypress trees—giving perfect privacy but also hindering me from catching a glimpse.

As their conversation continued, I felt drawn into their exchange. I could hear the love between them, but there was also regret. They hadn't seen each other in a long time.

"Promise me you'll be careful," his mother urged. "There are those who would stop at nothing to become the head of the family now that your father is gone."

The head of the family?

"I know, Mamma. But you don't need to worry. And you don't need to remarry. Especially not him."

His mother sighed. "Your father would be proud of you," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

Gabe's harsh chuckle threw me off. "You and I both know he wouldn't. I'm a disgrace to the family, a traitor. If he were still alive, he would've probably shot me on the spot."

His words resonated within me, making my heart race. He felt like a disgrace? Not good enough?

Despite my current situation, I couldn't help but feel a spark of hope. Maybe there was more to him than I had initially thought.

"When I first realized your father was a Mafia boss, I struggled," his mother confessed, her voice cracking with emotion, and my breath stuck in my throat. "But love won out over all the reservations I had. I only wish..."

My fingers tightened around the railing, and my mind raced as I processed this.

My suspicions were true.

Gabe wasn't just a kidnapper and cold-hearted killer—he was a made man, an Italian Mafia heir. And the Italian Mafia were mortal enemies of the Irish one—of my own people.

Hell.

He could never know who I was, who my father was.

What would he do if he knew? What would happen then?

“You gave us an amazing childhood, Mamma, despite everything,” Gabe reassured her, his words filled with warmth. “Now stop worrying about me. I’m a grown-ass man. I can handle my shit. Tell me about that hare-brained idea of agreeing to marry Uncle Fausto.”

“Fausto knows things,” she whispered, her voice barely audible even to my straining ears. “Secrets that I’d rather die than have exposed.”

Gabe’s voice grew dark, and I could almost feel the tension radiating from him in waves. “There are things worse than death, Ma. And if Fausto ever gets his hands on you, that’s the fate that awaits you.”

My heart raced in my chest as I realized he was not only talking about his mother. He was talking about me—about the torture I’d endured at Fausto’s hands. The sadistic pleasure he derived from whipping people, from inflicting pain.

A hell he rescued me from. A fate worse than death.

My fingers gripped the edge of the potted plant, knuckles turning white as I struggled with the horrifying memories.

Gabe’s voice softened and pulled me back to the present. “I’m back, and whatever secrets he knows, as long as we protect each other—as long as we don’t let him drive a wedge between us, he can’t touch us.”

At that moment, I understood that Gabe wasn’t only protecting his family but also me.

As their conversation continued, I leaned against the railing, thoughts churning through my mind.

Gabe was a man of contradictions—fierce and gentle, cold and tender. And as much as I hated to admit it, I found myself drawn to him in a way I’d never experienced before.

But could I really trust him?

My heart ached with the truth.

Protecting me from his sadistic uncle was one thing. But having the daughter of the head of the Irish Mafia in the US in

his captivity and being able to use her as a bargaining chip, another thing entirely.

There might be far more to Gabriele Falcone than met the eye. Despite his tough exterior, he had a heart of gold when it came to those he loved.

I found myself softening toward Gabe—a softening I couldn't afford.

Despite the strange pull I felt toward him, I needed to leave, needed to escape.

Before it was too late.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



My heart sped up when I looked at who was calling. “I need to take this, Mamma.”

My mother nodded and went back inside. However, the deep crease between her eyebrows—the only outward expression of how worried she really was—remained.

Seeing my mother in pain hit me hard. But why wouldn’t she tell me what Fausto knew to blackmail her with?

“Fausto knows things. Secrets that I’d rather die than have exposed.”

Fuck.

I accepted the call.

“Hey, Peaches. I need some good news right now.”

“Hey, Falcon, well, you’re in luck today. I got what you wanted. A link’s coming your way within the hour. Do you still know your last password?”

I scoffed. “Yeah, of course.”

“Good. I downloaded a massive amount of data, but I haven’t had time to go through anything yet. Just got in and got out. If we need to get in again, we have a backdoor now.”

“Thanks, Peaches. If you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to reach out.”

“10-4, Falcon.”

The call ended. Peaches was one-of-a-kind. All the guys I met from SOG were the same as my team at Raptor Security.

Former team.

I'd almost made it. Almost been one of the good guys.

Before my past caught up with me.

And dragged me back under.

I stared at my phone for a second, then finally got to my workout—the main reason I was down here instead of up in the room with my beautiful captive. Or in the surveillance room with my brothers.

One hour, then I would finally be in a position to have the information necessary to face Fausto.

I wouldn't need to back off again. My mind flashed back to the evening, to the moment I had with my beautiful captive in the foyer. Was it really only two nights ago?

It felt longer. Felt like she'd been with me forever. She'd buried herself under my skin. Inserted herself into my blood.

But she still wasn't mine.

Not entirely.

I got rid of my T-shirt, then jumped up and hung from the branch of a tree and started my pull-up routine.

At least if I exerted my body, maybe then my brain would shut up.

Maybe then I could forget the woman in my bed for a minute, or ten.

And maybe then the desire that screamed at me to take her would go away, too.

What would I find in Fausto's files? What should I search for first?

If there was, as Peaches said, so much data, would I even find what I was looking for?

That evening—I needed to find the moment my captive told me about.

Did she really save my life?

And if she did. Why?

My eyes went up to the deck when I heard a rustling noise—keeping a steady rhythm with my pull-ups.

I watched her stick her head through the potted cypress trees, guaranteeing complete privacy on the deck, then she flung a makeshift rope—made out of bedsheets—over the barrier.

Fuck me.

My beautiful captive was trying to escape.

She didn't look my way since I was at an angle, and I hung silently back until she disappeared again.

The bedsheet rope caught on one of the potted trees, and I could only see her hands as she untangled it and lowered it farther.

Would she really try to escape?

With bedsheets, like in a bad prison-escape movie?

Would she kill herself trying to do so?

My heartbeat sped up—and not from the exercise. No amount of exercise could have the same impact as just looking at her had on me.

I continued my pull-ups for good measure.

Fascinated.

Finally, I could see her squeeze through between the wall and the potted plant.

Ass first.

And what an ass.

My dick stirred.

I hadn't pegged her as overly athletic—thin or frail yes, but maybe I was wrong about the athletic part.

She dangled on her makeshift rope, and when she let go of the guardrail, I stopped breathing.

Please let her have it attached properly.

I dropped down from my branch and hurried to where she might land if the rope didn't hold.

She didn't see me since I stayed slightly behind her and enjoyed her ass swaying slowly from side to side with her downward movement.

When she was finally securely on the ground, she turned around.

Our eyes met.

Hers grew big and round and shone with guilt—like those of a child caught stealing cookies.

“Going anywhere?” I folded my arms across my chest, then looked back up to the beginning of the rope before I settled on staring her down.

“No?” she said, her voice wobbly, her eyes glimmering with insecurity.

“Well, then, care to explain.” I arched one eyebrow—which was trigger enough to wake her inner rebel.

I liked her inner rebel.

A lot.

I liked to dominate women sexually, but dealing with a brat outside of the bedroom was adding a layer of fun and zing, and made my blood burn like nothing else.

Seeing her finally break would be a heady rush.

“I needed some fresh air and decided to go for a walk.”

“A walk?”

She nodded.

“A walk?”

“Yes, a walk. Maybe you're not familiar with the concept. It's putting one foot in front of the other, making your way to—”

“To where?”

She narrowed her eyebrows, and I could feel her shaking with pent-up fury. “To anywhere but here.”

I laughed, a big belly laugh. “You thought you could escape in broad daylight?”

Now she looked like she wanted to murder me. I expected the punch—I just didn’t expect her to fake jab and then aim at my throat—that was why I was a split second too late with my block.

Her fist connected and took away my ability to breathe, and all I could do was take her into a bear hug and pin her under me as we went to the ground while I was wheezing for air.

“Are you okay?” I could feel her hands on my sides, caressing my skin.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you. Really, I just... I don’t know. You locked me in the room, and I really don’t like being locked up. I like my freedom, you know. So, I decided to try to get out. I thought you were gone since you ended your conversation with your mother and I didn’t hear anything for a while. I’m so sorry.”

My wheezing had turned into a desperate attempt to squash the full-on laughter that had built inside of me like a pressurized gas cylinder right before it exploded.

She was apologizing for trying to escape when I was the one holding her against her will.

This was hilarious.

Breathtakingly, overwhelmingly, beautifully hilarious.

When I couldn’t hold it in anymore, a big belly laugh burst out and rendered her speechless.

At first.

Within a minute—when my laughter wouldn’t let up, she turned angry, then furious, and finally, she settled on clawing her fingers into my sides and pinching me until the pain overrode my laughing fit.

“Stop that.”

“Stop laughing,” she said.

Our breath mingled, and suddenly, I could feel her rapid heartbeat against my chest. Could feel my dick harden against her core.

Her eyes held mine as if she'd bewitched me. And I couldn't not kiss her.

I lowered my head. “In a second, I'm going to kiss you.”

I could hear and feel her breath come out of her in a whoosh.

I searched her eyes, waited for her whispered “okay” before I conquered her lips.

I hadn't planned on it, but something happened when our lips met. As if a powerful animal was awoken deep within me.

An animal that recognized its mate.

My mate.

Mine.

I invaded her with my tongue, couldn't get enough of her. At first, she was shy, but then she thawed. And boy, if I didn't unleash her inner beast, as well.

It was a mating of our tongues, hot, intense.

We drank each other in as if we'd been dying of thirst in the middle of a drought.

Her satiny tongue stroked against mine; her hands roamed all over the skin on my back and sides.

She spread her legs, and I settled between them and ground against her core, the feeling of urgency burning me up like a fever.

“Ahem.”

I froze.

She froze.

She opened her eyes again, stared into mine.

I lifted my head slightly, turned to the side, and slowly looked up from the tapping foot right next to our heads, to folded

arms, then to the stormy expression on my mother's face.

Watching me with the same fury in her eyes as she did when I was twelve years old and decided to jump off of the roof of the barn to prove to Alessio and Cristo and Vincenzo that I was, in fact, an indestructible superhero.

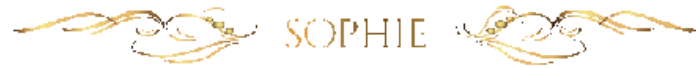
“Gabriele Falcone. Have you lost your mind? What on earth do you think you're doing?”

Well, as it turned out, I wasn't indestructible then, and I was no superhero now.

Not when my mother gave me that look.

Or that tone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



“I’m listening.” Gabe’s mother looked entirely different than I thought she would. For someone who had such a breathtakingly good-looking son, I’d expected a typical Italian beauty, like Sophia Loren—a voluptuous beauty with high cheekbones, flawless skin, and effortless international flair.

Instead, I looked at a no-nonsense woman in cargo pants, with cornrow braids that kept her hair back and accentuated her stunning face—at least I was right about the cheekbones.

But she looked at Gabe and me like a drill instructor, ready to make us drop into doing push-ups—which she could do herself, with her fit physique and bulging biceps, and probably outdo even Gabe.

I looked sideways at his naked arms—maybe she couldn’t outdo Gabe.

But she was scary. Capital S.

Gabe got up and helped me stand, as well, then led me to the patio furniture and offered me a seat before taking the chair next to me. “It doesn’t concern you, Mamma,” he said, not backing down—not even from his mother.

His mother took a seat opposite us and smiled a dangerous fake smile that would make every Bond villain shiver. “Well, you’ve been away for a while, dear son of mine, so let me refresh your memory.” Her saccharine sweet tone gave me the heebie-jeebies. “I’m your mother. Everything concerns me. Now, explain yourself.”

At that moment, the sliding door opened, and Cristo—the brother who'd carried me from the trunk to the room that first night and then entered a staring contest with me—stepped out.

Gabe groaned next to me.

Cristo's step faltered, then a grin—nothing short of devilish—filled his face. “Introducing your captive to your mother? Bold move, brother. Bold move.”

Gabe's mother swung her head around, her eyebrows narrowed, and glared at Gabe. “Your captive?”

Then she turned in her seat and focused on me. “What's your name, dear?”

“Sophie.”

Gabe's gaze snapped to me and was burning a hole in my temple. I side-eyed him, and I could swear he was plotting my murder right then and there. Then the look in his eyes changed into something that hit me deep, something like betrayal and disappointment.

But what did he expect? I looked at his badass mother again. No chance I could lie to her, or pull off the same ‘I won't tell you my name’ routine I pulled off with him.

“Did my son hold you captive?”

I started to nod when I suddenly felt Gabe's hand squeezing my thigh, and I froze.

“Let me explain, Mamma. She's not so much a captive as I've taken her into protective custody.”

“Protective custody?” his mother repeated and arched one brow.

Cristo chuckled, poured himself a glass of water, and settled in to watch the show.

Gabe glared at him—which didn't deter him one bit. “See, when I arrived, Fausto immediately summoned us.”

His mother nodded.

“That's where I met”—he paused for a moment—“Sophie.”

Him saying my name and the way he said it—like a caress—made my insides suddenly feel all squishy and soft.

His mother's eyebrows narrowed, she looked at me, then back at Gabe, then back at me.

She didn't look like she bought any of it—even though what he told so far was the truth.

“He held her as a slave,” Gabe said matter-of-factly, his voice low, almost inaudible, while holding my gaze. “Had her locked in a cage, in between the whippings.”

To hear it out loud shouldn't have had such an impact on me, or maybe it should. But those words blew in my face like the gust of wind of a train passing by at full speed, and the only thing that anchored me was his hand on my thigh and his eyes holding mine.

Mooring me to the here and now, preventing me from plummeting into my memories.

Into the dark.

I could hear the sharp intake of breath from Gabe's mother.

The seconds of silence ticking by slowly.

“That's why I kidnapped her when I got the chance, and that's why she's hiding here until I can get her home safely.”

I narrowed my eyes. Now this was a bold lie.

If he wanted, he could've let me go days ago. If he wanted, he could've sent me on my way.

If he wanted.

Which he didn't.

He wanted me with him.

Wanted me.

And I him.

I laid my hand over his and squeezed. Silently thanked him and told him I was there, not gone into a bad place.

“Does Fausto know Sophie's here?” his mother asked.

Gabe shook his head. “Not yet. I don’t think.”

His brother put his glass down on the table. “So, you think the breaking and entering—”

“Was an assassination attempt aimed at me, not related to her.”

“Assassination attempt? Breaking and entering?” His mother’s voice sounded shrill to my ears, but Gabe still held my eyes captive.

“Cristo will explain,” Gabe said, pushed back his chair, moved his hand to my arm, and made me stand up. “The two of us, my dear Sophie, need to have a little conversation.” His eyes glittered with a promise of what was to come, anger mixed with dominant power, with a hint of pissed-off. But there was more.

Barely contained lust that made me shiver and stoked my own desire.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



I had every intention of taking her right up against the door the moment we reached the room, to kiss her or tear into her—for not trusting me enough to tell me her name—I wasn't entirely sure why.

Instead, my phone dinged as soon as we stepped inside.

Peaches' mail arrived—and doused my raging mixed feelings.

I wanted her, and I would take her—just not quite yet.

Work was more important.

Her safety was more important.

I locked the door and led her to the bed but didn't push her down. Instead, I went to my backpack, grabbed my cuffs, and stuffed them into my pocket without showing them to her.

She remained silent when I approached again, her eyes wide, her lips rosy-red and puffy.

I wanted to kiss her again, needed to kiss her again.

Just not yet.

I laid my hand on her chest, then pushed her slowly back. When she sat on the bed, I lifted her legs, turned her, and pushed her back until she lay flat under me.

Her breathing turned into panting.

Was she afraid?

She should be.

She could've broken bones if she fell down with that stupid makeshift rope of hers.

Could've broken what belonged to me.

I leaned forward until I could take a whiff of her uniquely enticing scent. "Since you're not appreciative of my heroic acts," I murmured into her ear, nipping her earlobe, "you leave me no choice."

I let my fingers glide down the soft skin on both her arms. Then I circled her wrists with my hands and slowly brought them up over her head.

I took them both in one grip, and before she realized what I was doing, I had her cuffed to the headboard—thank God the frame was made of metal, not some kind of plushy upholstery.

She froze, stopped breathing entirely, and stared at me.

"Take a deep breath."

She exhaled, then inhaled.

"Another one."

She did as I told her, followed my command beautifully.

I could see she was bracing for an assault. Or maybe she was just expecting me to take her.

Not yet.

We both had to wait a little while longer.

"Anticipation makes everything much more rewarding," I whispered in her ear. "I need to work for a little while. But afterward, you and I, Sophie, will talk and play."

Another sharp inhale.

I raised my head again and held her gaze for a moment.

"Gabe, I..."

Then I kissed the tip of her nose, got up, and went to my backpack for my laptop and my noise-canceling headphones.

If I listened to her, I wouldn't be able to concentrate. No matter if her eyes glittered and her mouth was cursing me, or if

she was apologizing or begging.

A single word out of her mouth would hold me captive.

When I needed to focus.

I needed to look at Fausto's files.

Know what had happened.

Work before play.

Always work before play.

Though I couldn't get myself to leave her entirely.

I settled at the desk, which faced away from the bed but conveniently had a mirror right behind it.

I could watch her without turning around.

Could see if she needed something.

Could take care of her.

When had taking care of her become an obsession?

When did she become my obsession when no other woman I'd met had ever held my interest longer than one evening, one session in the club?

I shook my head, booted up my laptop, and settled down. I would find out why soon enough.

I would have her, fuck her, get her out of my system, and then it would be easy to let her go.

I scanned the email, then looked at the source code of the link. I wouldn't put it past Peaches to try to tap my system, as well, and sure enough—there were some extra parameters attached to the link. Computer wizardry wasn't my area of expertise, though I'd learned tonnes since SOG started working with us. But Peaches should've known better.

I extracted the clean URL, then entered my login data to gain access to the server. There was another prompt to download an executable, and I chuckled.

Damn, Peaches was keeping me on my toes.

I denied access, then made a mental note to hire someone to do a security audit on our family's system. And another mental note to discuss moving our family business onto the online realm. Businesses were so much more vulnerable to online theft and extortion than offline so we needed that security. Though online would be much easier, cleaner, would mean less manpower and better profit margins and was overall a good business decision. Running online casinos was so much more profitable, as well.

Maybe I could even hire Peaches. I looked up and into the mirror for a moment, just to watch my pretty captive, Sophie, throwing daggers at my back.

Peaches would laugh into my face. SOG's main mission was fighting human trafficking. Honor, courage, and virtue weren't only lip service to them. So, the chance for Peaches to come to work for me and use his skills for evil was zero, zilch, out of the question.

But maybe—since human trafficking was the one criminal thing my family didn't have their fingers in—we could become temporary allies.

The number of files before me made me blink. Peaches didn't lie; there were folders upon folders, all named in some kind of numeric code. How the fuck would I ever find anything in this heap of data?

But thanks to Peaches, there was one text file named "Read me—Mafia Prince."

That asshole, making fun of me already.

I opened the file.

Hey,

I didn't take time to crack the nomenclature, but there's a folder with all the video files—I renamed it for you and found the one from two nights ago, as well.

She's a beaut, but you look like a beast between all the suits.

P.

I shook my head, then ground my teeth.

I was grateful for his help, but a desire to kill him bubbled up inside of me.

Nobody got to look at her—nobody but me.

I searched for the file, then downloaded the video.

I looked up into the mirror and caught her staring at me, murder in her eyes.

My beautiful captive was furious being bound to the bed.

When the download was complete, I opened the file.

It was the video feed for the living room, trained at the table. The quality wasn't very good, but you could see people coming in and out. I fast-forwarded and watched the table being set.

It grew dark outside the windows, and the lights turned on. I fast-forwarded until the first men flooded into the room and took their seats.

Fausto's seat at the head of the table was closest to the camera, and with his back turned to the camera, there wasn't a single frame with his face in it.

How convenient.

He knew how to dodge his own surveillance.

I watched myself enter. Peaches had been right. Between all the black suits, black shirts, and black shoes, I stood out like a parrot.

My hair wild, my torn jeans and white tee made me look a little out of place. The dress shirt and the tie that hung around my neck like a noose didn't help either.

Good.

I didn't even want to fit in.

Even though I would need to.

I'd accepted my destiny.

I'd come home.

I couldn't pretend anymore.

Fuck.

I fast-forwarded until she rushed to my side and handed me a glass.

I turned the video back a minute, to before the other server spilled my glass, then started watching.

I could see Fausto's glass just barely. Could see Fausto do something under the table, then he poured the contents of a small vial into his drink.

He looked sideways, gave a nod, then the server marched forward.

How did I not see any of this? How did I not see this coming?

But she did.

I rewound again. This time I watched her. She was hovering to my right, her back against the wall. She watched Uncle Fausto, fear and animosity wafting from her in waves.

I remember feeling her presence behind me. Could still feel the ghost of her skin against me from when I grabbed her arm in the foyer.

But I was too engaged in keeping all of the men present within my range of vision to look at her.

When the server came and knocked over my glass, her eyes turned huge. She looked to the left and right, clearly unsure of what she should do.

When Fausto handed me his glass, her panic was so evident and so endearing, it nearly broke my heart. She turned and grabbed a glass from the tray beside her.

I focused on her hand, which was shaking like a lonely leaf in fall, whipped by the autumn winds, holding onto the tree.

She stepped up next to me, and I watched myself look up at her.

She handed me the wineglass and shook her head once. I didn't know what she meant at the time—just sensed her urgency.

I watched her hover until I gave Fausto's glass back to him, then retreat when the danger was gone.

I raised my eyes to hers in the mirror.

She'd saved my life that night, just as she'd told me.

I wouldn't have caught it. Wouldn't have pegged Fausto to be so bold as to spike his own drink to kill me.

But sure as hell, he did.

And sure as hell, I would be dead if it wasn't for my beautiful guardian angel who protected me even though she had no reason to do so.

I pulled my headphones from my head, turned around in my chair, then stood.

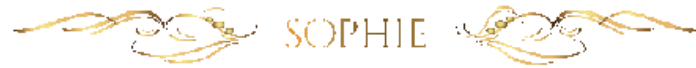
She watched me silently approach.

Acute awareness written all over her face.

I owed her my life—I needed to let her go.

Right the fuck now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



He turned around in his chair and looked at me as if he was seeing me for the first time.

What was going on?

I couldn't see what he was doing on his laptop, though every time he looked into the mirror, I felt his smoldering eyes on my body like a physical caress.

The energy between us had changed since our little altercation outside when he buried me under his body and kissed me.

That kiss.

That kiss was out of this world. Not that I had extensive knowledge—or any—when it came to kisses, but a kiss like that was almost certainly out of the norm. Because if that's what it felt like every time, why would anyone ever do anything else but kiss?

What I didn't understand was that ever since that kiss, he could cause the same zing of energy and lust within me with just his look.

Holy shit. I was a goner.

If he wanted sex right now, I would totally be game.

Despite our situation.

Despite him being the man he was.

And being a virgin at my age was borderline mortifying anyways. So why not do it with someone who took my breath away? Who would've thought I would remain a virgin even

after being kidnapped, kept as a slave, and then kidnapped again? Wasn't that ironic?

Though the alternative—being raped—would've been my worst nightmare, of course.

But somehow, it had me wondering if my Irish grandma hadn't cast some old Gaelic chastity spell on me. Doomed as untouchable until my wedding day, or something like that. Or was it just the good old Catholic guilt instilled in me that was acting up now?

He stood and came toward me in one fluid motion, his eyes burning like molten lava. How could his eyes change their color—according to his mood?

And what mood was he in right now?

He'd grabbed his T-shirt before he led me back up to the room earlier, and I almost regretted not having had more time to study the tattoo on his chest some more before he covered it again. But from what I'd glimpsed—being buried under him—it was a harrowing 3D effect of his open chest and a charred heart underneath.

Was it how he saw himself? Did he feel like his heart was blackened and burned?

Well, it was probably the truth, a prerequisite for gangsters like him.

I braced for what would come next.

Would he want to talk?

Or would he want to play?

I dragged air into my increasingly tight lungs.

And did he mean by play what I wanted it to mean?

Sex? Please let it be sex!

“You saved my life,” he said, his voice hoarse and emotional when he reached the bed and stared down at me.

He reached into his nightstand.

Condoms?

Would he have condoms?

He pulled out a keychain, then uncuffed me.

“I can’t believe you really saved my life. Why?”

He laid the cuffs and the keys back into the drawer and closed it, then he straightened and pinned me to the bed with his eyes alone.

“Tell me.”

“I don’t know?”

He raised a single eyebrow—a silent request to stop the bullshit.

“Because you were the only one who looked at me as if I was a human being.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Why would anyone look at you any other way?”

I shrugged. I didn’t know anymore, but I could remember the distinct feeling of being less than. Being defined as a slave and reduced to a body and nothing else.

He leaned forward, his hands framing my head. “You’re the most beautiful human being I’ve ever laid my eyes on, Sophie. I will forever be indebted to you. Whatever you need, just say the word, and I will make it happen.”

“Does that mean if I want to go home right now, you will let me go?”

His eyes dulled, and he nodded solemnly. “Of course, but I will get you home anyway; you’re free to go whenever you want; I’ll do whatever you want.”

My breath hitched. I took all my courage and bundled it into the next sentence. Did I dare give voice to my desire? To admit how much I wanted this man who’d been holding me against my will and who’d turned my world upside down?

“Great, then I want you to have sex with me.”

He blinked twice, then shot up into a straight position again. “Come again?”

“You told me you’d do whatever I want. And I want you to have sex with me.”

He looked at me as if I’d lost my mind.

And maybe I had, but leaving didn’t seem like such a desirable thing anymore. Not when I could have him instead.

“Why?” he asked.

“Why what?” I said, holding his gaze.

“Why would you want to have sex with me?”

I took a beat before answering his question with a counterquestion. “Why did you kiss me earlier?”

He leaned closer and lowered his voice to a growl. “Because you’re robbing me of my fucking mind.”

“Well, ditto.”

He shook his head slowly from side to side. “But I kidnapped you. Am holding you hostage.”

“Yes, you did. Ever heard of Stockholm syndrome?”

He narrowed his brows. “So that’s the reason you want to have sex with me?”

“Maybe?”

He stared at me for three seconds flat. “That is not a good enough reason.”

Wait, what? I’d offered myself to this gangster and he’d refused me? What the fuck? I was teetering on mortified before my inner rebel reared her head again.

I looked at him.

The way he stared at me was that of a starving man looking at a plate of steaming, delicious pasta. He wanted me as much as I wanted him.

“Okay, how’s that for a reason? You kidnapped me because you cared for me. Then you bathed me to relieve the pain, tended to my wounds, and stitched me up. You brought me to safety when those two thugs showed up, and you didn’t kill me when I emptied that fire extinguisher onto your face.”

He narrowed his brows, and for a split second, his eyes slipped to my heaving chest before his gaze locked with mine again.

“You were there when I had my nightmare. You took me in your lap and let me cry all over you. You cared for me then, as well. And you didn’t kill me when I tried to escape earlier.”

“Should’ve wrapped my hands around your neck instead of kissing you,” he murmured.

But I ignored his comment and took a deep breath. “And then there’s the way you look at me, as if you need to kiss me, and instead, you either caress my hair or you kiss my nose.”

Except earlier.

“Earlier, you kissed me, and it made me feel...everything. That’s why I want you to have sex with me.”

“You don’t know me.” His voice sounded dark and dangerous. “You don’t know who I really am.”

I chuckled. “Well, let me sum up what I do know.” I raised one finger. “You’re the new head of the Falcone family, so I guess you’re a made man in the Italian Mafia, for one.”

His eyes on me didn’t show any reaction.

“You also have no problems kidnapping someone, or killing someone, so you’re obviously no choir boy—which leads me back to point one.”

He remained quiet.

“But you never hurt me, you care for me deeply, and you respect your mother—so even though your soul is black through and through, and you will end up in hell, you have at least some kind of moral compass, some sense of honor. And I can respect that.”

“You can respect that?” He suddenly looked like he would burst out laughing any second.

“I wouldn’t consider you boyfriend or husband material, but a quick romp in the hay—absolutely.”

He shook his head, suddenly serious again.

I sighed. “You want me, don’t you? And I want you, so why tiptoe around it?”

He lowered himself to the bed. “I want you.”

He swept a stray strand of hair from my face. “But—since you have me all figured out—you should know I’m not to be bossed around.”

My breath hitched.

Fuck. I should’ve known—known he was domineering and assertive in everything. Of course, he would be turned off by me asking for what I wanted.

“Though I have to say, this once, I will comply with your request.”

It took me a second to grasp the meaning of his words. He didn’t reject me.

He agreed to have sex with me.

Me!

“If you want me to stop at any time, say the word.” His voice was suddenly much darker, low, and it sent a shiver down my spine. “And I might even consider it.”

He stretched, then took off his shirt in one swift move.

He slowly reached into his nightstand again and pulled out a wad of condoms.

My eyes almost fell out of my sockets, and my breath got stuck somewhere in my throat. What had I gotten myself into?

Then he slowly leaned forward again.

Caging me in, his movements languid and smooth like a predatory cat.

Then he loomed over me, bracing his hands on either side of my head. “But we both know that’s not what you want.”

I shuddered as his breath ghosted over my cheek.

Holy shit!

No? I didn't know beyond the concept of having sex what I wanted. So how could he?

Suddenly I wasn't so sure I was ready.

I meant it more as a thought experiment. Didn't expect he would say yes—and go for it on the spot.

“I didn't mean right this second.”

He smiled a dangerous smile. A predatory smile. “Are you scared, Mia Stellina?”

And suddenly, I knew he was toying with me, probably thinking if he scared me enough, I would back down.

Yeah, that strategy didn't work well with my rebellious streak. Which I could feel solidify in my chest.

So instead of pushing him away—what every instinct in my body screamed at me to do, what every sane person would do in my situation, I narrowed my lids, then followed my treacherous body and pulled him closer.

But instead of kissing me, Gabe buried his head in my hair, nuzzled the side of my throat, and bit me right where my neck met my shoulder.

A strangled moan escaped me.

“Do you want me to stop, Sophia?”

He was still daring me.

I closed my eyes, torn between longing and doing what I knew would be much safer and the responsible thing to do.

Finally, I whispered, “No.”

A low, possessive growl rumbled in his chest. “Your wish is my command, little one. But don't come crying later.”

His words made my core quicken, and lust paired with fear pooled in my stomach.

Holy shit, what had I gotten myself into?

His lips claimed mine in a searing kiss that ignited my blood.

I melted into him, my hands roaming over the hard planes of his back.

He groaned and deepened the kiss, then crawled over me, pinning me fully against the bed.

I gasped as he pressed his erection between my thighs, hot and heavy.

My core clenched in response, and an aching need built inside of me.

More, closer.

He trailed kisses along my jaw and down my neck, pausing to nip at my pulse point. A jolt of pleasure-pain shot through me.

“Please,” I breathed, not even sure what I was begging for. More. Less. I didn’t know.

“Shh.” He cupped my breast through my T-shirt, his T-shirt. Rolled my nipple between his thumb and forefinger. “I got you.”

He slid his hand lower, then slipped into my-his shorts.

He teased my slick folds with his fingers, and when he found my clit, I cried out, trembling.

No one had ever touched me there before.

Gabe swallowed my sounds with another searing kiss. “So wet for me already,” he rasped against my lips. “I’m going to make you come so hard, you forget your own name, Sophia.”

Sophia—the Italian version of the name he promised me I’d forget.

He slid one long finger inside me, and I gasped at the intrusion—a flicker of pain and then mind-numbing pleasure as he started to move in and out.

“That’s it,” he crooned. “Relax for me, Sophia. I won’t hurt you.”

I forced myself to breathe through the strangeness of the sensation. He pumped his finger slowly, giving me time to

adjust. The discomfort faded, replaced by building pressure and heat.

My hips rocked of their own accord, seeking more. He pushed deeper, stretching me deliciously.

Then he curled his finger, finding a spot that made me see stars. I cried out again, nails digging into his shoulders.

“There,” he growled. “You like that, don’t you?”

All I could do was moan in response as he stroked that place inside me again and again, pushing me higher and higher. Then he twisted his hand a little, and his thumb found my clit. He pushed, then circled until pleasure crashed over me like one giant wave.

I shattered around his finger, clinging to him as I rode out my orgasm.

I came back to myself slowly, still trembling in his arms.

He held me close, one hand stroking my hair while the other caressed my cheek.

“You did so well, Sophia,” he murmured. “You’re beautiful when you come for me.”

Heat flooded my cheeks. I didn’t know how to respond to such intimate praise. I hid my face against his throat.

But he would have none of it.

He cupped my chin, skimmed his thumbs over my cheeks, then held my face, gazing into my eyes. I saw warmth there and something else—a hunger that made my pulse jump.

“Enough?”

For a moment, I was tempted to nod, but instead, I shook my head.

“You’re feisty, little one,” he said softly. “Thank God, since I’m not done with you yet.” Still cupping my chin, he rubbed the pad of his thumb over my lips. “Not by a long shot.”

Panic and arousal warred inside me. I wanted more, but I was freaking out, as well. Should I tell him I was still a virgin?

Did he need to know? Would he even notice?

As if sensing my thoughts, Gabe pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead. “Shh.” His smile disappeared. “I won’t hurt you. I promise.”

I narrowed my brows, somehow confused.

So, he knew I was a virgin. But how? Could he tell? “Why would you hurt me?”

He looked at me for a couple of heartbeats. “Whatever happened to you—if you need to stop, we’ll stop.”

So, he knew I hadn’t had sex before. “I won’t tell you to stop.”

A grin transformed his face. “Then beg me to take you.”

Beg?

He wanted me to beg?

Was this his idea of foreplay?

“Sophia?” He grabbed my jaw and stared down into my eyes.

This was so wrong—and yet...

“Please take me.”

It was as if I’d unleashed a firestorm with those three words. He had himself and me naked in seconds, put on a condom, raised both my legs, and pushed inside of me with one long stroke.

I cried out with the sharp pain.

And we both froze.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



“**W**hat the fuck?”

I stared at her, and she stared back at me defiantly.

When I pulled back, she interlaced her legs behind my ass and held me in place.

“Sophie?”

“Yes.”

“Are you still a virgin?”

She cocked her head. “Right this minute, I would say no.”

I narrowed my eyes. “And a minute ago, the answer would’ve been?”

She closed her eyes, then whispered, “Yes.”

My chest imploded, my thoughts were a garbled mess, and all I could do was stare.

Holy shit. She’d been tight; I realized she was tight when I had my finger in her. I just didn’t... She’d been Fausto’s slave. I thought for sure she’d been raped.

And instead, she was still a virgin. Had been a virgin, as of a minute ago.

Until I took her virginity.

“Let me go,” I growled.

She shook her head.

“Sophia.” My voice sounded dark and menacing. But that was exactly how I felt.

She’d given me her virginity.

Why would she do such a thing? Why was someone like her, beautiful enough it hurt, uninhibited, forward enough to ask for what she wanted, still a virgin anyway? An alarming thought entered my mind for the first time.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty.”

My breath whooshed out of me. At least she was legal even if she was twelve years younger than me.

Thank God for small favors.

“Let me go,” I demanded again, and she turned her head and complied.

I pulled out, noticed the blood on the condom.

Madre di Dio.

I got up, walked across the room and into the bathroom, got rid of the condom, then drenched a washcloth with warm water and made my way back.

She was watching me, her eyes swimming with tears. “I’m sorry. It’s really not a big deal.”

Not a big deal? Not a big deal?

Fuck.

Of course, it was.

I fucked her, without even knowing she was still a virgin. Without going slow or carefully preparing her.

I sat down next to her, then forced her thighs apart and cleaned her of the traces of blood.

I threw the washcloth on the nightstand—I didn’t need another bloody spot on the carpet—then laid my head in my hands and sighed.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, sat up behind me, and slung her arms around me from behind, her breasts pressed against my back.

My dick immediately went from half-hard to full mast again. What the hell was wrong with me?

I rubbed my hands through my hair.

“What do we do now?” she whispered against my skin.

I sighed.

What was there left to do?

Only what every honorable Catholic man would do after taking a girl’s virginity. I would finish the job, and I would give her the best first time any girl had ever had, and then I would ask her if she wanted to marry me.

I turned, then drew her around me until she sat in my lap.

“I’m sorry, Sophia.”

“For what?”

“For not taking the time to give you what you really needed.”

“And what do you think it is that I need?”

I smiled. “Orgasms. Lots and lots of orgasms.”

Then I pushed her back onto the bed.

I stared at her lips, then slid lower on the bed, trailing kisses down her neck and over her breasts. I took one nipple into my mouth, sucked hard enough to make her gasp.

I lost myself in the sensation of exploring her body, her smooth skin, her gasps and moans.

She became my whole universe. The center of my attention.

All that mattered was stoking her lust, making it good for her. Mapping her body and finding the points that triggered a moan or a shiver. And when I finally reached her beautiful pussy, I used my lips, teeth, and tongue to push her to new heights of pleasure with one orgasm after the other.

It was beautiful to watch her come when her moans turned into throaty cries once more.

“Please, Gabe.”

I sucked on her clit, then released it with a plop. “Please what?”

“I can’t—”

“Can’t what?”

“It’s too much.”

She squirmed under me until I splayed my hand across her smooth stomach, locking her in place. “One more.”

“Gabe,” she said, her voice raspy somewhere between a sigh and a plea.

“I’m calling the shots here, little one. And I demand one more,” I said before I started sucking again.

I pushed my finger inside first one, then another. Stretched her still incredibly tight walls.

I made a lazy circle around her clit. “I will fuck you here, and when I do, you will beg, Sophia. You won’t be able to stop yourself.”

She whimpered.

“And then”—I pulled my fingers out and made my way to her other hole, coated her beautiful rosebud with her own juices—“I will take you here—first my finger.” I circled, danced over the nerve endings there—her reply was instant and a beautifully sensual sigh. “And you will beg me to fuck you there, as well, won’t you, Sophia?”

She raised her head, stared at me.

I looked back, then winked before I breached her with my fingertip.

Her eyes widened.

In and out—I played with her—could see the rising lust in her eyes—exhaustion, too.

This would be her last orgasm.

I closed my lips around her clit again, sucked until she came once more with the tip of my finger in her ass.

And it was the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



I woke slowly, disoriented.

For a moment, I didn't recognize the room I was in—the expensive modern furniture, the high ceiling, the late afternoon light filtering through the window.

I blinked, then it all came rushing back: Gabe. The sex. How he'd pleased me for hours until I passed out from sheer exhaustion. But refused to finish the job of fucking me properly.

Heat flooded my cheeks as I remembered crying out his name. I'd been totally at his mercy, unable to do anything but feel.

He'd taken me to the edge of pleasure and pushed me over more times than I could count. Until I thought I might die from exhaustion.

Then I remembered his words that accompanied my last orgasm, and heat rushed through my body.

"You will beg me to fuck you there, as well, won't you, Sophia?"

I got instantly aroused again. Could feel wetness pool between my legs.

Holy shit, this man could talk dirty—on top of knowing exactly how to get me off—multiple times. I'd been putty in his hands. And he knew exactly what to do with me.

Everything except fucking me. Why didn't he fuck me?

I turned my eyes to him.

Gabe was sprawled next to me, sleeping, as well.

I watched the steady rise and fall of his chest, strangely fascinated by him.

He looked younger while sleeping, the harsh lines of his face softened, and with his usual intensity missing, he looked almost approachable.

Harmless. Nice.

I could see the man he might have been if he hadn't grown up in the Mafia. If kidnapping, extortion, and violence weren't part of his normal life from day one.

Almost against my will, I reached out to trace the tattoo on his chest.

His eyelids fluttered open, and he grasped my wrist in a bruising grip.

I froze, heart pounding.

For a long moment, Gabe just stared at me, eyes narrowed. Then he released my hand and raked his hand through his hair with a sigh.

"You just can't stay out of trouble, can you?" His tone was almost fond but still hoarse from sleep.

I scowled and replaced my unease with righteous annoyance. It wasn't as if I'd willingly gotten myself into this fucked-up situation. He was the one who'd brought me here and made me fall for him. "If you didn't want trouble, you shouldn't have kidnapped me."

His lips quirked. "Touché." He sat up, the sheet pooling around his waist, and I flushed as I recalled what was beneath. Not that he let me touch his cock.

Not yet.

Or really fucked me with it.

Not yet.

He looked at his watch "Fuck. It's almost time for dinner. Time to get up. We can't stay in bed all day."

“We can’t?” I stretched and didn’t bother hiding my utter contentment. I had no intention of getting out of bed anytime soon.

Gabe seemed to find my defiance amusing.

He leaned down to drop a surprisingly sweet kiss on my nose. “Aren’t you hungry, Sophia?”

I cocked my head to the side, looked down at the outline of his cock beneath the sheet, then smiled until he hung his head and groaned. “I’ve created a monster.”

But when his hand slipped underneath the sheet, slid between my thighs, and his fingers brushed my aching center, every single rational thought fled my head. “Yes,” I gasped, rocking into his touch. “But only for you. I want this. I want you.”

A low sound rumbled in his chest. “Good girl.” He circled my clit once, then slipped inside me, first one finger, then a second.

I cried out at the sensation and clutched his shoulder.

He went down on his elbow, his hand cupping the back of my head. “You’re so wet for me already,” he purred, his lips against my ear. “So eager and willing and mine.”

I closed my eyes and nodded.

He began to move his fingers, stroking then pushing them inside in a rhythm that quickly shattered what was left of my control.

I rode his hand shamelessly, chasing my pleasure and his praise until the coil of heat in my belly snapped, and I came with a sob, pulsing around his fingers.

He held me as I trembled through the aftermath, wrapped me in his arm, and murmured in Italian against my temple.

When I’d recovered enough to open my eyes, I found him watching me with a mix of awe and male satisfaction. His fingers were still buried inside me, his smug face only inches from mine. He flexed his fingers until I sighed again.

He'd played me like an instrument—such a primal form of claiming me completely, it should have made me feel used, but instead only made me ache for more of his touch.

All of it.

I licked my lips, and his gaze dropped to follow the movement.

“You said you'd never do anything against my will,” I said softly. “You told me you'd stop if I asked you to.”

His eyes flicked back to mine, guarded. “Say the word, and I will.”

He pulled on his hand, but before he could slip his fingers out of me, I gripped his wrist and pushed them back in.

Then I turned my head, brushing my lips against the curve of his shoulder in a feather-light caress. “Then don't stop. Never stop. Give me more.”

A low growl rumbled in his chest as he lay back and pulled me with him and on top of him.

One hand was still inside of me, the other hand splayed over my ass. His erection prodded against my belly.

“You are a dirty girl, mia Stellina.” His voice held a dangerous edge, but there was no real heat behind the words—only hunger—one that matched my own.

He slid his hand from my ass, wrapped it around my neck, squeezed, then pulled me down until my lips touched his.

At the same time, he pulled his finger out of me and settled me more firmly against his bulge.

I gasped and clenched when I felt his cock nestled between my thighs.

Yes.

He chuckled—a low, dangerous rumble in his chest.

I panted, trying to ignore how delicious his hardness felt pressed against my core.

But not yet.

I wanted more. Wanted to explore him, as well. “I want my turn.” I snaked my hand between us until I could wrap my fingers around his cock and reveled at his sharp inhale.

“Sophia,” he whispered, pausing to nip at my ear. “I’ll give you exactly five seconds. Then I will take over and spend the rest of the night tasting every inch of you. I will make you come again and again while I fuck you with my fingers, my mouth, and my dick.”

Desire coiled hot and heavy inside me once more, and a helpless moan slipped out of me at his words. Finally.

Then he let go of me and stretched both arms to the side.

I explored the hard planes of his body on my way down until I could see him, feel him, and reach him with my mouth.

He had the most beautiful cock. Long, thick with a big, bulbous head. I traced the blue veins, running up and down with my tongue.

He groaned, but I wasn’t done exploring.

I circled him with my hand, running it up to the tip and down.

Impossibly hard but also satiny smooth.

And so, so big.

No wonder it barely fit and had hurt.

I kissed his tip, then wrapped my mouth around him. His salty taste exploded on my tongue, and his throaty groan filled my ears.

“Time’s up,” he croaked.

And before I could protest, he grabbed me by the waist, flipped me around, laid me out on the bed, and covered my body with his.

He kissed me again and nipped my lower lip.

I groaned and gave myself over to him.

I melted into his kiss and tangled my fingers in his hair as his hands roamed over my body.

Every touch left a trail of fire in its wake, and when his fingers found my nipples, teasing them into stiff peaks, I gasped into his mouth.

He swallowed the sound, deepening the kiss until I was dizzy with lack of oxygen...and need.

Only when I was squirming beneath him did he break away, trailing his lips along my jaw.

He nipped my earlobe, and I hissed, but he'd moved on already, and he skimmed along my neck.

"You're so responsive." He scraped his teeth over my collarbone. "So beautiful."

He slid a hand between my thighs, fingers gliding through my slick folds. "So eager and wet for me already."

I bucked against his hand with a cry, chasing the friction I so desperately needed. "Please," I begged. I didn't care that I was begging.

I needed him, needed this like I needed air to breathe.

"Please, what, Sophia?" He raised his head and stared at me with a gleam in his eyes but never stopped the teasing movements of his fingers. "Tell me exactly what it is you need."

I sucked in a sharp breath, and my heart pounded as if I'd run a four-minute mile.

He trailed lazy circles over my clit, then took it between his thumb and forefinger and squeezed—hard.

I hissed and bucked at the same time. The ache inside of me grew feverish, almost unbearable.

I wanted this, wanted him, more than I'd ever wanted anything in my life. "I want you," I whispered. "To fuck me."

A dark smile curved his lips, his eyes a burning blue flame. He covered my mouth with his once more.

Then he grabbed my thighs and pulled them up, spread them wide, and settled between them.

I gasped into his mouth at the feel of his cock pressing into me, hot and hard and insistent.

For a split second, I tightened, then forced myself to relax.

Even if it hurt again, I wanted this.

Needed this.

He broke the kiss, trailed his lips down my neck as he pinned me to the bed. "You're mine," he growled against my skin. "Forever."

I whimpered, driven only by need that I didn't give his words a second thought.

He reached down between us, took his length, and lined up at my entrance.

We both groaned as he slid inside, stretching and filling me so exquisitely that I saw stars. He took his time, inched forward, then rocked back again.

Slowly going deeper.

The stretching was intense, though the sharp pain had lost its teeth.

When he was impossibly deep inside of me, had filled me up completely, he stilled.

I opened my eyes.

Watched him.

He looked savage, his long hair disheveled in my hands, his whole body taut. His eyes were closed and his jaw clenched as if he was struggling for control.

Like a beautiful work of art. Like a wild animal barely in control.

Then he opened his eyes, and liquid fire engulfed me from head to toe.

He began to move, slow and deep at first, watching my every reaction.

I settled in, met his movements while staring into his eyes.

Then something changed.

As if the beast he'd so tightly restrained broke free.

He grabbed my thighs and pushed them even farther up and apart.

The languid strokes built up to a brutal, pounding rhythm that had me crying out with every thrust.

"You can take it," he whispered against my lips, nipping at my lower lip, adding pain to the punishing thrusts.

The pleasure was all-consuming, almost too much to bear, and I closed my eyes. I held on for dear life. Clutched his shoulders, nails digging in as the tension inside me mounted higher and higher, bringing me right to the brink.

"Come for me," he rasped, changed the angle, then slid a hand between us.

When he reached my clit, he rubbed tight circles around it, never once slowing his bruising thrusts. "I want to feel you come around my dick."

His words, raw and explicit, together with an especially forceful upward thrust, tipped me over the edge.

My climax slammed into me, wave after wave of ecstasy radiating out from where we were joined as I shattered apart. Dimly I felt him follow after, warmth flooding me as he found his own release with a guttural shout.

I clung to him, breathless and vibrating.

Slowly, the madness that was my mind eased, replaced by bone-deep satisfaction I'd never known before and the inability to move a muscle.

I listened to his heart thrum against mine.

Enjoyed his weight burying me under him.

Whatever this meant, or what the future might hold, I was happy he was my first.

Even if it was just for now.

Because in that moment, buried under him, I knew that I was his.

Until he said the words that froze my heart.

“Fuck. No condom.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



U nease churned in my stomach when I silenced the phone again—Hawk desperately trying to reach me.

I looked at her beautiful face—even in sleep, she looked absolutely gorgeous—then slowly extricated my arm.

Whatever Hawk needed, calling three times within ten minutes seemed excessive—especially for him.

I got up and dressed in a loose tee and shorts, then my eyes fell on her once more.

How could I've forgotten to use a condom?

In my thirty-two years on this Earth, I'd never forgotten. Not once.

Wasn't even tempted.

Until her.

Nobody ever had the kind of logical-thinking-killing effect on me.

Nobody but Sophie.

The name didn't fit her. Sophia—the Italian pronunciation, maybe, but even that sounded too meek for the fiery girl she was.

Girl, woman. Fuck.

She was twenty—barely an adult.

And I'd just taken her virginity.

Without using a condom.

Three cardinal sins in one fell swoop.

What a great start to this old new life.

A Mafia man in action. Black soul, black heart, and black morals equate to questionable actions.

God damn it.

I looked at her serene face once more before I closed the door—leaving it unlocked.

She was free to go—I owed her that much—even though I could taste the desire to lock her up tight and keep her mine on my tongue.

Sweet and addictive as my grandmother's susumelle.

Fuck.

I needed to focus—and not on her.

I waited until the call connected, then pressed the phone against my ear. "Hawk."

"Falcon."

"What do you need?"

"Somebody we both know needs to reach you. I'll send you the number—call him now."

Hawk ended the call. The urgency in his voice had me a little unsettled. I made my way to the control room, which was already occupied by Alessandro and Cristo—bickering as usual.

They both turned to me as soon as I entered.

Cristo's grin was positively evil.

"I heard we have a guest," Alessandro said, then turned to Cristo, and they both chuckled.

I raised a hand. "I don't have time for you to fuck with me right now." I could see the error of my word choice a second before Cristo burst out laughing.

"All fucked out then?" Alessio said, keeping a straight face. "Poor girl."

I lowered my lids, glared at him, but he stared back. Was it hatred or unwanted admiration putting that glint in his eyes?

My phone beeped with a text, and I glared at my brothers once more. They both focused on their laptops again, chuckling like the real jerks they were.

Then I called the number Hawk had sent me—a US number I didn't know—immediately.

“Who's this?” The male voice on the other side sounded gruff.

“Hawk told me to call.”

“Gabriele Falcone?”

“Positive. And you are?”

“Craig Donnelly.”

My eyebrows shot up. I hadn't expected the Irish to be the one who needed something. Especially since I still wasn't officially established as head of my family yet, and it had only been a couple of days. “Didn't expect the Irish Mafia out of Boston to be the first to come calling.”

Alessandro and Cristo's eyes shot to me.

I shrugged—no clue why he would need to reach me this urgently.

Donnelly sighed, never a good sign to have one of the most influential guys in organized crime sigh. “What's wrong?”

“My daughters and my niece.”

“Daughters?” I silenced my mic. “Alessio,” I barked, “Pull up anything you find about Craig Donnelly's daughters.”

Alessio looked at me as if I was borderline crazy.

I unmuted my mic. “Tell me what's going on.”

Alessio was still looking at me as if he had no clue what I wanted.

“Do it,” I mouthed at him, and he nodded.

Finally.

“My daughters and niece were on vacation in Italy when they were kidnapped a week ago.”

“A week ago?”

Donnelly groaned. “We’ve been searching up a storm, but there’s no trace of them.”

“In which part of Italy?”

If they’d been visiting Sicily or down east, I might have to reach out to partner organizations. And I needed to secure my position as the boss of the Falcone clan first to even get anyone to listen to me.

“They were last seen in a nightclub in Verona.”

Verona. Even though situated in northern Italy was a stronghold of our organization and my family, maybe we were in luck.

“Anything else you can tell me?”

He groaned again. “Bring them back, and we’re even.”

“Roger that.”

I ended the call.

“What have you got?” I asked Alessio.

“There are three daughters. Jemma, Cara, and Sophie. There’s nothing about them online, but I found a video on Jemma’s social media.” He pushed his laptop to the side and pushed play.

I leaned forward.

Then froze.

Sophie—my Sophie was laughing and dancing, wearing a blue halter-neck dress which showed entirely too much of her cleavage.

Shit.

Cristo, who had leaned over, let out a low whistle.

Then he turned to me. “You kidnapped Sophie Donnelly. Bold move, *fratello*, bold move.”

Bold move, my ass. I didn't even know her first name when I grabbed her.

And I sure as hell didn't know who her father was—before I took her.

Took her from Fausto.

Locked her in my room.

Took her virginity.

I was a dead man walking, living on borrowed time because the moment I gave Sophie back and she told her father was the moment the Irish mob would send out the first killers...if Uncle Fausto didn't get to me first.

“How did Uncle Fausto get her when they went missing in Verona?”

“Verona?” Alessio asked. “He's a frequent guest of our nightclubs up there. He's spending most of his time up there nowadays.”

“Our nightclubs?”

Alessio shrugged. “Cristo is mostly down here, taking care of logistics. I'm overseeing the business in Verona.”

“So, you're responsible for the nightclubs?”

Alessandro nodded.

“And Fausto is there most of the time?”

He nodded again.

I narrowed my eyes. “Trafficking children?”

Alessandro's brows narrowed, he slowly got up, his spine ramrod straight, and faced me. “Not in my club. You know we don't do that.”

“Do I know?” I raised one eyebrow. “Maybe you're working with Fausto on establishing a new business venture—now that Papa is gone.”

Murder glittered in his eyes.

I prepared for the attack, but when he came at me—with more finesse than I gave him credit for—he took us to the floor. We grappled and rolled around on the floor as we tried to gain control over each other. For a split second, he got the upper hand, straddled me, and used his weight to pin me to the floor.

My heart raced as we fought for dominance, then I got a butterfly hook in and rendered him immovable in a Guillotine choke in ten seconds flat.

Extremely unsatisfying.

Pussy.

I leaned forward and put more pressure on his throat. “Do not fuck with me. Do not challenge me. Either you accept how I run this family or you get out and possibly end up with a bullet in your head. Your decision.” I tightened my arms.

Alessandro snarled but tapped.

I let go immediately.

I didn’t need this shit in my own house, but as it seemed, I had a lot of clean-up to do before I could sleep without my hand on my gun.

Sadly, I would also sleep without Sophie.

“Okay, knock it off, you two. Alessio would never go into trafficking.” My brothers exchanged a glance—one that I couldn’t place.

Why was Cristo so sure of that? What had I missed?

“What about the other sisters?” Cristo asked.

I stood and offered my hand to Alessandro. After a couple of tense seconds, where we just glared at each other, he reached for my hand and let me help him up.

A truce.

Now I at least knew he wasn’t working with Fausto. His reactions. The look in his eyes—I didn’t detect any signs of deception.

Or that he was a better actor than I gave him credit.

“We need to get to the bottom of this. Who is running the club if you’re not there?”

“Enzo.”

“Enzo Falcone—as in *cugino* Enzo?”

Alessandro nodded.

Jesus.

Our cousin Enzo had been borderline psycho when we were kids. “Is he still into torturing animals?”

Alessandro’s eyes turned huge.

It was never an official thing, but my mother forbade me to hang out with cousin Enzo—even though we were the same age. And one night, when I was sneaking out, I overheard my mother and father talking about Enzo getting caught killing a cat.

“I don’t know about torturing animals, but he’s doing a lot of the dirty work for the family.”

Great. Not that the men of my family weren’t dark and twisted. But there was a fine line between men who did what they did for power and honor and men who killed and tortured to satisfy a twisted need deep within them.

The first ones were cold-hearted killers you could count on; the second ones were sociopaths. Irresponsible, dangerous, and flat-out crazy.

“How often does Fausto visit Verona?”

Alessandro shrugged. “About every two weeks, maybe. He’s Enzo’s godfather.”

I sighed. “We need to go to Verona.”

Alessandro nodded, and Cristo grinned. “Road trip.”

I scoffed. “We’re taking the fucking jet, dumbass.”

And I needed to take Sophie with me because leaving her here would mean she would be unprotected.

Also, arranging an international flight from Verona would mean much less publicity than doing it here.

“Make sure Fausto stays put without raising suspicion,” I told Alessandro who nodded.

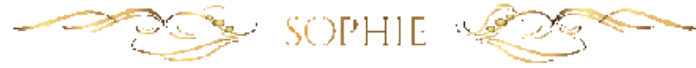
If it wasn't for Sophie, I wouldn't lay low. But I needed her out of the line of fire first before I tackled my uncle head-on.

I took out my phone again. My mother picked up on the second ring.

“I need your help with something.”

And my mom wouldn't be my mom if she didn't immediately spring into action.

CHAPTER THIRTY



“Hey, I’m sorry I fell—” I froze when the door opened, and instead of Gabe, whom I expected, his mother, her arms overflowing with clothes, entered.

Damn.

I pulled the comforter up to my nose.

I was still naked underneath. Naked with Gabe’s cum dripping from me.

Well, that was probably not the case anymore, since he’d cleaned me up afterward—right before he’d held me in his arms and told me everything would be fine—and I fell asleep with my nose buried against his chest.

“Hey, Sophie, sorry for the interruption at this ungodly hour, but Gabe asked me to bring this to you. You’re quite tall, but I hope these will fit.”

I stared at her. Blinked.

I looked out the window. The sun had already set, so it was probably early evening.

How long had I been out?

“Come on, girl. Try these on. Gabe said you’re leaving within the hour, and you’ve got nothing to wear.”

Leave? Within the hour?

No way. I wasn’t ready to be sent home. Not yet. Not so fast. I wanted another night—one more chance to touch him, one

more chance to feel his skin against mine, one more time to have sex with him.

Explore, experience all the things he'd promised me he would do to me.

"Chop, chop," Gabe's mother said and laid the mountain of clothes on the bed right next to me.

"Mom." Gabe's dark voice made my eyes fly to him and his mother turn around.

"Thanks for the clothes, but could you give her maybe some privacy to try them on?"

His mother looked at me, then back at him. Then she shook her head. "Your father wouldn't approve," she said, but crossed and exited the room, and Gabe shut the door in her face.

"I'm not leaving." I crossed my arms and clamped the comforter against my chest.

"You do as I please," Gabe said, never making eye contact.

"Why?" I didn't question his last words. Of course, Mr. Blue Devil would think everyone had to jump when he said jump. But why was he suddenly so cold? What had happened in the short time between him telling me everything would be okay, and now?

"Why would we leave right away?"

"Because, Sophie Donnelly—" His eyes found mine, held mine.

The unexpected, barely hidden disdain shocked me.

"Your father just called. I need to find your sisters, and then I need to give you back as soon as possible."

"Give me back?"

"Give you back."

"Give me back?" Anger built inside of me like a hurricane. He didn't own me. Therefore, I wasn't his to give to anyone.

"I'm not going."

He was on me and in my face in the blink of an eye; he pushed me back with one hand splayed on my chest until I lay flat on the bed. Then he leaned over me, his breath ragged against my lips. “You do whatever I tell you to do, Sophia.”

I would have laughed in his face, should’ve.

It would’ve been the safe choice.

The sane choice.

Instead, I strained my head, and bit his lip—hard.

He raised his hand, and for a split second, I thought he would hit me.

I should’ve known better.

Instead, he grabbed my shoulder and flipped me over until I lay on my belly. Then he lifted me up, sat down, and positioned me over his left thigh, his left arm lying heavy on my back—caging me in.

“Put your hands on the floor.”

His dark voice gave me goosebumps, and I followed his command.

My legs barely touched the ground, and I was awkwardly balancing myself.

He caught my legs between his thighs, anchored me.

Then he spanked my naked right cheek with his flat hand.

White-hot pain shot through my body, and I howled out. I struggled to get away from him—a futile effort since his legs had a death grip on mine. I clawed my way up with my hands, but he would have none of that.

Instead, he caught first one, then the other wrist, and pushed my arms back until he held my wrists against the small of my back.

I struggled for a few seconds more, then settled just like his hand settled on my ass cheek, rubbing, soothing the pain away.

“I’m not fucking asking, Sophie, and this is not the time to test me.”

I squirmed. The lazy circles on my ass cheek made me horny—which shouldn't have.

“Sophie?”

I ground against his thigh—but couldn't get good contact. Instead, I willed him to move his hand just a little bit deeper.

There.

“Hmmm.”

“How about you stop dry-humping me and try on some clothes?”

“Mhmm.” I squirmed when his glorious finger swiped over my sex.

God yes.

He chuckled, then his flat hand made contact again.

I gasped. This time the pain rolled through me and immediately turned into a delicious heat.

“You like this, don't you?” He swiped his fingers through my folds. “Fuck, you're drenched.”

Then he gently slapped me right there, between the legs. Pain and heat merged into one, and my cry turned into a sigh.

More. I needed more.

Instead, he let go of my wrists and propped me up until I stood between his legs.

He handed me a flimsy, colorful dress. “Try this on.”

I stared at him, blinked, then turned my eyes to the dress, then back at him. I could see his cock straining against his shorts.

“Why?”

“Because we need to leave—right now—and save your sisters.”

My sisters.

As if he'd emptied a bucket of cold water in my face, I suddenly snapped back to the here and now. Of course, how

could I be so shallow as to want him to fuck me—or slap me—instead of saving my sisters?

God.

I nodded, then pulled the colorful dress over my head. It reached the middle of my thighs—a couple of inches too short though sexy as hell—both revealing and covering me with its layered design.

He looked at me as if he wanted me—his bulge growing—but then his lips curled, and his eyes grew cold—appalled.

As if I was wearing something absolutely tasteless.

“Next.”

“It’s a perfectly fine dress.”

He growled.

I pulled it over my head, then found some panties and a bra when I went through the mountain of clothes—I put those on—thank God the bra fit—then tried the next piece and the next.

And so it went.

Except for one long, black dress, which had the style of a kimono, covering me from my throat to a couple of inches above my ankles, he dismissed every single one of his mother’s dresses.

I ended up in a shirt and another pair of his shorts. That’s how he pulled me out of the room and all the way into the backseat of a black SUV with blacked-out windows.

Progress, I guess, since the last time he took me somewhere, he threw me into the trunk, while this time, he made me sit between him and another man, who eyed me suspiciously.

“Alessandro, meet Sophie. Sophie, this is my brother Alessandro.”

The man next to me gave me a suspicious side-eye.

From the passenger seat, his other brother Cristo turned around and winked at me.

“Nice to officially meet you, Sophie.”

I nodded at them both, then turned, narrowed my eyes, and stared at Gabe, who scrolled on his phone and had completely checked out.

What an asshole leaving me alone with his brothers.

I turned back, my gaze meeting Cristo’s, who was still staring at me.

Gabe and Cristo kind of looked like brothers, both dark-haired with similar facial structures. Strong, aristocratic nose, and a jaw to die for. The only exception was Gabe’s long hair, beard, and his blue eyes. Out of the three brothers, only Gabe had those.

But where Gabe and Cristo looked similar, Alessandro looked nothing like them.

He looked darker, more rough with the tattoos on his throat and knuckles, and even more sinister. His strong, black brows narrowed in what seemed like a constant half-frown. If I would be scared to the point of losing the ability to breathe meeting Gabe or Cristo in a dark alley, I would probably piss my pants meeting Alessandro.

Defiance reared its head, like always when I met people I was scared of.

No self-preservation at all—that’s what my father always called it.

As far as my therapist was concerned, he called it a defense mechanism. But no matter the name, the scarier the person I met, the sassier I became.

Downright stupid—if I thought about it. Not that thinking about it would stop it. It was like an urge, which grew stronger and stronger until I blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“Is this the usual face you’re wearing, or are you annoyed at me?”

I could feel Gabe’s head snap up behind me, but I continued to hold Alessandro’s dark eyes, ignoring his menacing scowl.

One.

Two.

Three.

Alessandro raised a single eyebrow in a motion painfully familiar.

They were brothers, alright.

Then the left corner of his mouth slowly stretched upwards until a dimple appeared.

His whole face morphed from serial killer to borderline dark angel.

Holy fuck.

“I like you, Sophie. Especially if you’re like this to my brother, as well.”

“She can even defy you if she’s gagged and trussed up like a turkey. It’s all in the eyes,” Cristo said.

That made Alessandro smirk even more.

Gabe growled behind me, my only warning before he slung his arm around my waist, lifted me onto his lap, scooted into the middle, and dumped me to his left.

The action was smooth and fast. And incredibly possessive.

I stared at him, gaping. “Wha—”

Gabe slipped his hand under my hair, then squeezed my neck and leaned in until his lips touched my ear, and with a low growl, his voice dark and dangerous, he whispered in my ear, “Do not test me.”

He squeezed once more, then let go.

A shiver ran down my spine. I panted.

What was that?

Was he seriously pissed because I made small talk with his brother while he ignored everyone in the car, including me?

Fuck this.

I leaned forward until I met Alessandro's eyes again. "How did he survive this long without any social skills?"

Alessandro shrugged, but his eyes wrinkled and shone with amusement. "Mom really tried, but he was a clumsy kid, probably fell on his head one too many times. Then he abandoned the family and spent the last decade as a hermit somewhere."

"Zitto!"

Alessandro chuckled.

Cristo turned back around, a grin on his face. "Gabri only pretends to be dangerous. In reality, he's the biggest snuggler of the three of us. Ask Mamma."

"Silenzio, o ti butto fuori dalla macchina," Gabe said.

His Italian sounded sexy.

"What did he say?"

Cristo's eyes crinkled. "He's threatening to throw us out of the car if we don't shut up."

"That's not very nice." I leaned into Gabe, my lips touching his ear. "You really should be nicer to your brothers. They clearly love you."

He turned his head to me, his eyes reflecting his utter disbelief. Then he leaned in for a bruising kiss that left me breathless and panting.

"Either you shut up or I'll gag you. Your choice."

His eyes glittered with mischief.

And I just knew he would prefer the latter.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



The flight had been short and luckily, as uneventful as the drive to our family home on the outskirts of Verona.

When the heavy gate opened and I caught my first look at Villa Caliginis, my chest constricted. Another first. The first time home with my papa gone.

I looked sideways at Sophie.

She'd been quiet, lost in thought. Was she thinking about her sisters? Or was she thinking about her immediate departure?

Her leaving me?

I shook my head. She was never mine, to begin with. She'd made that abundantly clear from the start.

When we arrived at the villa, she didn't even look around. Even though I fully expected a comment. Some kind of sassy mentioning of how the golden spoon I was born with had destroyed my ability to empathize.

Or maybe she didn't comment because she was used to beautiful houses, extravagant driveways, and the crystal-clear turquoise of infinity pools.

But this was home. A home I'd missed more than I ever thought I would.

I helped her out of the car, and once I'd entered the beautiful foyer, with its marble floor and imperial staircase, I inhaled deeply.

Home.

“Let’s hit the club before Enzo knows we’re here,” I said to my brothers. Then I turned to Sophie next to me. “You can stay here. Rest a little.”

She looked at me and waited.

And waited.

I sighed. “You shouldn’t be seen with us in public,” I said.

She raised a single eyebrow and started tapping her foot.

Telling me—without words—she would not stay behind, no matter what arguments I uttered.

I should’ve known appealing to her sense of decency was a lost cause.

I sighed and shook my head.

Sophie was a rebel.

A fighter.

She played by her own rules.

I didn’t envy her father because keeping her out of harm’s way was probably a full-time job.

And with that mouth on her, it wouldn’t only be outside threats he’d need to protect her from.

But also, I didn’t even want to know what hare-brained action she would take if I left her behind.

So aside from chaining her to a bed, the safest thing would be to take her with us.

“Let’s get changed. Meet up in five minutes.”

My brothers nodded and disappeared up the marble staircase.

When I took Sophie’s hand, her stomach rumbled.

I narrowed my gaze. I’d forgotten to feed her. I’d had a sandwich in the command room with Cristo and Alessandro before we left, but I’d forgotten to feed Sophie.

And she didn’t say a word.

Fuck.

I wrapped my arm around her waist and led her across the entry hall, but instead of leading her upstairs and getting changed, I pulled her into the kitchen and onto one of the old barstools my father had bought for my mother—from a random cafe they'd visited in Rome—even though he despised the red vinyl upholstery and constantly complained about the springs piercing his ass.

That's how much my father had loved my mother.

A morally black man who fell head over heels for a young Italian-American woman.

“Sit down.”

She sat without questioning me or demanding to know why we weren't changing.

I filled a pot with water and put it on the stove while searching the freezer for a container of my mother's famous bolognese sauce.

The one thing she learned how to cook because she knew it was my father's favorite.

And sure enough, I found one and put it into another pot.

I salted the water for the pasta with more salt than I thought I needed—the secret recipe for delicious Italian pasta, then stirred the frozen block of bolognese.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Feeding you.”

“Why?”

“Because I was careless. I should've done it before we left.”

“You don't need to take care of me.”

I leaned my back against the kitchen counter, folded my arms over my chest, and didn't dignify that stupid statement with an answer.

I kidnapped her, locked her in my room, held her hostage, and took her virginity. It was my duty to care for her—which included not forgetting to feed her.

I cooked the pasta al dente, as my nonna taught me, then watched her eat.

She swallowed her first bite while holding my gaze, and my dick instantly hardened.

When she slid her tongue over her lips and moaned, I held my breath and tightened my grip on the counter behind me.

Watching Sophie eat pasta was more of a turn-on than any other encounter I'd ever had with any other woman.

Sexual or otherwise.

Nothing had ever been this sensual, this captivating.

Not even playing with the most gorgeous subs at the club.

“Thank you,” she said after she'd polished off her plate. “That was incredibly delicious.”

Nothing better than a woman with a healthy appetite.

She licked her lips once more, then folded her hands in her lap, looking incredibly young and innocent...and sexy.

“You can thank me next time by letting me finger-fuck you while you eat.”

Her eyes locked with mine, and a blush turned her pale skin rosy red.

If I made it my mission in life to make her blush every day, I would die a happy man.

“Let's get ready.”

She narrowed her eyes, but instead of calling me out on my brash comment, gave a breathless “okay.” Turned me on even more.

Was there time for a quick romp?

I led her to my room.

My eighteen-year-old-self room which I hadn't seen ever since.

Thank God my mamma had removed all traces of posters full of dark, sarcastic humor and those showing my obsession with

heavy metal bands.

“Do you want to shower?”

She nodded.

I nodded at the bathroom, then went in search of a dress for her as soon as she closed the door behind her.

Thank God my mother’s walk-in closet was overflowing with clothes in all sizes, shapes and forms.

I brought a couple of black dresses back to the room, then stripped.

And it took more self-restraint not to join her than I cared to acknowledge.

This...us...needed to end.

Right now.

We had no future. My sassy little fighter, born into the wrong family, was still innocent.

Too innocent for someone like me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



As we arrived at the nightclub, I couldn't help but feel a sense of unease. My nostrils flared, and I had to force my eyes shut for a moment.

The way she smelled, standing next to me, drove me insane. The scent of crushed pine needles—probably from the shower gel she found in my bathroom—enhanced her own delicious scent. It should be manly, but on Sophie, the heady mixture underscored her femininity. As did my mother's dress, which clung to her like a second skin.

She looked stunning—a clump of heat inside of me coiled like a wild animal made of fire, ready to rip anyone to pieces who dared to look at her.

The silk of the dress was cool to the touch, and my grip around her waist got tighter and tighter as we passed the line leading into the club.

She looked up at me—her face tight—but immediately looked away again—before I could mask the storm in my eyes, before I could give her a reassuring half-smile.

“Just stay close to me, and nothing will happen.”

She straightened.

Should've known showing my protectiveness would wake her inner warrior. Or was it defiance?

Suddenly, she no longer looked young or innocent. She looked like a femme fatale.

Like a queen of the night.

Kicking butts and taking names.

With one unbelievably sexy move of her head, she threw her hair back, which caught and glimmered under the dim lights of the entrance.

This was wrong. I should've insisted on her not coming with us.

That dress was not the right choice, and a myriad of things could go wrong with her in this kick-ass mood.

I wanted her all to myself, wanted her on her knees, sucking my dick, her watery eyes locked with mine.

My palms began to sweat, and my mouth grew dry as I felt the urge to claim her eclipse my better judgment.

I leaned close, struggling with myself not to sweep her up and carry her back to the car.

Back to my bed.

I tried to quell my yearning, knowing that by tomorrow, I had to let her go.

But every fiber of my being wanted her.

"If you do something stupid, there will be consequences to pay," I growled in her ear.

Her sharp intake of breath sent a zing through my body.

She turned her head, her eyes danced full of mischief.

Fuck me.

I unleashed a monster. Or might've found my match in her.

And how much fun would it be to see her break?

As we approached the entrance, the bouncer immediately recognized Alessandro, bowing his head in respect. He barely acknowledged my presence, which was just as I liked it.

Keeping a low profile was always better than standing out. But my return as the new head wasn't going to be easy.

Trust would have to be earned, not given.

“Tell Enzo we want to talk to him,” I ordered the bouncer, keeping my voice steady. The bouncer looked at me for a second, then his eyes widened. He nodded and moved out of the way while he talked into his radio.

News traveled fast.

“Stay close to her,” I commanded Cristo and Alessandro, making sure they understood how important it was to keep her safe.

They nodded, but I could see the tension building in both my brothers.

The same tension that filled me.

“Enzo’s on his way,” the bouncer informed us, snapping me back to reality. I steeled myself for the conversation that was about to take place.

And the information I needed to extract from him.

We entered the club. Inside, the atmosphere was electrifying—music pounding, people dancing, and lights bouncing off of every surface. I held Sophie’s hand tightly, protective instincts surging through me.

The pulsating beat of the music reverberated through my chest as we made our way upstairs to the VIP lounge. The nightclub was a cacophony of sound and movement; bodies writhed together on the dance floor below us, bathed in the neon glow of overhead lights.

I held Sophie’s hand protectively as we navigated the crowd, her fingers entwined with mine. Every so often, I’d catch myself staring at her. Seeing her all dolled up and stunning, I wavered between throwing my suit jacket over her and attacking her.

We finally reached the relative seclusion of the rapidly emptying VIP area and sank down into a group of plush couches.

Cristo, ever the comic relief, his sole purpose in life to drive me insane, turned to Sophie with a smile. “Care to dance, beautiful?”

My stomach tightened, and I shot him a deathly glare—which he ignored.

Sophie hesitated for a moment, then glanced at me for approval.

I nodded, putting a lid on my jealousy and the automatic no that lay on my lips. Maybe getting her away from the conversation with Enzo wasn't such a bad idea.

Though my eyes stayed glued on her as she stood and followed Cristo to the small VIP dance floor.

The two of them laughed and moved to the rhythm of the music, looking carefree and alive. I watched their easy fun, knowing my time with her was coming to an end. No matter how fantastic the sex had been, or how much I wanted to keep her, I had to find her sisters and return her to Craig Donnelly.

“Quite taken with her, aren't you?” Alessio's voice cut through my thoughts.

I stiffened, thrown off by his perceptiveness.

“I don't know what you're talking about.” I tore my eyes from the dancing couple.

“She's an attractive woman. And you're not blind,” Alessio responded, his tone both teasing and serious. “What happened between you two? Why did you take her from Uncle Fausto?”

I clenched my jaw. I couldn't hide the truth from my brother. Wouldn't.

If I wanted honesty from him, I needed to trust him first. “He kept her as a slave, in a cage. She was whipped, abused.” The thought of Sophie's wounds made me furious all over again.

Alessandro studied me, clearly seeing the struggle within me.

The silence between us grew; despite the love I felt for my brother, the tension came off me in waves.

“Are you falling for her, Gabe?” he asked, concern etched on his face.

“Of course not,” I replied though I knew he saw right through me. The truth was, I couldn't deny my obsession with Sophie.

“Whatever happens,” he said quietly, his voice filled with understanding, “I’m on your side.”

I nodded, unable to find the words to express my gratitude for his support.

My focus returned to Sophie and the dangerous path I was on.

When Enzo arrived, I could immediately sense his twisted nature.

He looked like a typical boxer, brutish, with low-brow power, a big neck, a punched-in nose, and a false smile. All buried beneath an overpowering cloud of aftershave, but the stench of insincerity couldn’t be missed.

Intention had a smell—and his was borderline vomit-inducing.

We hugged and kissed on each cheek, holding up a façade of politeness.

For now.

He flopped down on the opposite side of the table, legs and arms spread wide. “Welcome back, Gabriele.” He smiled, pretending to acknowledge my return as the new head of the family while secretly looking down at me as if I were a bug he wanted to squash beneath his heel. He signed someone, and a drink appeared in his hand, then he beckoned the young female server—who barely looked legal—with his finger. “How’s life treating you?”

The server waited next to him, and he grabbed between her legs and squeezed.

My stomach tightened, and I could feel Alessio next to me straighten in his seat.

Enzo then sent her away with a slap on her ass. His blatant display of power was almost ridiculous.

Deranged. Ego-driven. Cocky. I filed that away. Always good to know what made people tick.

“There’s something I need your help with.” I caught Enzo’s gaze as he gave me a nonchalant tip of his chin, but his eyes glittered with power.

He really thought he was the one in control here.

What an oblivious *stronzo*.

“Enough with the pleasantries,” I said, leaning forward and letting him see my impatience. “Human trafficking isn’t part of the Falcone business, now, is it, Enzo?”

I held his gaze, let the tension build in the air between us until he shifted his weight uncomfortably.

I gave Alessio a nod, and he handed Enzo the picture of Sophie’s sisters and cousin.

“Where are they?” I asked, staring at him—not missing the hint of recognition in his eyes before he schooled his face into a mask.

“No idea,” he said and handed the picture back.

I exhaled slowly.

If I wasn’t one hundred percent certain before if he was involved in the kidnapping and human trafficking, now I was convinced.

He could play dumb all he wanted, but he couldn’t hide the depraved sheen in his eyes.

“I can ask around. Get you some information,” Enzo said.

Informing Fausto was what he meant.

His evasiveness only served to further my suspicions, and I knew I had to be quick and ruthless.

I needed answers, and I wouldn’t hesitate to get them by any means necessary.

It was time to up the ante.

Sophie and Cristo took that unfortunate moment to return to our table.

Oblivious to what was going on, Sophie’s laughter rang out like a beautiful melody. I couldn’t help but feel that insatiable pull towards her, a magnetic force that I shoved down violently.

I did not want her anywhere near Enzo.

“Did you miss us?” Cristo teased, grinning at Alessandro and me.

“Absolutely,” I replied dryly, and my eyes flipped from Enzo and locked on Sophie. Her cheeks were flushed, and her smile lit up the dimly lit VIP area.

Sophie’s gaze met mine, then she looked at Enzo.

Her eyes widened, and her whole body froze.

My heart clenched, following her line of sight to Enzo, who had straightened in his seat. His twisted grin sent shivers down my spine, and the depraved lust in his eyes made it clear he was pure evil.

And that he’d met Sophie before.

“Talk,” I demanded, my voice cold and lethal.

“Find out for yourself,” Enzo snarled, defiance in his eyes.

In a swift motion, I pulled out a knife, grabbed Enzo’s hand, and impaled it to the table between us.

His screams did nothing to sway my resolve.

“Tell me where they are, or this gets worse.”

“Fausto’s villa,” Enzo spat through gritted teeth.

Wimp.

“All except one.” His eyes went back to Sophie. He licked his lips.

I twisted the knife, not caring about the blood staining the tablecloth, before I yanked it free, leaving him to cradle his mangled hand.

My attention snapped back to Sophie, who had paled considerably. She looked terrified, was shaking like a leaf, and I cursed myself for letting her witness such violence.

But when Enzo’s gaze settled on her again, something dark and deadly spread and thickened inside of me.

I doused the fire with ice-cold calm. “Get out of my sight,” I growled, my blood boiling underneath the tight lid I had on my emotions at the thought of Enzo ever touching Sophie. The

barely restrained rage in my voice seemed to do the trick as Enzo jumped up.

Though instead of leaving, he faced Sophie, and his next words made my blood boil over, and fury flushed my whole body.

“Remember me, slave?” he drawled, a sick smile playing on his lips. “You still owe me a blow job.”

The words slid off Enzo’s slimy tongue and sent a surge of white-hot rage coursing through my veins.

My vision tunneled, and my pulse pounded in my ears.

I couldn’t let this sick bastard live another second.

Then he sent her a kiss, licked over his lips, and grabbed his junk, and I snapped.

I lunged over the table at him.

My hand shot out, gripping the knife as I plunged it into the side of his throat and back out in one swift motion.

Crimson sprayed across the table as Enzo’s eyes shot to me and widened in shock before they turned over.

He fell to his knees.

I watched as life left him.

“Take care of him,” I barked at Alessio and Cristo, taking my eyes off Enzo’s lifeless body slumped on the floor.

If this happened anywhere else, it would mean a life sentence in prison. But in here, in my club, on my turf, it only meant we needed to get rid of the body.

Welcome to the darkness.

“Gabe...” Sophie’s voice trembled as she stared in horror at the grisly scene before her, her beautiful face etched with terror—because of me.

“Come on, let’s get out of here.” I took her hand in mine, leading her away from the remnants of my vengeance.

Her fingers were cold and trembling, and I held onto them tightly, trying to offer her some semblance of stability.

We knew where Jemma, Cara, and Fiona were being held captive now, but my overprotective instincts screamed at me to protect Sophie.

Especially after what she'd just witnessed.

Would she ever look at me the same way again, knowing what a cold-blooded and ruthless killer I was?

I wasn't second-guessing my actions. Enzo needed to die. But I'd rather she hadn't witnessed it.

As we made our way through the thumping bass and chaos of the club, Sophie remained silent, clinging to my hand like a lifeline.

I could feel her insecurity and unease, and it gnawed at me, making my stomach churn.

"Are you alright?" I asked softly, and let my lips brush her ear. Even though I already knew the answer.

She looked up at me, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. "I-I don't know," she stammered, her voice barely audible over the pulsating music.

"Once we find your sisters and cousin, everything will be okay," I reassured her although I wasn't sure if I was saying it more for her or myself.

The weight of my actions and their potential consequences bore down on me, but I pushed it aside for now.

There were more pressing matters at hand.

And I had to start somewhere showing my force.

Gaining control and power.

A reputation. Fear.

"You did that for me," she whispered, giving my hand the lightest squeeze.

The hint of amazement in her voice made my heart take a double beat.

Maybe there was a sliver of hope that she could still see the man beneath the monster.

“Whatever it takes,” I vowed, my determination renewed.
“You’ll be home soon.”

As we stepped out into the cool night air, leaving the sounds of the club behind us, I couldn’t help but wonder what the future held for us.

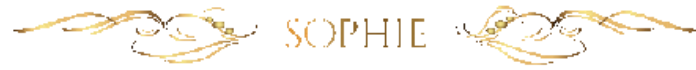
Future.

I scoffed. There wasn’t an ‘us’ beyond this.

But one thing was certain.

She’d buried herself under my skin and cutting her out would hurt like a bitch.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Gabe drove me home in silence, the whir of the engine and the hum of the tires on the asphalt the only sounds that filled the air.

His hands were gripping and loosening on the steering wheel in a silent rhythm as if he were waging an internal war. I watched his knuckles turn white, then his hands relax again. He opened his mouth again, then snapped it shut, fighting the urge to say something.

I looked out of the window, wishing I could just disappear into the night until we arrived at the heavy gate.

I stared at the name engraved into a heavy stone plate on the wall surrounding the property. Villa Caliginis. Did that name mean something, or was it just a random street name?

The gate whirred open, and we made our way up the narrow gravel driveway heading up straight to the villa.

He parked the car and shut off the engine but remained seated.

I made a move to open the door, but he stopped me. The expression on his face was intense. "I'm sorry."

I sighed.

"Let me take care of you," he said.

"Okay," I said, shocked at the frailness in my voice.

He needed it as much as I did.

I watched him walk around the car, open my door. I took his hand as he led me inside and upstairs into his room.

Without a word, he helped me take off the dress. I felt heat radiating from his hands as he carefully undid the buttons on the side, warming my cold body.

So cold.

I was so aware of him, of the way he was looking at me, his eyebrows narrowed. His eyes full of worry and concern.

His hands tenderly brushed against my skin.

He was gentle—achingly so—handled me as if I were a horse that would bolt any minute.

He understood I was still in shock.

Was I still in shock?

Killing was part of his life. Part of my father's life, as well.

I'd always known.

Though I'd never experienced it up close.

Had never watched the life drain out of someone and felt it so viscerally.

When the dress was off, he looked at me one more time before taking a step back. For a moment, neither of us said a word. He simply stood there, his gaze fixed on me before he turned away and walked into the bathroom.

I watched him leave, feeling a strange mixture of sadness and relief.

He turned on the shower, then came back for me, urged me in wordlessly before following.

The steam swirled around us, cloaking us in uneasy silence, almost suffocating us as we stood there in the humid heat.

He washed me so slowly as if I was fragile glass, like that first night together—but this time, his touch felt strangely detached, distant—as if there was a layer between my skin and his hands.

And even though his touch was firm and unyielding, the way he looked at me—as if he was expecting me to break away and flee at any moment—was unsettling.

It felt nothing like before.

He toweled me off with a fluffy, white towel.

He moved with the ease of someone who was accustomed to death—even from his own hands. But in his eyes, there was understanding, even compassion.

Hadn't he done the same with the dead intruders in his room? Hadn't he shielded me from the sight of them on the floor and sent me into the bathroom?

When we were done, he helped me into one of his shorts and a tee.

Too big on me—overwhelming reminders of how small I was compared to him, and the world around me.

How ill-equipped and oblivious to the harsh reality of his life I was.

I'd grown up sheltered.

And if anything, it took me twenty years to finally wake up.

The kidnapping, the whipping, the degradation. Falling in love with a killer.

Maybe all of this happened for a reason.

Maybe this was the lesson I needed to learn.

To wake up and see the world as it is, instead of hemming and hawing about the circumstances of my life—of my golden cage.

The moment his brothers returned, he kissed my forehead. "Stay put, and do not open the door for anyone! We'll be back before you know it. Everything is going to be alright."

I nodded.

He stared at me for a moment—concern written all over his face.

But then he left without another word.

And coldness swept back to consume me.

I watched all three of them rush out of the door to rescue my sisters.

I watched the taillights of the two SUVs disappear down the driveway.

And then I stood by the window, staring out at the twinkling lights of Verona in the distance.

Staring.

Waiting.

As much as I wanted to forget what had happened tonight, as soon as I blinked, images flashed back to me like still frames of a horror movie—Enzo’s expression contorting from leering to shock when Gabe lunged forward and plunged his knife into his throat; the ever-expanding pool of blood in the strobe of light, and finally, Enzo’s unseeing eyes before he crumpled to the floor.

My stomach tightened.

Gabe had killed a man.

For me.



The headlights of the first SUV cut through the darkness of the night like a beacon of hope.

How long had I been standing here looking out the window—not seeing anything but the gruesome events of the evening?

How much time had passed?

Minutes? Hours?

I held my breath in anticipation.

Waited.

Watched.

The black SUVs stopped just as the security lights went on.

I leaned forward until my forehead touched the cold windowpane.

Gabe, Alessio, and Cristo stepped out of the vehicles—all without shirts. And then helped my sisters out, as well.

My eyes filled with tears and blurred my vision, and a strangled sigh escaped my lips.

Everything is going to be alright.

Without a second thought, I rushed downstairs to greet them.

Jemma, Cara, and Fiona—all with blankets over their shoulders—ran into my arms. Their warm embrace filled me with love and relief, and tears.

So many tears.

We held each other for what seemed like an eternity.

Cried together until my worries and fears faded away, replaced by a feeling of contentment, even joy.

We were all safe.

After a while, we broke apart, and the three men stepped forward, all three of them with heavy expressions.

My eyes searched and found Gabe's.

He looked worn out.

Tired.

Drained.

Whatever they found in Fausto's villa, it was more than my sisters.

Worse than that.

And it was Gabe's job as the new head of the family to clean the shit up. What had been going on?

For the first time, I looked at my sisters, scrutinized their clothes—black dress shirts and suit jackets and nothing else.

Their appearances—faces and hair—were ragged.

But they looked relatively unharmed—at least on the outside, thank God—which was an improvement on how Gabe had found me.

Gabe cleared his throat and gave me a small nod when my eyes snapped to his. “You good?” he asked in a somber voice.

I nodded. I wanted to go to him. Sink into his arms.

But he appeared unapproachable.

“Take my room—get them cleaned up; I’ll whip up some pasta,” he said.

I nodded. “Thank you.”

He smiled—just a ghost of a smile, then he turned away and disappeared into the kitchen.

I stared at his retreating back. Something had shifted between us.

In him.

I focused back on my family.

Alessandro and Cristo both stepped aside when I ushered them upstairs.

We were halfway up the stairs when Cristo spoke. “If you need anything, don’t hesitate,” he said, his voice dark and throaty.

I turned around. His unusually stern expression made my skin crawl.

“Thank you.” I looked from him to Alessio, including him in my thanks.

Then I led my family into Gabe’s room.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



The sound of footsteps echoing through the hallway pulled me from my thoughts.

I leaned back against the counter as Sophie and her sisters entered the kitchen, each clad in one of my old, far-too-big death-metal T-shirts—like a runway show of my personal past.

The sight brought a strange warmth to my chest.

Cristo mimicked my stance, a smirk playing on his lips. “Well, hell. Looks like Gabe’s wardrobe is having a revival. Some call it trash; I call it vintage.”

I couldn’t help but smile at his comment, but my gaze was drawn back to Sophie. She’d changed, as well, but instead of another tee, she wore the clothes I’d had on earlier, on the flight here.

Before the whole Enzo debacle. Before taking a shower with her.

Was it because she liked my scent? The thought settled like a dark, twisted secret into my chest.

“Hey, you all look great,” I said, trying to keep my voice light. “Ready for some food?”

We found Sophie’s sisters and cousin in one of the rooms in Fausto’s basement. Why he took Sophie and left them behind was anyone’s guess.

I just hoped they hadn’t had it as bad as Sophie. Hoped they hadn’t suffered through the same nightmares Sophie had gone through.

Thinking about the woman who occupied my thoughts much more than was wise made my gaze snap back to her.

Her eyes met mine, and something in her expression—a softness, gratitude maybe—made my heart beat dully in my chest.

Our time together was limited, counted not even in hours, but minutes, and the weight of that knowledge pressed down on me as if I was trapped beneath a boulder.

I'd gotten a text from Hawk earlier. He was on a flight here to pick them up and take them back home.

I didn't want her to go.

Wanted her by my side—needed her—but I couldn't keep her.

Not without risking the lives of everyone around us.

“Take a seat.” I held out the chairs and waited until Jemma, Cara, and Fiona settled down. “You need sustenance, and if there's one thing Italians do best, it's food.”

I served them generous portions of my homemade pasta, this time with marinara sauce, and the scent of garlic and basil filled the air as the steam wafted from their plates.

“Thank you,” murmured the sisters, their eyes wide with appreciation.

I caught Sophie's gaze, then held up an empty plate with a silent question.

She shook her head and declined, her voice soft. “I'm still full from when you fed me earlier.”

Our gazes locked, a tangle of unspoken emotions passing between us. I knew it was only a matter of minutes until her escort home would arrive.

Our time together was coming to an end—fast.

My chest tightened, the desperate urge to keep her close gnawing at me. To make her mine—forever.

But that meant going to war with the Irish mob, and I didn't have that kind of power—not yet.

Sophie approached and positioned herself next to me, her ass leaning against the kitchen counter.

Our hands were so close they almost touched. Her body heat radiated towards me, her intoxicating scent filling my nostrils.

How had I become so obsessed with her in such a short time?

And what was it about her that drew me in so completely?

We watched as Sophie's sisters ate, savoring each bite. Cara wiped her mouth and smiled. "This is delicious, Gabe."

I raised one eyebrow, exchanged a glance with Sophie who gave me a one-sided shrug.

She must've told them our names because we sure as hell didn't volunteer them.

"Thanks," I replied, the words barely escaping my clenched jaw.

Cristo, who had helped himself to a portion, settled down and silently dug in and cracked a grin, his eyes dancing with mischief. "You know, if this whole *capo dei capi* gig doesn't work out, you can always open up a restaurant."

An ironic chuckle escaped me, but it was short-lived as the weight of three pairs of eyes settled on me.

Sophie obviously hadn't told her family everything.

The tension in the room thickened, and I caught a nervous glance exchanged between Cara and Fiona. It seemed the realization of who they were breaking bread with had rendered them all squirrely and in a panic.

Sophie sensed their unease and offered a reassuring smile. "It's okay, they're pretty decent, for *mafiosi*," she murmured.

"Besides," Jemma chimed in, trying to lighten the mood, "a man who can cook is super sexy, even if he's a made man."

The other women nodded in agreement, and I chuckled despite myself. Their attempt at normalcy was endearing, and apparently, the role of jokester of the family was in Jemma's young hands.

She was the youngest—like Cristo. Apparently, the Donnelly family had a similar dynamic to what we had. But my laughter soon faded as the reality of our situation settled over me once more. Sophie and I were like two stars on a collision course, destined to burn brightly before either barely missing each other or colliding and going in opposite directions at the speed of light.

And all I could do was savor the remaining moments we had together, knowing that letting her go would be one of the hardest things I'd ever done.

My phone vibrated once in my pocket—the signal I'd been dreading. Hawk was on his way here to escort Sophie and her sisters back to their family.

Back out of my life.

My chest tightened. The knowledge that our time together was drawing to a close left a bad aftertaste in my mouth.

But there was no other option—keeping her would only lead to more bloodshed.

I wasn't in a position to take on the Irish mob—not yet.

I walked out of the kitchen and to the door, feeling Sophie's gaze follow me like a ray of sunshine warming my back.

I crossed the entry hall and activated the display mounted next to the entrance.

The camera at the front gate showed Hawk's familiar figure accompanied by Birdie, one of his most trusted operatives and a skilled sniper.

The cavalry had arrived.

I pushed the button that opened the gate, allowing them entry.

Sophie joined me by the door, her eyes wide with apprehension. "What's going on, Gabe?" she asked softly.

Her usual gumption was so subdued; she was borderline timid. Was it still from her witnessing me killing Enzo?

"Your escort is here," I replied, straining to keep my voice steady. The words tasted bitter on my tongue. "It's time for

you to go home.”

“Home? No, I can’t... I’m not ready to leave yet.” She looked at me, desperation in her eyes.

I realized with a painful jolt that she was as attached to me as I was to her.

What a fucking nightmare.

“Listen, Sophie,” I said, trying to hold back the emotion threatening to choke me, “come tomorrow, there will be war. Fausto is going to launch an all-out attack against me.” I skimmed my knuckles over her jaw. “And you are a weakness I can’t afford.” The words felt like knives tearing through my chest. “And a complication I don’t want.”

Sophie’s face paled.

She turned away abruptly and fled up the stairs to my bedroom.

I watched her go, feeling as if a piece of myself was being ripped away.

Hawk and Birdie arrived at the house, and I greeted them with the familiar bro-hug, trying to push aside my emotions. “ETD 15,” I told Hawk, who nodded solemnly. Fifteen minutes would give the girls in the kitchen time to finish their pasta and me time to say goodbye to Sophie.

I left Hawk and Birdie and made my way up to my bedroom, with thoughts of what to say to her bombarding my mind. Letting her go would be excruciatingly difficult. In the short time we’d spent together, she’d embedded herself into the very core of me, and cutting her loose felt like I imagined self-amputation must feel like. My chest tightened painfully, but I knew it had to be done.

For her sake, and mine.

My hand lingered on the doorknob, and with one last deep breath, I pushed open the bedroom door and stepped inside the room.

Sophie stood by the window, her eyes fixed on the night outside. The moonlight cast a soft glow on her face in the

otherwise dark room, highlighting the tension etched in her features.

I flipped the switch, and light flooded the room.

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” I asked gently, trying to hide the pain in my voice, “To finally end this madness?”

Sophie turned to me, her eyes blazing with anger, but she didn’t say a word before she turned back to stare outside.

My chest tightened as I closed the distance between us. I wrapped my arms around her from behind.

She pressed herself against me, yet she remained silent.

Her body fit perfectly against mine.

Felt perfect against mine.

This moment would be burned into my memory forever—such a powerful connection arose from the most unlikely of meetings.

We’d been doomed from the start. Like day and night, like two sides of a coin, fated to be forever apart, yet inexplicably drawn to one another.

“We never had a chance,” I whispered into her ear, watching her in the reflection of the window and fighting back the urge to just keep her by my side forever. “Not with the way we started, not with our families being mortal enemies. And also, Stockholm syndrome.”

My attempt at humor didn’t land the way I wanted it. Instead, a single tear ran down her cheek, and my heart ached at the sight of it. I tried to soothe her, skimmed my fingers through her hair, but the weight of our situation was both too heavy to bear and too absolute to change.

“Please don’t make me leave,” she begged, her voice cracking with emotion.

“*Mi dispiace, amore mio.* I have no choice,” I told her, struggling to keep my voice level and void of emotion. “Your safety is more important than anything else, and you’ll never be safe at my side. *Sei il mio cuore.*”

I kissed her crown, then turned her around in my arms, wiped away her tears, kissed her one last time, and sealed our bittersweet goodbye.

Her lips tasted like desperation and heartbreak, and I knew for as long as I lived, I'd never forget the taste.

Or the feeling.

Hand in hand, we walked downstairs, where my brothers, her sisters, Hawk, and Birdie waited in the entry hall.

All eyes were on us, but I couldn't bring myself to let go of her hand. The warmth of her touch was the only thing keeping me sane and in control.

It didn't matter that every fiber in me screamed to not let go, to keep her, no matter what.

But that wasn't reality.

And escaping reality was not possible.

Not for us.

Sophie had to leave, and I had to let her go.

But even with the distance between us, even though we would never see each other again, she would take a piece of my soul with her—one I could never reclaim.

The SUV's engine hummed softly as we drove to the airport. Sophie's hand was still clutched tightly in mine—a lifeline she refused to let go of.

I could feel the silent questions from everyone around us, their gazes heavy with curiosity and concern, but I didn't care.

All that mattered was Sophie, her warmth burning into my skin—leaving a mark, forever.

She struggled to be brave.

My little fighter.

And watching her suffer in silence nearly killed me.

The unspoken words hung heavily between us, a suffocating cloud of pain and longing for what could never be.

“Everything will be okay, Gabe,” Sophie whispered, her voice barely audible above the noise of the road.

I squeezed her hand gently, unable to speak. There were no words left, just a raw, gaping wound that had my teeth on edge and a violent urge to burn down the entire universe simmering just under the surface.

When we arrived at the airport, we pulled up to the private section, and the gate opened for us in impeccable timing. Hawk had arranged everything perfectly—there wasn’t a single trace leading back to me, ensuring that nobody would know the jet was connected to us, or who the passengers were.

We stopped right in front of a nondescript business jet.

“Time to go,” Alessio announced, his voice void of emotion. He probably could see with one look at me this goodbye was tearing me apart, but he also understood the necessity of it all.

The inevitability of it.

Alessio exited the car, Birdie, from the passenger side, threw me a dirty look before she was gone, too.

I watched Jemma, Cara, and Fiona exit the other vehicle with Cristo, while Hawk followed close behind.

I hesitated, unwilling to release Sophie’s hand just yet.

“I don’t want to leave,” Sophie said, her voice barely above a whisper. I watched her eyes fill with sorrow.

I could drown in those eyes. “Time to go, Mia Stellina.”

“Wait,” she whispered, her voice choked with emotion. “Just...one more minute.”

We sat there, our fingers intertwined, each second ticking away like an agonizing countdown. The world outside faded away, leaving only Sophie—her scent, her soft breaths, her undeniable intoxicating presence.

For a split second, I let myself fantasize about what the future with her by my side would look like: a life full of laughter and happiness that seemed almost within reach yet so brutally out of grasp.

“Thank you, Gabe,” Sophie murmured, her voice trembling. “For everything.” She looked at me, and our gazes locked.

I skimmed my finger along her jaw, then reached for her hand. “You’re my heart, Stellina,” I confessed, my throat aching. “Remember that, always.”

In the quiet confines of the SUV, her eyes on mine, my world shrunk until it was just Sophie and me, her hands in mine, our fingers intertwined, each second ticking away like an agonizing countdown.

Out of words.

Out of air.

Reluctantly, I stepped out of the SUV, leaving our temporary sanctuary, and pulled her behind me and into the clear night. A sudden gust of wind whipped at our faces as we approached the jet, but the balmy wind was nothing compared to the bone-deep chill settling in my chest.

I guided her up the steps and into the jet and pushed her into a seat, fastening her seatbelt with the utmost care, trying to savor the fleeting moments we had left together.

Our gazes met, and I brushed a kiss across her forehead.

“Here,” I murmured, pressing my business card into her hand as I kissed her knuckles tenderly. “My private number is on the back. If you ever need anything, day or night, anything at all, call me.”

I couldn’t let her go without knowing she could reach out to me.

Hoping she would reach out to me.

“*Sei la donna più forte che io abbia mai conosciuto,*” I told her earnestly, my voice thick with emotion. “It was an honor to have you as a captive, Sophie.”

My desperate attempt to lighten the mood fell flat as tears welled up in her eyes and spilled over onto her cheeks.

I sighed, then stepped back.

Jemma, Cara, and Fiona gathered around her, offering comfort and support.

With one last lingering look at her tear-streaked face, I turned and left the plane.

“Take care of her,” I told Hawk, my voice barely audible.

He nodded solemnly, understanding—without needing to hear it—just how much she meant to me. Hawk knew me better than anyone. Had witnessed me and called me out on how I’d always kept my distance. How I never let anyone—especially a woman—come too close.

As a matter of fact, I’d never felt about anyone before the way I felt about her.

Hawk laid his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “Even after I personally deliver her to her father, I’ll make sure she remains safe, Falcon,” he promised.

I forced a nod and climbed into the driver’s seat of the SUV, with Alessio sliding in beside me. Cristo took the wheel of the other vehicle, and we drove off to park the SUVs.

Once parked, Alessio and I climbed onto the roof of our vehicle.

I inhaled deeply in an attempt to gain some semblance of composure.

Perched atop the SUV, Alessandro beside me and Cristo on the other vehicle, my gaze remained fixated on the private jet as it taxied toward the runway—an unsettling hollowness gnawed at my insides, a pulsing pain throbbing against the insides of my hollow rib cage.

I had believed myself to be cold, unfeeling, my heart to have withered and died a long time ago.

But letting her go had shattered that illusion.

I’d had a heart after all—and now it was gone.

“Are you okay, Gabe?” Alessio’s voice broke through my thoughts, concern etched in his features.

“Of course,” I lied, my voice flat.

Every cell of my being ached for her, but I wouldn't let it show.

With an absent nod, I tore my gaze from the ascending jet.

"Come morning," I began, forcing my emotions into submission, "we will need to turn the heat on Fausto." My voice held determination, belying the storm raging inside of me when I lost sight of the blinking lights of the jet against the black-as-ink night sky.

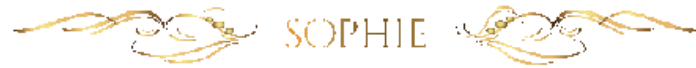
"Inform everyone you can reach. There will be a meeting tomorrow morning—a decision to be made."

I climbed down from the vehicle, and Cristo and Alessio did the same.

We went to our own much smaller private jet, ready to fly home. Ready to fight to remain in power in this family.

Or die trying.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



Three weeks later:

“Is there anything else you want to talk about today?”

I shook my head while looking at Nick—our family therapist—as openly and innocently as possible.

This was our tenth session in the last three weeks, and I was over and done with therapy.

Nick had known Cara, Jemma, and me since our mother had died, and our father insisted on therapy sessions for all of us.

When my father had insisted on taking up therapy again, I didn't even object—even though I knew there was a big chunk I wouldn't talk about.

Couldn't talk about.

Gabe and the days I spent with him.

Everything I experienced with him. His hands on my body, his eyes on me. The feelings of safety and love I had been missing ever since.

But I told Nick about Fausto. Told him about the kidnapping, talked about my fears, the degradations, the pain, and the feelings of worthlessness, of the dirtiness I felt—before Gabe.

I cried, I wailed, I cussed.

It was like an exorcism of some kind.

I got it all out.

Nick was impressed with how I coped.

But was I really coping?

Or had everything I'd experienced with Gabe been so intense, so technicolor instead of the muted tones my normal life consisted of, that it was burnt into my memories, outshining and crowding out the darkness of what had happened before so all the bad things couldn't linger and fester?

I suspected the latter was true.

Especially with the way I couldn't stop thinking about Gabe.

Couldn't stop replaying everything that had happened over and over again.

Couldn't stop wondering what would have been if circumstances were different.

But circumstances were what they were.

We never had a chance, not with the way we started, not with our families being mortal enemies.

He knew it, and I knew it. There wasn't a happy end for the daughter of an Irish mob boss and the boss of an Italian Mafia family.

Not in this life, anyway.



Two weeks later

I looked up from my book when my little sister Jemma stuck her head through the door. "Hawk's here again, and Papa asked me to come get you."

I nodded, but even that tiny movement took a lot of energy, and just thinking about closing my book and getting up from my window seat in my room made me feel exhausted.

These days, everything cost me a lot of energy.

And I didn't even know why.

I was back home. Back to the life, the golden cage I'd always known.

Outwardly, nothing had changed. Not in my everyday life: The same routine. The same sheltered existence.

Maybe Dad was a tad more protective than before—hence the doubled security and our personal details reporting on our every move.

But we all understood.

All managed somehow.

Only my way was not to talk at all.

Except for Fiona. I told Fiona everything—over the phone. But back home, no one knew.

Not my sisters.

Not my dad.

Not my therapist.

Because what was there to say that wouldn't make me sound completely, 100% crazy?

I fell in love with a Mafia boss, who saved me from slavery, only to keep me hostage in his room?

I fell in love with a man who killed people without a second thought but cared for me enough to bathe me and stitch me up?

Well, that would sound perfectly reasonable, wouldn't it?

And I didn't even want to know what my therapist would say to that—and what would happen if he would report back to my dad.

I looked down at my bookmark—Gabe's business card.

My insides knotted up, and a low-level queasiness—a near-constant companion these days—made me close the book with a snap.

I was torturing myself.

When I caught myself daydreaming about him—I avoided thinking of him.

But every night in my dreams, I was back in his arms. Back in his bed. With him inside of me, and his breath soft against my ear.

Pure torture.

Would Hawk have news about him?

Did I even want to know how he was doing?

You are a weakness I can't afford.

That was what he said. Not that he didn't love me—even though he never said he did.

But he was a man.

Not a hopeless romantic like myself.

He'd kissed me goodbye, but ultimately, he was the one who sent me away.

Maybe it was only sex for him—the thrill of the forbidden—unlike for me.

Because I fell in love with my blue-eyed devil. Head over heels, no holds barred.

At least, that's what I was suspecting after all the soul-searching and moping around I was doing.

Or maybe it was just infatuation. My feelings heightened in the aftermath of the emotional turmoil I went through.

I shook my head. How would I even start to entangle the one from the other? I couldn't. And it wouldn't make a difference anyhow.

We never had a chance, not with the way we started, not with our families being mortal enemies.

I rubbed at the pain in my chest.

It was time to move on.

I stood, then headed out of my room.

I needed to cut my ties to him, and that meant Hawk's frequent visits had to come to an end, as well.

I walked down the stairs and knocked on my father's office door before entering.

Nobody was inside, but the door leading outside was open, the curtain moving in the wind.

I crossed the room but stopped when I heard my father's voice.

"I need to know what happened to her over there. Because something bad did—she's completely altered. Quiet. Withdrawn. And she refuses to talk about it," my father said.

Hawk remained silent. Hawk was Gabe's friend, wasn't he? I'd witnessed their mutual respect. So how much did Hawk know, and what would it take to get him to talk?

Would Craig Donnelly, the most powerful man of the Irish Mafia in the US, owing you a favor, be enough?

And what would happen to Gabe if my father knew?

Gabe had enough enemies; he didn't need my father added to the list.

I stepped through the door. "Hello."

My father and Hawk turned to me at the same time.

Dad's face turned into a smile—the same anguished smile he'd given me ever since I'd come back. "*A thaisce*."—My treasure, the Irish endearment he called all three of us.

Hawk offered me his hand, but instead, I stepped up and gave Hawk a kiss on the cheek.

That was my personal way of getting over what I'd experienced.

Exposure therapy.

Get up close and personal with people even though I'd much prefer to keep my distance and not touch or be touched. "How's Birdie doing?"

Birdie, Hawk's badass counterpart, had been incredibly awkward on the flight back—a woman who clearly wasn't used to being sweet and showing affection had done that for

me. She'd held me when I cried. She'd told me everything would be okay again.

And she did all that while trying not to show how utterly uncomfortable she was while doing so.

Hawk sighed. "Birdie will be the death of me any day now."

I chuckled. That was his standard answer every time I asked about her.

Hawk and Birdie had chemistry—enough for me to notice despite my devastated state on the flight home.

But for some reason, Hawk seemed to be hell-bent on not succumbing to the attraction clearly visible every time his eyes fell on Birdie.

"Give her a kiss for me." I fought my smile.

Hawk nodded but looked like he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar at the same time.

Fighting your attraction to someone inappropriate was hard work.

"And FYI, I'm doing okay, Dad." I turned to my father. "I'm just feeling a little low. I feel claustrophobic, I miss Fiona, and I wish I could spend the rest of the summer in Ireland with her—as we planned."

I could see the big fat no written all over my father's face.

He wouldn't let me out of his sight.



Four weeks later

My pulse pounding, I dashed into the bathroom of the diner I'd selected to have lunch with my sisters, opened the box, and read the instructions.

Doing this at home would be way more comfortable. But there was always the chance someone would find the pregnancy test and report it back to my dad.

Something I did not need.

Even doing this was difficult—though easier when using Cara and Jemma to block my security detail from looking at my purchases.

When I missed my first period, I thought it was because of all that'd been going on.

But after I missed the second one, I added two and two together.

Fatigue, missed periods, unprotected sex.

You needed to be an idiot to miss the signs.

I peed on the stick, set my timer, then waited.

I didn't have to wait long before the plus sign appeared.

Pregnant.

I was pregnant with Gabe's child.

I called Fiona immediately.

"Hey, girl, I'm just about to go to bed. I miss you." Her voice sounded fake chipper. Like always. Which told me she wasn't, at all, doing as well as she wanted me to believe she was. A constant occurrence these days. And something that had me worried about her.

But this was not the moment to call her on her bullshit.

"I'm pregnant."

A second ticked by.

Then another.

"You're what?"

"Pregnant."

"Wow, shit, I don't know what to say, Soph."

"Wow, shit, actually sums it up perfectly."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm holding the test in my hand and staring at it."

"I'm sorry."

Her words sounded so sincere, and her voice conveyed so much sorrow, it somehow snapped me completely out of my moment of shock.

I started laughing until tears ran down my cheeks.

But there wasn't an ounce of anger or sorrow I felt for myself. I was laughing because how else could it be but amusing?

With Gabe and my story being how it was.

I remembered him pulling out the condoms—and in the end, not using them at all.

I laughed even harder.

Only I could remain a virgin throughout being kidnapped and beaten and held in a cage—just to get pregnant the first time I had sex with a big bad Italian Mafia boss—who held me captive in his room and made me feel like I was the only woman on Earth.

“Are you okay?” Fiona said, clearly doubting my sanity.

“Yes,” I gasped for air. “I’m okay.”

“Do you need me to come?” Fiona didn't sound convinced about my mental stability.

“Tell you what.” A surge of energy like I'd never known before shot through me and left my whole body buzzing.

I was pregnant with Gabe's baby. And I would make one hell of a mother and give that baby the best family it could wish for—even without its father. “I'm coming to you. How does that sound?”

“Do you think your dad will allow you to go?”

I shrugged. I didn't care what my dad did or didn't do. I was twenty, about to become a single mom. It was time for me to grow up and create the life I wanted instead of sitting in my invisible golden cage and feeling sorry for myself.

All I could hope for was that my dad would understand.

And if he didn't?

I shook my head. I would deal with it then.



“Dad.” I knocked on my father’s office door, then opened it.
“Can I talk to you for a second?”

“What is it, *a thaisce*?”

I sat down in front of his big desk. “I need to go to Ireland and visit Fiona.”

“What? Absolutely not. Why?”

“Because she’s gone through a lot, she’s all alone, and she’s not coping well. Cara, Jemma, and I have each other, but she’s got no one who knows what she’s gone through.”

“She can come here.”

I shook my head. “Let her stay in her familiar environment. Cara and Jemma are okay without me; she’s not.”

My dad looked at me in silence for a long time.

“I worry about you.”

I nodded. And he would worry a lot more once he found out the news. “I know. But I’m getting there, Dad. Really, I am.”

He nodded once. “You can go to Ireland for a month, but you will take two guards with you, and they’ll be with you at all times.”

I jumped up, rounded the desk, and gave him a kiss.

My father beamed.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Now out; I’ve got work to do.”

Running the Irish Mafia was a full-time job—even though my father had worked from home as much as he could since we came back, he was constantly working.

I nodded, crossed the room, and before I closed the door, I listened to my father pick up the phone and make the call, “Sophie will travel to Ireland—make all the necessary arrangements.”

I leaned against the closed door and smiled.

I would see Fiona. Have some time to think about the changes I had to make in my life.

And I'd get the chance to tell my dad about my pregnancy without him being able to scream at me—at least not face-to-face.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



“**T**he vote is unanimous. Gabriele will be the new Capobastione,” my uncle Stefano, the Capo Crimine of our family, said and effectively ended this weeklong campaign to build alliances, regain trust, and strengthen my position.

“If anyone has any doubts or tips”—I sent a lopsided grin to the group of men gathered in the big conference room —“please come see me anytime.”

I stared at Uncle Fausto. It took all my strength not to wipe his nonchalant grin off his face during this family meeting. He’d tried to campaign but ultimately failed to get the support of the senior members of our organizations.

At least not right now.

And even though the official vote was in my favor, I could feel malice coming off of my uncle in waves. He was probably scheming, biding his time. Building alliances and waiting for another chance to kill me.

I would gladly give him that chance to end this right now.

Openly.

In a fair fight—not in his scheming, underhanded kind of way.

But he wasn’t man enough, or maybe his influence wasn’t strong enough, to take me down head-on.

And I had no basis, no evidence to burn him to the ground—just yet.

But I wouldn't rest until I found it.

Wouldn't rest until I defeated him once and for all.



“*Capisci?*” I stared at one of my enforcers while I pressed his head against the surface of my father's old mahogany desk.

These days my anger was close to the surface, and my temper ran hot.

“He understands,” Alessandro said and laid his hand on my shoulder and squeezed.

I put pressure on his head once more, then took a step back and released Otello from my vise.

“*Vai!*” I said and turned to the window.

Streetlights bounced off the wet asphalt and cast irregular shapes of light on the otherwise dark street behind Vexa—our biggest nightclub—and the base of operation in Verona.

Shadows and light.

I listened to Otello getting up and scurrying out of my office like the rat he was.

He was another one of Fausto's puppets. And I was done with it.

Over and done.

Fausto's power inside the family ran deep—like an undercurrent of poison—invisible on the surface but steadily trickling beneath it.

Had my father known? Was that the reason for his death? Because he got too close to the truth?

The door opened and closed.

“They all voted for you. Why are you still so suspicious?” Cristo asked.

I turned around and stared at my little brother.

Because I wouldn't rest before this unfortunate operation of human trafficking was entirely gone from our family's business operation.

And until every last one involved got the message. Human trafficking was not a business venture the Falcone family would be dealing in. And everyone involved before better uninvolve themselves or faced the consequences.

Even if I had to hand deliver those personally.

Cristo sat on the back of the sofa in my office and let himself fall backward—all playful—then looked at me upside-down. “You behave like everybody in the family is your enemy.”

I shared a look with Alessio, who shrugged at our little brother's antics.

Somehow, despite his reservations and my suspicions, Alessandro had advanced to be my right-hand man.

While Cristo was still a little too young and a little too reckless—apart from his playboy-who-likes-to-party-a-little-too-much ways.

Alessandro, on the other hand, would've made a good head of the family.

He had gravitas, a good head on his shoulders, knew everything about the family's businesses, and held the respect of the senior members.

Why didn't my father choose him?

It would've been the logical solution. The prudent solution.

Instead of leaving a power vacuum behind, he could've made sure everything would run smoothly after his death.

I went back to my desk, sighed, then opened the folder containing this week's report Alessandro had handed me just moments before Otello arrived.

“Because I don't trust them. Not until...”

Not until this Earth was wiped clean of the likes of Fausto.

Not until I found out how exactly my father died.

Not until I made sure every single participant in this human-trafficking operation was crystal clear on my zero-tolerance stance.

Not until I had revenged Sophie.

Sophie.

Fuck.

It had been weeks since she'd left.

Incredibly busy weeks. Weeks with me sleeping a maximum of three hours per night.

And despite everything, she still popped into my thoughts all the fucking time.

“Can we go home to Castello dei Pietra soon?” Cristo sounded like a nagging child.

Fucking annoying.

Though my threshold of patience had significantly lowered these last few weeks.

“We'll stay here until everything is settled.”

I couldn't even stomach the thought of going back.

I'd tried. That first night without her, I'd taken one look at the room, then made a beeline to the control room.

She was fucking everywhere: the bed, the shower, even the fucking deck.

I could, without any effort, recall how she felt against me in the jacuzzi. Her scent was still all over the bedsheets—which I forbade the cleaning staff to change.

I locked the room and didn't allow anyone inside.

Not even myself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



I looked out the window at the landscape flying by. And even though it was a beautiful, vibrant autumn day here in Boston, with temperatures in the low 70s and with a hint of colorful foliage already, I longed for the dry heat, the smell of salt and dry earth in the air, and the pine trees that filled the sky with their deep, resinous scent and which bathed Gabe's family's country home in their shadows.

Maybe being there would chase the low-level nausea—my constant companion these days—away.

Maybe there I wouldn't feel this gaping emptiness.

I could almost hear the sound of the cicadas chirping at night, and I missed the way everything seemed brighter and more vibrant in Gabe's presence.

More real.

I shook my head.

It was more likely that it was just the situation that had heightened my senses and made me experience everything more intensely—or the exceptional circumstances that had made everything earthshakingly memorable and seared into my brain.

Made me crave it still.

It seemed like a lifetime since I'd been there, and in some ways, I felt like I'd never left—at least not all of me.

A part of me—a vital one—was missing ever since.

I moved my hand to my belly but stopped mid-air.

My eyes snapped to my father—who was watching me. He was always watching me.

“We can always turn around. Ireland in autumn is really not all that great,” he said.

I cocked my head. “I love you, Dad. And I promise I will check in every day.”

“Yes, you will. Also, you won’t be a second alone anyways.”

My dad shifted his eyes to the two people sitting opposite us.

Edgar Donovan and Siobhan O’Reilly—my bodyguards. Dad had even hired a woman—something unheard of before now—just to make sure I wasn’t alone even for a minute.

I exhaled and looked out the window again. I had to get the timing right to give him my news because if I told him a second too early, he would probably cancel my flight and lock me in my room.

Thinking about it—was my father’s power great enough to shut down the airport?

Not that I was willing to risk it.

I would call him right before take-off to tell him the news.

No chance of stopping me then.

If that made me a coward—so be it.

“Of course, sir,” O’Reilly answered my father, who relaxed next to me.

We arrived at the airport, and security and check-in went by in a hurry—my father probably had someone high enough in his pocket because why else would he be standing next to me and the sizable business jet?

Just like Gabe stood next to me before we boarded the jet in Verona.

“Call whenever you need to, and come home the moment Fiona is well enough,” Dad said, took me in his arms, and

kissed my cheek. “Or better yet, bring her with you and come back home immediately.”

For a second, I couldn't catch my breath. Would he still think this way when he knew I was pregnant?

Would he still welcome me in his home?

My father had always been overprotective—especially after Mom died. And he was a devout Catholic—much more than Cara, Jemma, or I were.

My pregnancy would be a reminder of his loss of control—something he had no tolerance for.

And at the same time, he would know that more happened in Italy than I let on.

Much more.

“I will. Thanks for letting me go.”

He nodded, squeezed me once more against his broad chest, then let me go. “Under no circumstances will you leave your uncle's house. Or Ireland.”

I mock-saluted him, then turned and, flanked by my two new shadows, boarded the plane.

I took out my phone and played with it and prayed my phone call wouldn't interfere with any avionics during take-off.

Maybe I should tell him once I'd landed safely.

I turned on flight mode and rested my head against the backrest.

The jet's engines roared to life as we raced down the runway and quickly ascended into the air, taking us higher and higher above the clouds.

The cabin was silent, except for the monotonous, dull whir of the turbines.

I leaned back in my seat and closed my eyes, feeling a profound peace wash over me.

I leaned my head against the cool window, feeling the vibrations of the plane hum through me, and gradually drifted

off into a deep sleep, something I hadn't experienced in weeks.



As soon as the plane touched down, I took my phone off airplane mode, waited impatiently until it found service, and called my dad.

He picked up immediately. “Sophie?”

“Hey, Dad, we just landed. There’s something important I need to tell you.”

“Okay?”

I could hear the wariness in my father’s voice. Felt the sharp pain of doom.

“Dad, I’m pregnant. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier, but I was afraid you wouldn’t let me go, and I desperately need time to think things through. Please don’t hate me.”

“Hate you?” My father’s voice sounded frail and angry at the same time. “Never. But you will tell me the name of the bastard, and you will come back immediately.”

“Dad, no. Please give me a week.”

“No fucking way.”

Now he was back to booming.

“I’m not coming back, no matter what. I’m twenty, but I’ll be staying with Fiona, and I’ll be good, I promise, but I’m not coming back. I love you.”

I ended the call with a sigh, my heart throbbing. I knew he wouldn’t take the news well. But it hurt my soul to disappoint him. My father had always been my hero—and was the only parent I had left.

I looked up from my phone into two pairs of eyes. “I’m not going back, and it’s your job to protect me, not take me against my will.”

They both looked uncomfortable.

This would not go over well for any of us.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



I nipped at my coke—sans rum, though that remained a secret between the barkeeper and myself—and looked around.

The nightclub's cacophony of sounds and light enveloped me, the bass thumped against my chest, and laughter wove a false veil of joy. I usually avoided this place, preferred to do my business in one of the meeting rooms or my father's old office upstairs, but tonight was different.

Cristo had called upstairs and told us Fausto had asked for a meeting.

Whatever the asshole wanted, he wouldn't have come into my house if it wasn't important—or he still wasn't aware how close to killing him with my own two hands I really was.

As I scanned the bustling crowd, Sophie invaded my thoughts—her body swaying to the music like an ethereal vision—laughing at something Cristo said to her.

I shook my head, forcing her memory back into the shadows.

Back where it belonged. However, the memories were never far from my conscious mind, hovered there, just to invade and take over whenever I wasn't strong enough to keep them at bay.

It had been almost two months now. I'd stopped asking Hawk how she was doing a while ago.

Stopped torturing myself.

Fuck. I hung my head and stared at the polished surface of the table.

What was it about her that made forgetting her so difficult?

The way she was kind to everyone? The way she was strong and resilient and never surrendered despite being at my mercy? Or the way she gave herself completely—body and soul—even though she should've hated me.

My spidey senses tingled, and I turned to the door to the VIP area as Fausto entered, slithering through the people gathered there like the snake he was.

He was stopped by my people, patted down and disarmed, before they let him come closer.

His sleek smile made the small hairs on my neck stand on end and my stomach tighten. I imagined his venom spreading—poisoning our family, thick and gooey, like the gel in his slicked-back hair—the little he had left.

I clenched my fist, feeling my nails dig into my palm—a painful reminder to keep my focus.

“Gabriele,” he purred, sidling up to me with a sinister smirk. “Enjoying the night?”

I shot a look at Alessio who was leaning against the railing, his back to the club and the dance floor beneath us.

His jaw tightened in an effort to keep his anger in check.

A perfect mirror of mine. “You asked for this meeting. What do you want, Uncle Fausto?” My voice was unyielding, hard, but emotionless. Betraying none of the turmoil brewing within me nor the simmering hatred I was feeling.

He leaned in, his minty breath invading my senses as he whispered, “Oh, there are some important proceedings going on you're unaware of.” The malicious gleam in his eyes told me he enjoyed this, enjoyed yielding what little power he still held.

“Proceedings?” I arched my brow. “Why don't you fill me in then?”

He settled down on the stool beside me and ordered the same that I had. My eyes met those of the barkeeper across the room as soon as the server conveyed the order.

He looked at me questioningly—I nodded.

Rum and Coke—that’s what I was drinking.

Once Fausto had his drink in hand, he took his time to take a big gulp.

“Talk,” I snapped, unwilling to mask my disdain any longer.

He turned to me, his face a fake mask of cordiality. “Your father made some significant miscalculations shortly before his death.”

“Miscalculations?” I couldn’t help but feel unease when I searched Alessio’s eyes.

He shrugged, then took a phone call.

I turned back to stare at the dance floor beneath us.

There was a flash of blond hair, and for a split-second, before the woman turned around, I hoped it was Sophie.

Even now, with Fausto right next to me, when I needed my full focus on the treacherous waters of our conversation, my subconscious was still searching for her.

I sighed. Sophie’s absence gnawed at me—a phantom pain I couldn’t shake. The fact she would never again be within my reach was as suffocating as the used air in the club.

“Are you even listening?” Fausto hissed, snapping me back to the present. “When your father decided to expand into the Fentanyl business a couple of months ago, he stepped on some toes. Some very big, very unforgiving toes.”

“And?”

“Everybody knew Fentanyl was Moretti business.” Fausto’s voice rose with each new detail of his version of the events that had transpired, his soft and smooth baritone layered with urgency and fake concern. “Your father thought there was room enough for two major importers. But he was wrong.”

I couldn't wrap my head around the dire picture of my father's decisions and actions he painted.

Because even though I hadn't spoken to him in more than a decade, the man Fausto described was not the man I knew and loved.

I exchanged a look with Alessio whose narrowed brows didn't make me feel any better.

Fausto wrung his hands as he told an elaborate story about the old feud between the Morettis and Falcones—that my father allegedly sparked again.

I watched Fausto, his wiry hair, combed neatly across the top of his head, thick and poofy in the front, thinning in the back, like a balding man in denial.

His body was sagging—a testament to his age, unhealthy lifestyle—and black soul.

“Get to the point,” I growled, my patience wearing thin.

“Fine,” he said, feigning hurt. “There are some new developments you should be aware of.”

My heart thundered in my chest, bracing for whatever venomous words were about to spill from his lips.

“Salvatore Moretti has his eyes set on your mother. He's had her under surveillance for months now.”

“And?”

“He's gearing to make a move.”

A move? On my mother? Only a man without honor would even consider taking revenge on a woman.

“I tried to protect your mother. Even offered to marry her.”

As if his offer to marry my mother was pure selflessness—when in truth, everyone knew about his sickening preferences and the untimely deaths of all of his previous wives.

A storm of emotions churned within me—anger and an unquenchable thirst to wrap my hands around his throat and watch him die.

Fausto smiled and squeezed my shoulder as if I was oblivious to the twisted web of deceit and betrayal that had entangled our family—because of him, because of his doings.

I wouldn't put it past him to have orchestrated this clash with the Moretti family.

I narrowed my lids. Was he actively sabotaging the family?

Probably. He must've been pissed about me shutting down his trafficking operation. Was this payback? Was this his newest plan to get rid of me?

But amidst all those thoughts, one still burned brighter than the rest—this bastard had put hands on Sophie, had held her in a cage. Had hurt her.

And for that alone, he deserved to die.

I was done fighting to keep my hatred under control.

Was done holding back.

I would set up a meeting with Salvatore Moretti and do what my father would've done. Settle this like every honorable man would. And then I would come after Fausto—kill him, openly and honestly.

It was time to face the demons within myself and those lurking in the shadows. It was time to make peace with the stone-cold killer inside of me.

It was time to trust my own decisions of who deserved to live and who deserved to die—because Fausto deserved to die.

Something inside of me settled.

I was finally ready to embrace my role and this life.

To be content.

To stop clinging to some sort of misdirected hope.

Despite the fact that with every beat of my heart, the memories of her etched themselves deeper into my soul.

I would use the pain to fuel my determination. And to strengthen my power.

“Stay away from me,” I snarled, my voice laced with loathing. “And stay the fuck away from my mother.”

Fausto sneered but hopped down the barstool and took a step back. “You know, Gabriele, I could arrange a meeting with the Morettis...if you’re interested.” His eyes glittered like those of a predator.

His offer hung in the air between us, but his intention and the fact that it was a trap, surrounded it like the stench of rotting meat.

His suggestion was harmless enough.

And yet.

Intention had a smell.

And this smelled like Fausto was baiting me, luring me into a trap.

The seconds stretched as I studied his calculating gaze, searching for any hint of deception, waiting him out.

Toying with him.

He leaned in closer, lowering his voice. “The Morettis have a secret meeting with the other families planned in one of their hidden locations. I can get you in.”

I clenched my fists under the table for a split second before I suppressed the storm of emotions raging within me.

Part of me wanted nothing more than to kill him right here and now, but another part—the logical thinking part—wanted to know what kind of trap Fausto was laying for me.

Since Fausto was a sadistic bastard, I wanted to know how far he would go—would he want to watch me being killed by a rival family with a feud older than myself? However, that would be very straightforward for his conniving nature.

“Let me guess,” I said, keeping my voice low despite the bitterness coating my tongue. “You want something in return.”

“Exactly.” Fausto’s grin turned predatory. “A small favor, really. Just remember who helped you when the time comes, *nipote*.”

Oh, I would remember. Would remember everything.

As much as I despised the man standing before me, I couldn't ignore the opportunity to gain valuable intel on my enemy. Let him set the trap—and let him step inside himself.

“Fine,” I conceded, gritting my teeth. “But this better work.” Trusting Fausto was akin to dancing with the devil, and I had no intention of being burned.

“Trust me,” he replied, the false sincerity dripping from his voice like venom. “You can make a powerful alliance with the Morettis if you play it right. And I will assist you.”

I nodded.

The moment he left, my thoughts raced.

Playing this game was like fighting with a double-edged sword—enticing yet laced with danger. I was reasonably certain Fausto's intention was that the Morettis would eliminate me, clearing his path to seize control of the Falcone family.

But despite the risks, something inside of me was thrilled at playing this dangerous game, thrived at navigating these treacherous waters.

I owed it to my father and to my family. To drain this swamp. I would uncover the truth on my own terms without falling into Fausto's web of deceit.

“Gabe,” Alessandro took the place next to me. “What did he want?”

“Spread lies,” I replied tersely, my eyes scanning the crowd for any sign of danger. “He claims there's a feud between our family and the Morettis. He said Dad moved in on Moretti business. Is it true?”

Alessandro furrowed his brow in concern. “I don't know,” he admitted.

Frustration gnawed at my insides. “It might all be one big fat lie, but we need to find out. I want you to look into it—discreetly. And I want you to set up a meeting.”

“Of course,” Alessandro nodded, his loyalty unwavering. “What about Mother? Did he mention her?”

“He claims his marriage proposal is his offer to protect her.” The words tasted bitter, bile rising in my throat at the thought of that snake slithering closer to my family.

“Over my dead body,” Alessandro growled, the fierceness of his words echoing my own thoughts.

“Exactly,” I agreed, clenching my fists. “But we need to verify his claims. We can’t afford to underestimate him. I need direct contact with Moretti senior, without anyone knowing.”

“Understood,” Alessandro replied, determination etched on his face. “I’ll get started right away.”

“Good,” I said, “and make sure we have eyes on Fausto at all times.”

I watched Alessio disappear into the shadows. My heart pounded in my chest, a mixture of resolution and excitement coursing through my veins.

“Whatever it takes,” I whispered, determination settling heavily in my chest, “I’ll find out the truth and protect what’s mine.”

I would face the storm head-on, no matter the cost—for love, for vengeance, and for the future of the Falcone family.

The heavy bass of the nightclub’s music vibrated through my bones, an irritating reminder that I couldn’t escape the chaos even in my own domain.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, bringing me back to reality. The caller ID displayed Hawk’s name. “This better be important,” I muttered before declining the call and making my way back to my office.

I shut the door behind me and took a deep breath. Then I called.

“Switch to video,” Hawk said, his voice tense and tight with concern.

“What’s wrong?” I asked as I slid into my chair and activated the video call.

Hawk’s face appeared on the screen, his expression grave. “I had a very interesting call from Craig Donnelly.”

“Is Sophie okay?” I straightened, and my chest tightened.

Hawk stared at me. “He’s furious, Falcon. He wants every detail about what happened to Sophie during her time in Italy. Every. Single. Detail.”

My heart clenched at the mention of her name, guilt weighing heavily on my chest. I’d taken her hostage, taken her virginity, and now her father wanted answers.

Why?

“What happened?” I demanded, my voice barely more than a growl.

“Gabe.” Hawk hesitated, his words slow and deliberate—he never called me Gabe. “Sophie’s pregnant. Donnelly’s hellbent on finding the man who touched his daughter and will kill him.”

The room seemed to close in around me, and my chest tightened until I had to force my breath in.

Sophie was pregnant.

Pregnant.

And it was my fault entirely.

A vision of her beautiful body—rounded with the growing life we’d created together during our moments of passion—made me feel queasy and exhilarated at the same time.

Mine.

And now her father wanted me dead.

“Falcon,” Hawk’s voice snapped me back to reality. “What the hell happened? You need to tell me, now.”

But by the way, he looked at me—he already knew.

My mind raced, desperate to formulate a plan that would protect both Sophie and our unborn child. I couldn’t confess

the truth to anybody—not yet. “I’ll handle it,” I muttered, evading his question.

“Falcon—” Hawk began, but I cut him off.

“Trust me.” The words tasted bitter on my tongue, echoing Fausto’s earlier false assurances. But this time, there was no deceit, only fierce determination. “I’ll handle it.”

I ended the call, my thoughts racing and my body pulsing with an overwhelming need to see her, touch her, and ensure her safety.

Damn the consequences.

She was mine, and now that she carried my child, there was no force in this world that would keep me from her.

“Whatever it takes,” I vowed, my resolve hardening. “I’m coming for you.”

And taking what was mine.

Mine.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



“I need your help; can you meet me in an hour?”

The jet I’d chartered in Verona had just touched down seconds ago at JFK airport, and before we’d even left the taxiway, I had—despite the late hour—my childhood friend Vincenzo Salvini on the phone.

“Gabriele Falcone?” Vince’s voice, scratchy from sleep, reverberated through the line as if he’d smoked a pack of cigarettes before going to bed.

“Yes.”

“*Dove sei?*” His voice suddenly had an edge—fully alert.

“JFK,” I said. But my head was already making a mental to-do list of all that I needed to do.

“What? Why?”

“Meet me in an hour, and I’ll tell you.”

“*Va bene!*”

I ended the call, quenching the urgency that drove me borderline crazy.

With almost mechanical precision, I organized transportation and made sure the pilot and jet stood on standby to bring us back tomorrow.

One step after the other.

Taking charge of the practical things while I tried not to think about Sophie.

Pregnant.

The cloak of secrecy seemed fitting for a man who was about to enter the lair of the Irish Mafia in Boston.

My departure in Verona had been so sudden—a split-second decision, I didn't have time to organize anything beforehand. Didn't even tell my brothers where I was going.

Somehow, the chaos of the moment was fitting to the mess Sophie and I had created.

But one thing was for sure. Calculating my moves now wouldn't change a damn thing with the situation at hand.

Me showing up at the door of the boss of the Irish Mafia in Boston was asking for trouble.

Asking for Sophie's hand had disaster written all over it.

And if I had to face Craig Donnelly in a duel, I at least needed a second who would take care of my body.

My phone rang.

"Gabe? Where the fuck are you?" Alessandro's voice sounded like a mixture of irritation and genuine worry.

"New York."

"New York?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Private matter."

He voiced his incredulity with a sarcastic chuckle. "There's only one thing in the world that would cause you to completely lose your head and make rash, borderline idiotic decisions. Or should I say one person?"

I scraped my hand through my hair and sighed. "Alessio." I clenched my jaw, restraining the surge of emotions that threatened my ability to keep my voice steady. "Take care of Cristo and Mamma."

There was a moment of silence, loud and deafening.

“Will do,” he said.

My throat tight, I ended the call before he could say anything else and leaned back and stared out into the darkness of my surroundings, the inky expanse a reflection of my reality.

The blinking lights of another jet cut through the night like bolts of lightning—just like Sophie had cut through my gray existence with the light of defiance in her eyes bright and striking.

Too startling to ignore or forget.

I might very well be dead before the night was over.

Or I might finally have her in my arms again.

I shook my head to dislodge the gloomy thought of what might be.

At least the family business would be in good hands.

At least, I hoped it would be. I should’ve killed Fausto when I had the chance—that would’ve made it easier for Alessio, at least.

I disembarked from the jet, then exited the airport through the separate private terminal, but instead of the driver I was expecting, Vincenzo stood waiting next to a black SUV with blacked-out windows.

I raised a single eyebrow in question.

“Alessandro called and told me that, in no uncertain terms, he will hold me personally responsible to get you back in one piece.”

He opened the door and waited until I jumped in before closing it and taking the wheel.

The powerful engine roared to life, the vibrations coursing through my veins along with adrenaline that fueled my resolve.

“Care to tell me what the hell is going on?”

“It’s complicated.”

He chuckled. “It always is. So? Where are we headed, and what do we need? Do I need to call in the cavalry?”

“Boston.”

“What’s in Boston?”

“Craig Donnelly.”

He stared at me, his brows arched. “And why would we want to meet with the head of the Irish Mafia?”

“Because his oldest daughter is pregnant.”

He slowly whistled through his teeth. “Sophie Donnelly is pregnant? Isn’t she...a teenager.”

I sighed. “She’s twenty.”

“So, you know her intimately, then?”

I could hear the hint of barely concealed laughter in his voice. Always great to have your friends make fun of your immediate death. “She and her sisters were kidnapped and held hostage on a trip to Italy a couple of weeks ago.”

“By you?”

I leaned my head against the headrest, exhaustion, and exasperation mingled with the urgency inside of me. “Not at first.”

Vince chuckled, a testament to our world where morality and honor weren’t mutually exclusive to kidnapping and hostage-taking. “But you’re not denying it.”

“She’s pregnant.”

The weight of those words, laden with consequences, hung in the air like a hand grenade a split second before the bang.

And it shut him up good.

“You’re dead.”

“I know.”

“But if you die, I can’t keep my promise to Alessandro,” he said and put the SUV into gear.

“I’m sorry for the inconvenience. Should I write Alessio a letter and explain your predicament?”

“Fuck, Gabe. You’ve barely been back; when did you have time to impregnate the girl.”

“Vince,” I growled, “let me make one thing perfectly clear. Sophie’s not a girl; she’s a woman. My woman.”

Vincenzo sighed, changed lanes, and as we sped along, the blurred lights of New York passed by. “Sorry, man. It’s just...I never pegged you as the impulsive and stupid type.”

That almost made me chuckle. As a sniper, I was the opposite of impulsive—calculated, patient, detached—those had been the qualities that made me the best of the best—and a mere couple of weeks back in the family business, and I was reckless, impulsive, ruthless, and stupid.

Maybe I did deserve to die.

“Okay, let’s call him, request a meeting,” Vince said, a pragmatic approach to a complex situation.

But not this situation.

“Negative.”

I could feel Vincenzo’s eyes on me but never wavered. This was a private matter between Sophie and myself, and I would handle it just like that.

“I will take her back with me, with or without Donnelly’s consent.”

Vince sighed. “You thinking you can just waltz in there and take a Donnelly, makes me question your sanity.” The incredulity in his voice irked me a little. Even though he was probably right.

“You can get out here, and just leave me the car.”

“It would probably be better for my health, but see, I’ve been a little bored lately.” His playful tone made me snap my head and stare at him. Whatever he would be saying next was bound to be completely insane. “So, a little gunfight, maybe with a side of hand-to-hand combat, is just what I need.”

I shook my head and stared through the windshield outside at the street.

Only a made man, or a crazy one, would regard the situation we would be facing as fun, or adequate to fight boredom.

The hours flew by, and the rhythmic hum of the road beneath us became a backdrop to my thoughts about the path I had chosen.

Why did I take her? What was it about her that I couldn't look away? And then later, I could've just let her go and sent her home. So, what if her defiance in refusing to tell me her name evoked my dominant nature?

All the choices I had made that had brought me to this juncture were questionable at best. Morally reprehensible and unhinged at least.

And yet.

When we arrived at the outskirts of Boston, my lack of sleep was catching up on me.

“What's the plan?” Vincenzo asked.

“Plan A is to knock on the door, ask Donnelly for her hand—have her fall into my arms, love shining bright in her eyes, and leave with her.”

Vince chuckled. “And the other plan A? The one not out of a sappy Hallmark movie?”

“Get in, get her out—ask for forgiveness and her hand later.”

“Well, I think getting in without anyone noticing is rather delusional. Donnelly will have security upon security.”

“Good thing I'm used to working in the shadows, then.”

Vince sighed. “Good thing indeed. And here I forgot to bring my invisibility cloak.”

I shot him a look.

But he just shrugged. “At least I have my flying cape on underneath.”

“You still wearing superman undies, as well?”

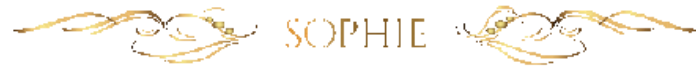
He scoffed. “I’m a man now; I upgraded to no undies at all.”

I chuckled. Nothing like a little gallows humor to battle the tension.

And really—getting into the home of the boss of the Irish mob should’ve not been that easy.

I needed to have a stern talk with my future father-in-law about his antiquated security system. Maybe get him to hire Hawk to spruce up the whole security concept.

CHAPTER FORTY



“**Y**ou’re depressed,” Fiona said, looking at me, one brow raised and her head cocked to the side.

We were sitting on her bed, both in our PJs.

I’d been here only a day. And all I did was take a four-hour-long walk—accompanied by my bodyguards—for Fiona to jump to that conclusion.

“I’m good, really.” Maybe I wasn’t “good,” but I wasn’t depressed either. Just...I didn’t even know how to describe my current state. I thought being back in Ireland would help. But I missed Gabe the same way I missed him back in Boston—a low-level anguish simmering just beneath the surface mixed with nausea.

And that feeling of all-consuming emptiness that never went away.

Added to that, the fact that my father now refused to take my calls had caused the rest of my barely intact world to crumble down like a sandcastle in the rising tide.

I’d never felt so utterly alone and hurt.

Well, that wasn’t exactly true. Thoughts of waking up in the cage came to mind.

I felt utterly alone and was hurting then, though it was another kind of hurt.

This time it was more internal, thrumming against my rib cage from the inside, squeezing my heart and my stomach to the

point where I couldn't even eat properly anymore—without throwing up.

“Soph’, you’re not fine, and neither am I. So, let’s stop pretending. Talk to me.”

“I miss him.” It was the first time I’d even acknowledged out loud that I was still thinking about Gabe.

“Tell me what happened between the two of you.”

“He kidnapped me, and I fell in love with him.”

“Aren’t you a bit...hasty using that word?” Fiona lifted her hand and brushed a strand of hair out of my face. “You were together only a couple of days. Infatuation, sure, but love?”

I nodded, then sighed. “I know. Trust me. There’s nothing you can say that I didn’t tell myself. Stockholm syndrome, adrenaline rush, hero worship. I even researched how you develop an obsession.”

I laughed, a self-deprecating laugh because otherwise, I would start crying—and it wouldn’t help one bit. “I thought with distance and time, those feelings would go away.”

Fiona held my gaze. Her eyes shimmered with compassion. “But they didn’t go away. And now you’re pregnant.”

I smiled. “And now I’m pregnant.”

“Did you tell him?”

I shook my head. I thought about his business card, which I kept on me like my most prized possession. “He’s Italian Mafia. There’s no scenario on Earth where the two of us could have our happily-ever-after.”

Fiona nodded. “Yeah, if your father finds out, he’s dead within 24 hours.”

I didn’t often purposefully think about how exactly my father had held his position of power for so many years, but he probably wasn’t so different from Gabe’s brutal nature.

Images of Gabe killing his cousin flooded back into my mind, like an unwanted mental replay of a horror movie.

“He never harmed me.”

Fiona cocked her head again. “He kidnapped you and held you against your will.”

“But he cared for me. From the moment we met, he cared for me.”

“And yet, he didn’t let you go when you asked him to.”

I nodded.

She was right. I’d complained my whole life about being unable to escape the golden cage I was born into. How could I long to be back in Gabe’s room—trapped and unable to escape?

“What can I do to make things better?” Fiona asked.

I cocked my head and smiled at her. The fact she was even asking, helped. The fact that she, despite her own misery and depression, was being compassionate was enough. “Talking about it all helps.”

She nodded.

There were demons in her eyes. Demons she hadn’t been able to exorcise since Italy. The situation with her parents and their lack of caring had been an issue before. Fiona’s situation was the polar opposite of mine. While my father was overprotective to the point of locking us girls up, her parents were borderline neglectful.

There was some weird dynamic going on in Fiona’s family. Her father was married to his job, and her mother was competing for her husband’s attention to the point of not caring or paying any attention to her daughter at all.

The fact that Fiona was living at home again, after having attended boarding school for all of her teenage years, was only because she could do whatever she wanted. Travel, party—nobody cared where she was or what she was doing.

Which made it that much harder on her. And that much lonelier.

I laid my hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “Talking about it all helps, Fee.”

She nodded, tears gathered in her eyes. “I don’t think I can,” she whispered.

I brushed my hand over her cheek. “You will, and when the time comes, I’ll be here to listen.”

We fell into each other’s arms. Her whole body shook with sobs, so heart-wrenching I started to cry, as well.

We all had our own horrible experiences during our time in Italy.

And compared to whatever my sisters went through, I was probably the most fortunate one.

All because of Gabe, who caught me and held me, but showed me so much kindness, as well.

He was morally black, but that wasn’t all he was.

There had been a part of him, his heart, or soul, maybe, that had been kind and caring and loving.

That was the part of him I fell in love with.

I just hoped he could salvage that part despite the life he’d been born into.

The life he’d chosen.

A life of crime, death, and violence.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



We got in through the service entrance—which someone had left unlocked.

When I'd told Vincenzo to stay in the vehicle, he'd laughed in my face and gotten out before me.

Reckless and stubborn. But the way we worked together—like a well-oiled machine—made me glad to have him by my side.

We'd skipped the ground floor and made our way upstairs in the dark.

The home was a modern mansion—a lot of concrete, glass fronts, and not a squeaky board, step, or tile anywhere.

Four doors greeted us on the first floor. Vincenzo turned to the one on the far left first, but when we heard a snore, loud enough to scare a tiger, we immediately backtracked.

I didn't peg Cara or Jemma as snorers, and I knew for a fact that Sophie didn't snore.

Now only three doors were left. I hesitated, then took the first one. I immediately knew I'd hit the jackpot when Sophie's faint scent hit my nose as soon as I opened the door. It was something so uniquely her that I would forever recognize it.

The blinds were open, and a slither of moonlight hit the floor right in front of her bed. I crossed the room, laser-focused on my target and only half-aware of Vincenzo coming in behind me and closing the door. But when I leaned over the bed, it was untouched.

What the hell?

Vincenzo came up beside me. “Empty,” he whispered.

I nodded.

“Is it her room?”

“Yes.”

“You sure?”

“Hundred percent!”

I could feel his inquisitory stare on me but moved on to her desk. I couldn’t make out much in the moonlight, but it seemed orderly—apart from the stacks of books.

A lot of books.

But it had an air of abandonment—the way a room felt when you came back from a mission or a long vacation.

Or maybe she was a neat freak.

The hell if I knew.

Vincenzo laid his hand on my shoulder. “Let’s try the next room; maybe she’s sleeping with one of her sisters.”

Maybe she was.

Was she still experiencing nightmares?

My stomach hardened. I would kill Fausto—no matter the consequences.

We tiptoed to the next room and opened the door.

We stepped into the room, and Vincenzo closed the door behind us with a barely audible click.

“Stop—or I’ll shoot you,” a female voice coming from our left said in a deadbeat, determined tone.

We froze in our tracks, both turning to see a figure emerging from the darkness of an en-suite bathroom. She clicked on a lamp, illuminating her youthful features and revealing determination in her gaze.

Jemma.

When she stepped forward into the light, her white nightgown became translucent.

It made her look much younger than her eighteen years and almost ethereal, if it weren't for the pistol held in her delicate hands, its barrel pointing directly at us.

After a split second, she gasped and expertly lowered the gun. "Gabe?"

I nodded. "Where's Sophie?"

She cocked her head, then looked at Vincenzo beside me. "Who's your friend?"

"Vincenzo Salvini."

I could see when she recognized the name. The world of organized crime was small enough—especially at the top—for her to have heard Vincenzo's name.

She raised an eyebrow, a sly grin playing on her lips. "Boston, huh? Did you guys get tired of New York's bright lights and decide to take a detour to the land of baked beans and tea parties?"

Fearless and funny.

Vince beside me looked down at his feet and chuckled.

But I didn't have time for small talk or jokes. "Where's Sophie?"

Jemma's face turned serious. "Ireland. She left yesterday."

Fuck.

I clenched my hands into fists, then looked down at my feet and exhaled my frustration. "Why is she in Ireland?"

Jemma smiled. "She put an ocean between herself and Dad before she told him she's pregnant. Smart move, if you ask me —" Suddenly, her face turned serious as if she'd just added two and two together. "It's yours, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"Well, you better get the hell out of here because Dad is like an angry bull charging along the streets of Pamplona. If he

catches you here, he will kill you.”

That was a risk I was willing to take. Because running away like a coward would be taking the easy way out. And I’d done that once—when I sent Sophie back home, instead of fighting to keep her by my side.

“You’ve been to Pamplona?” Vince asked, folded his arms over his stomach, and openly stared at her.

What the hell was that?

Jemma looked from me to him, gave him a slow—and perfectly inappropriate—once-over before she said, determination vibrating in her voice, “No. But I will.”

Vince nodded but remained silent.

“Let’s find out how mad he really is,” I said and turned, ready to face Craig Donnelly and whatever consequences he deemed adequate.

“Wait,” Jemma squeezed by me and blocked the entrance to her father’s room. “Let me wake him up.”

I nodded.

It didn’t matter. If he was as angry as Hawk and Jemma had told me, I would probably not make it out alive. I turned to Vince. “I need you to support Alessio as best as you can. He’s ready and able to take over the family.”

Vince narrowed his eyebrows, released a breath, then nodded.

The door opened.

I turned and faced Sophie’s father.

“What are you doing in my home?”

“Just a friendly visit.”

There was a pause, and he stared at me with narrowed brows. “And the reason for this visit?”

“Sophie.”

Rage made his eyes glitter in the dim light, a muscle over his jaw tightened, and I could feel the barely contained energy coming from him in waves.

“You bastard.” His voice was nothing more than an angry growl while he kept on staring at me.

I squared my stance, suppressed all movement, projecting an image of strength and carelessness. “You know I am.”

Craig Donnelly laughed, but it was a self-deprecating laugh. “And to add insult to injury, I begged you to find her and bring her back to me. You.”

I nodded and kept my gaze locked on him.

“You took her against her will.”

I cocked my head. It wasn't quite like that. But Sophie's father didn't need to know the details. What he needed were facts. The facts of how the future will look like from now on. “I'm here to take her home.”

“This is her home.”

“This was her home. She's pregnant with my child. Her new place is next to me.”

“Over my dead body.”

“That could be arranged,” I said with a menacing scowl, remaining completely calm.

We needed to have this out once and for all.

He growled, his hands clenched into tight fists. “You arrogant, worthless piece of shit.”

I bowed my head. I had to agree. Not that it changed a single thing. “This is the only shot you get. Because after I leave, I will find her, take her home with me, and she will become my wife.”

“Or you'll die here.”

I bowed again. “And Sophie's child will grow up an orphan,” I said.

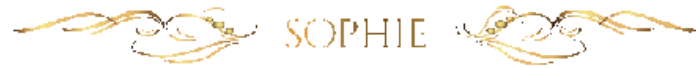
Dying was always a possibility. One I had made my peace with a long time ago. And I would rather die than live my life without honor, or her by my side.

So, when his fist came right toward my face, I didn't move a muscle.

Let him get it all out and let the chips fall where they may.

I blocked a few of his blows, had him work for the win and exorcise his frustration—up until the point where I got cocky, and he got dirty. He kicked me in the nuts and then scored a perfectly executed blow to my head, and everything turned black.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



“It’s going to start raining soon.”

I looked up at the clouded gray sky and swallowed down against the ever-present simmering nausea. Today, the Irish autumn didn’t bless us with the same moderate temperatures it did the past few days.

Temperatures that barely warmed the cold I felt inside.

Instead, the wind was sharp and aggressive, and the dark clouds hung threateningly low.

I turned around to gaze at Donovan and O’Reilly—my permanent shadows—who looked like they could use some warming up.

Luckily, they didn’t interfere with my life too much, though I still expected them to grab me and drag me back home at any given moment. Though they hadn’t even tried to take me back—a fact both reassuring and heart-wrenching. They were always just there, watching me, shadowing me.

Always.

Not that their presence kept the loneliness at bay that I felt so acutely—I could still taste it like a lingering bitterness on my tongue and feel it like a dull ache in my bones—every second of every minute.

I’d always thought this was what I wanted—being alone, being free—but somehow, it wasn’t as freeing as I thought it would be. It wasn’t giving me the happiness I always thought it would.

Freedom suddenly wasn't the opposite of being trapped in a golden cage.

Loneliness was.

Not that it kept me from forging ahead.

And neither would the bone-deep weakness that kept me from my walks more and more these days.

Keeping food down was such a struggle. Most days, I didn't even bother anymore.

But since yesterday, even holding down a sip of water had been a challenge.

Damn morning sickness.

Or was it the added stress of having decided on my future that made it all worse?

Well, right now, my biggest worry was to steer Fiona to where I wanted her to go—before it started to rain—while pretending we were on a boring walk—which couldn't be farther from the truth.

I side-eyed her. I'd been in Ireland for over two weeks now. I'd forced her to walk with me most days, which seemed to help to pull her out of her state somewhat. When I arrived, she'd been worse than I thought. She had trouble sleeping and panic attacks, and she was living like a recluse—and hiding it all from her parents—who were even more inattentive than I ever thought possible.

How could they not see—or care—what was going on with her?

But walking, breathing in the crisp autumn air, and being outside had a calming effect on me, and I wanted the same for Fiona.

I wanted her to get back to her former self—the same as I was back to my former self—almost.

Or, more accurately, I was growing into my new self.

I straightened.

I was a woman who took her life into her own hands—someone who decided on a path—and walked it.

No matter what.

Coming to Ireland had been the right decision for me.

Despite the loneliness.

Despite Dad refusing to talk to me.

Come to think of it, I hadn't been able to reach Jemma or Cara for the past couple of days, either.

Was he now keeping my sisters from me, as well? My chest clenched violently.

Was he freezing me out?

Was he waiting until I came back, crawling and begging?

I'd watched him play those kinds of power games all my life though he'd never played mind games with me—probably because I never put up a fight. Never went against his will and made the effort to butt heads with him...until now.

Now everything had changed.

And loneliness was the price of this new path I was on.

A path to shape my future.

I steered Fiona, and together we crossed the street. "Look, this coffee shop looks nice; we can warm up in a second." I grinned, almost dizzy with anticipation.

Fiona nodded. "I'm freezing. Look, what a beautiful storefront," Fiona said when we stopped in front of the storefront of a closed bookshop—my new bookshop.

The facade was adorned with intricate woodwork, showcasing carvings that depicted scenes from classic literature, almost hidden under climbing ivy that weaved its way up the aged brick walls. The rich mahogany door, though weathered with time, still exuded an aura of elegance and nostalgia, as did the weathered brass plaque—which wasn't readable anymore.

The massive window next to the door allowed glimpses inside, and even though the glass was dusty, the look inside was what

made me fall in love with it on the spot when I found it a couple of days ago.

“It’s a shame it’s closed,” Fiona said, cupping her hands and peeking inside at the empty shelves.

“Not for long, though.” I pulled out the key, equally ornamental and antique, then unlocked the door.

Thank God for the trust fund money that flooded my bank account unexpectedly a couple of weeks ago.

And thank God that Dad hadn’t frozen my bank account, or demanded the money back.

Because I’d used the money to buy the shop the day before, after walking by it every day for the past two weeks, inspired by the stories of the past it would be able to tell.

Formulating and strengthening the plan for my future a little more with every passing day.

“No way.” Fiona’s gaze ping-ponged from me to the open door and back. “You bought a bookstore? In Dublin? Are you out of your freaking mind?”

I pulled the door open, and we stepped inside. She did a one-eighty. “When did you decide? And when did you buy it? Why didn’t you tell me? And why would you want to move here?”

I shrugged. “Yesterday. It’s the best solution for now. I will stay here, be independent, raise my baby, and build a future for us away from...everything.”

I thought long and hard about my life and my baby’s future. Owning a bookshop would give me independence from everyone. Plus, I could take my child with me to work.

My father would disapprove.

Of course, he would.

But I couldn’t stay in the same place. Couldn’t stay on my father’s side, hidden in my golden cage—miserable. Just to make everyone else happy except for me.

I wanted more.

And I wanted more for my child.

A better future.

One away from organized crime where violence and killing people were scarily normal.

“Congratulations, Soph.” Fiona wrapped me in a big hug. “I think it’s great—even though you’re crazy for wanting to stay in Ireland, I’d love to have you here. Have you told your dad?”

I shook my head.

Fiona grimaced. “Uncle Craig will go bonkers.”

I nodded.

I was in for the fight of my life...and that of my baby.

“Let’s grab a coffee before it starts pouring,” I said, led her outside, locked the door behind me, and directed her to the coffee shop right next to my new shop.

Even though the thought of coffee alone gave me hives, maybe I could keep down a couple of sips of nice, warm chamomile tea.

“Good morning.” We entered “The Brew”—a very hip-looking place, with a modern but cozy feel—and took a table.

Liam, the owner, came right up. “Sophie, so good to see you. I had the best idea after our chat yesterday.”

“Hit me,” I said and smiled at Liam. He was attractive—in an artsy kind of way, probably in his early thirties, with a positive energy that radiated from him and infected everyone in his vicinity.

He’d just opened The Brew a month ago, though it seemed like he’d been doing it for years, had been born to run a coffee shop.

“How about you call your shop Pages? Get it? Brew and Pages, doesn’t that sound awesome? We could even hang up a new joint sign.”

I stared at him with my mouth hanging open. That was the most amazing idea ever.

I'd already obsessed last night about finding a name for the shop.

"Brew & Pages" had a great ring to it.

Liam's face fell when I didn't react immediately, and I jumped up and grabbed his forearms, mostly to steady myself since the rapid movement made stars burst in my vision and dizziness swamp me. "Liam. I love it! Let's do it." I painted an invisible sign into the air. "Brew & Pages." I could imagine it perfectly.

He grabbed me around my waist and twirled me around the room while smiling broadly.

I laughed, completely at ease, and was delighted at this moment of happiness for the first time in forever.

I would be okay.

And even though I had just met Liam, I already knew we would become great friends.

The same way I knew the second I met Gabe, being friends was not an option.

My mood plummeted—along with my stomach.

Even though I kept the smile plastered to my face.

Being friends had never been an option.

I'd been instantly attracted to Gabe. His gaze on me had switched me on like a lightbulb—even in the desperate state I'd been in.

He was the first man ever who had the ability to rattle me completely with just one look from his laser-blue eyes.

The same laser-blue eyes locked on me now from across the room.

Burning with an intensity that singed me even from the distance.

"Gabe?"

I blinked, not sure if I was hallucinating. Did I conjure him up by thinking about him?

I blinked again. But his image didn't waver.

He looked the same, but also different. A little rough for wear. Barely healed scars and discolorations from blue to yellow marred the flawless skin above his heavy beard.

Had he been in an accident?

But something in his eyes had changed, as well.

He looked darker.

Angry and lethal.

He crossed the room in huge strides, then stopped right before us.

He looked from Liam to me, and back again.

His gaze landed on Liam's hands that were still on my waist.

In a low warning, Gabe growled, "Remove your hands from her, or I'll remove them for you."

Liam's hands stayed on my waist for a second longer.

Gabe snarled, and bared his teeth, like a wild animal right before the attack. "Touch her again, and it's the last thing you ever use your hand for."

It wasn't an empty threat.

Dominant power radiated from him in waves: dominance and barely contained violence.

Liam pulled away, alarm written all over his face.

He studied first Gabe and then my face.

His eyebrows arched in a silent question.

Is he for real?

I swallowed hard and braced myself. "Liam, meet Gabe, Gabe, meet Liam."

Neither of them took their eyes off of me.

Until they did.

It was as if they were at a standoff, both trying to outstare the other...just moments before one of them would unleash their fury—Gabe, most likely.

My face grew hot, and my heart flip-flopped around in my chest as if it didn't know which way to go.

Finally, as if an invisible force pushed him, Gabe pulled his eyes away from Liam, and his gaze hit me as if he were physically touching me.

Then he took my hand before he regarded Liam again coolly.

"Gabe?" I whispered.

He looked back at me with raised eyebrows, a storm brewing behind his eyes, but he didn't answer.

Instead, with a small jerk of his head, indicating to get out of here, he tugged on my hand and led me away from Liam without another word.

And I followed.

Like a lamb being led to the slaughter.

Like a will-less child.

I looked back over my shoulder.

Liam's green eyes searched my face for an answer, but all I could do was shake my head gently.

The devil had found me.

He nodded slowly, and my eyes met Fiona's shocked stare.

She leaped to her feet and followed us until Alessandro stepped in her path and blocked her with his body.

"You!"

That one word, spoken with disdain and accusation, almost made me chuckle.

Almost.

I tugged on Gabe's hand.

He stopped.

"Move, or I'll make you!" Fiona snarled at Alessio.

Seeing my petite cousin face off with Gabe's heavily tattooed brother, who was at least double her weight and looked more

menacing than any man I'd ever encountered, was like looking at a miniature poodle trying to stop an angry grizzly.

Alessandro leaned down, stared at her face, grabbed her jaw, then whispered something in her ear that made her gasp, and her eyes pop.

"Let's go," Gabe whispered in my ear.

My eyes snapped back at him. Was he for real? Did he think he just needed to show up and I would fall at his feet?

But I could see the determination in his eyes, the barely contained storm of violence making my blood run cold.

I could come with him, or he would take me.

Those were the only two options he would give me.

I stared back at Fiona, and with a quick wave in her direction, I followed Gabe as he led me out of the coffee shop.

He opened the door to a black nondescript van, held it open for me, helped me inside, and waited until I was seated before he got in and settled down next to me.

He buckled me in, and his scent, so typically Gabe, surrounded me.

I glanced back at the coffee shop as the door closed.

Liam was standing at the window watching us go with a look of puzzlement on his face.

Fiona stood outside, her eyes spewing fire.

Gabe followed my gaze with a contemplative expression before turning back to me with a cold, menacing smile on his face. "Nice new friend you have there. Talk to him again, and he will die."

I scoffed at him, rolled my eyes, and shook my head at this absurd threat. But my heart was heavy.

We had been interrupted before we could even start our friendship.

Before I could even start this new life of mine.

But then Gabe grabbed my chin and forced me to look at him, and I immediately got lost in his intense gaze. “I finally found you.”

Butterflies took flight in my stomach as Alessio—who hopped in behind the wheel—started up the engine, and drove us away into an unknown future.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



I occupied my hands with a tumbler of vodka on the rocks, and the monotonous hum of the private jet's engines filled my senses as I watched Sophie out of the corner of my eye. She sat across the aisle—instead of facing me. And as if that wasn't enough, she angled her body away from me as if my presence repulsed her.

The way she completely ignored me sent a surge of anger and frustration through my veins, but the sight of her stirred something deeper, an ache I had tried to forget for months now and hadn't been able to shake off.

She looked frail. Had she lost weight, as well?

What was going on?

My head pounded like the relentless rhythm of a hammer—from the aftereffects and not unlike the rhythm of Craig Donnelly's fists colliding with my face. I could still taste blood in my mouth, could still feel the pain as darkness consumed me.

After three days in a coma, the week, trapped in a hospital bed, had given me plenty of time to think.

To plan.

To decide.

To fuel my determination.

Sophie's father might've believed that beating me to a pulp would be enough to keep me from Sophie, but he was wrong.

Dead wrong.

He should've finished me when he had the chance.

"Enjoying the view?" Alessio stopped at my seat and lifted a brow.

"Shut it," I muttered, my jaw tight.

My brother smirked, then turned his back to me and leaned against Sophie's seat, cutting off my line of sight.

Stronzo.

Who needed enemies when two little annoying brothers would do?

He knew how much I'd missed her. He was the first one I called when I released myself from the hospital, and in perfectly annoying little brother fashion, he demanded the truth before he agreed to meet me in Dublin.

So now he knew it all. Knew the struggle within me. And reveled in watching me in my current situation.

Asshole.

"Are you okay?" Alessio asked her, breaking the silence.

I straightened and strained my ears.

Sophie shifted her weight in her seat, the movement drawing my attention back to her.

The curve of her neck, the stray lock of hair that fell over her shoulder, her pale skin...all of it screamed at me, beckoned me to grab her, hold her in my lap, and claim her as mine.

But she continued to ignore me, refused to even glance in my direction.

And my anger grew.

"I'm fine. Thanks, Alessio."

Bullshit.

She didn't look fine.

A storm brewed inside me, a deadly mixture of longing and frustration.

Her place was next to me, that was crystal clear in my mind.

I wanted her more than anything, but at the same time, I needed her to want me, too.

Needed her to want to be by my side, not to be forced.

“Is there anything I can do?” Alessio asked, disrupting my thoughts. “Something to eat? Drink?”

“No,” she replied curtly, shifting her gaze from my brother back to the window.

When the intercom came to life, and the pilot alerted us that we were cleared for take-off, my brother took the seat opposite from her and buckled himself in before sending me a look I couldn't decipher.

The private jet taxied to the runway, then the engines roared to life, and I felt the force of acceleration pressing me back into my seat.

Every bruise, every unhealed cut, and my pounding head screamed at me, but I gritted my teeth and forced my body to relax.

My eyes darted over to her again.

She looked unbothered by the acceleration, but I couldn't help but worry about her. She looked like she couldn't even withstand a slight gust of wind.

Her clothes hung from her body.

Shouldn't she have put on weight at this stage? Not lost it?

And would flying affect her, now that she was pregnant?

And how was she feeling anyway?

Morning sickness? Any other complications?

Was she taking those prenatal vitamins I read about?

Fuck.

I ran my fingers through my hair. I needed her to talk to me. Needed her to let me take care of her and the baby.

I made a mental note to arrange for a midwife to stay with her at all times.

But as much as I was concerned about her health, a small, selfish part of me couldn't wait to see her with a heavily pregnant belly, couldn't wait to welcome the perfect child we'd created.

The jet leveled off, and the roaring engine noise settled into a soft hum.

I strained my ears to catch the conversation between Sophie and Alessio. They both leaned forward and spoke in hushed tones, and their voices were barely audible over the mechanical purr.

My stomach tightened, and I got up and stood beside Alessio.

When he looked up at me, I motioned for him to get up, and to my utter surprise, he did with only the minimum amount of eye-rolling and head shaking.

I didn't care. Sophie was mine. I didn't want anyone near her or talking to her but me.

I plonked down.

But apart from a quick flick with her eyes—there was no visible reaction.

Which grated on my nerves and made me want to punch something.

“Where are my bodyguards?” she finally asked after a minute of silence. Her voice was tight with concern. Her head turned to Alessandro—who'd taken the seat I had previously occupied.

He shot me a glance before answering. “We just put them to sleep and into the back alley. They'll be fine and should be up by now.”

Sophie nodded at him, then stared back out the window.

But I couldn't tear my gaze away from her.

Her complete disregard for my presence irritated me, but watching her—even from a distance—was like watching a

rainbow, something I couldn't resist.

"How did you find me?" Her question was directed at Alessandro again, not me.

It stung.

"Gabe went to your home in Boston," Alessandro said, glancing at me again. "Your father beat him unconscious, nearly killed him."

Sophie's gaze flickered over to me, shock etched on her face. For the first time since she'd taken my hand at the coffee shop, she really looked at me. But I couldn't decipher what was going on behind those beautiful eyes.

Fear? Concern? Pity?

"He would be dead if Vincenzo Salvini and Hawk hadn't intervened," Alessio continued, his voice heavy.

Her eyes rounded even more.

"Gabe spent a couple of days in an induced coma before he woke up. And then he released himself—against the doctor's orders." Alessio stared at me with utter incredulity.

I gave him a hard stare back. I didn't want her to know the details, but maybe it was the only way for her to understand how far I was willing to go.

And maybe, just maybe, she'd realize that she still felt something for me, too.

Who would she choose if given the choice—her father or me?

As the conversation died down, I couldn't help but stare at Sophie, my heart both full and empty at the same time.

The need to have her back in my arms burned a hole inside of me, but the distance between us and the silence seemed impossible to bridge.

Sophie's eyes flicked over to me once more. Her eyebrows were drawn as she studied me as if I was a lab experiment gone awry.

I looked at her unwaveringly, then arched a single eyebrow.

And waited.

Sophie's gaze remained locked on mine, her eyes searching for something I couldn't grasp.

Questions seemed to dance at the edges of her gaze, but she didn't voice them.

Instead, she turned back to Alessio. "Is he okay?"

Alessio chuckled. "Ever seen one of those people who completely lose their mind and develop superhuman strength?"

She shook her head.

Alessio chuckled. "He's okay, physically. Mentally though..." He shook his head and made a move with his thumb as if cutting his own throat. "Utterly useless."

I glared at him.

"Where are you taking me?" Her tone was suddenly colder than ice, and I bristled internally at the fact that she still refused to address me directly.

"*Castello dei Pietra*," Alessandro replied nonchalantly. "You've been there, remember? Blue skies, beautiful beaches, pine trees, impeccable cooking skills of the owner, who's only borderline lord-like." He winked at her.

She chuckled.

Damn him.

"And if I don't want to go?" She crossed her arms defiantly, her eyes flicking back to me briefly before returning to my brother.

Alessandro glanced at me, his expression unreadable.

Anger simmered beneath my skin and threatened to boil over like a volcanic eruption, but I managed to maintain the facade of calm I'd cultivated over the years. "Take a hike, Alessandro."

Alessandro looked up and down the small private jet. "Since I don't have a parachute with me, I'm going to ignore this for

now,” he quipped. “Also...” His gaze ping-ponged from me to Sophie. “Could the two of you please make up and behave like reasonable adults? This not-talking-to-each-other is a kind of a non-option in your situation.” He nodded pointedly at Sophie’s belly.

Fuck me.

I was not taking relationship advice from my little brother.

I growled, which caused her gaze to snap to my face.

I grabbed the pair of headphones, provided for each seat and shoved them into my brother’s hands. “Go away and make sure noise cancellation is at a ten.”

Alessandro smirked and retreated to a seat a few rows away, leaving Sophie and me alone finally.

“We’re not playing the same game again,” I growled, frustration mounting as I leaned forward and caged in her knees with mine, forcing her to face me.

“And what game would that be?” she shot back, her voice laced with venom, her chin shoved forward.

“The kidnapping/hostage game,” I said, unable to control my temper any longer. Why was she so stubborn?

“Well, you should’ve thought about that before you dragged me out of Liam’s coffee shop,” she retorted, her sassiness both infuriating and intoxicating.

“Do not mention this asshole again. Ever.” My jaw clenched, and my chest tightened with the thunderous emotions that raged inside of me.

Wasn’t she at all happy to see me? Didn’t she miss me at all? Wasn’t she as affected by my presence as I was by hers?

I couldn’t read her, and it drove me borderline insane.

The simmering longing that had deepened during our weeks apart, which had fueled me during my time in the hospital, erupted into full-fledged irritation. And anger.

“Dammit, Sophie!” I roared.

Her bulging eyes calmed me down immediately.

I gritted my teeth, locked down my emotions, and continued with a dead calm in my voice. “You’re pregnant with my child. Why didn’t you call me?”

Her eyes flashed with hurt and defiance as she faced me head-on.

Finally.

Tension crackled between us like electricity, almost palpable.

Sophie’s eyes blazed with fury—shining more brightly, like an exploding star.

My little kitten was showing her claws.

My little sassy star was finally back.

“You sent me away when I wasn’t ready to leave, Gabe!” The raw hurt in her voice cut through me like a knife. “And now you’re a complication I don’t want.” She threw my own words back in my face.

A complication?

She was calling me a fucking complication?

My hiss pierced the air when I got in her face.

Her anger was a force to be reckoned with, radiating from her in waves, but beneath it, the raw pain in her eyes was unmistakable.

Fuck.

My righteous anger deflated like a balloon with a bullet hole.

She’d been hurting all this time, and it was entirely my fault.

We locked gazes, our breathing heavy and labored as our silent staring contest continued.

I drank in the sight of her—even furious, with fire blazing in her eyes, she was the most beautiful woman I’d ever laid my eyes on.

Especially furious.

I wanted to touch her—her pale cheeks, the curve of her lips—wanted to run my fingers through the golden strands of her hair, framing her face.

She was everything I didn't want to want, but everything I needed.

I'd tried to live without her, tried to erase her from my thoughts.

And without her, I might've just been the most miserable I'd ever been.

From now on, I refused to live without her, refused to spend even a day without her by my side.

And I needed her to get on board with that.

I continued to stare until Sophie sighed and broke our intense stare, punctuating the tension between us. "What will you do if I tell you I want to leave, Gabe?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

My heart clenched, and I looked her straight in the eyes.

No sense in prolonging the inevitable.

"Leaving isn't an option," I told her, my voice firm, laced with steel. "Now that you're pregnant with my child, your fate is sealed. Your place is by my side, whether you want it or not."

I could feel the weight of my words settling between us, like a weighted blanket of truth burying us under its weight.

The reality of our situation was undeniable—we were forever entwined, for better or for worse. And as much as I wished for Sophie's happiness, I wouldn't let her go.

Not now, not ever.

The silence stretched between us, a living thing that pulsed with the echoes of my announcement and everything that we both left unsaid.

A part of me exhaled as I recognized the situation.

Sophie was back in my life, defying me at every turn, but the relief quickly turned bittersweet. Having her close wasn't

enough; I wanted her to choose to be by my side.

To want to be by my side.

Just as much as I wanted her.

She crossed her arms over her chest and stared out the window.

The sight of her beautiful profile, illuminated by the indirect lighting, stirred something deep within my chest.

A fire ignited and was fueled by the desire to make her fall in love with me—to make her want me just as much as I wanted her.

I clenched my fists at my sides, attempting to control the sudden surge of emotion. “Sophie,” I said softly. Her name tasted like heaven on my lips.

She didn’t respond, her eyes still fixed on the view beyond the glass.

“Listen to me,” I insisted, then reached out to touch her thigh.

She flinched at my touch but didn’t pull away.

Thank God for small victories.

“I know this is not what any of us planned. I know I’ve made mistakes...when I held you against your will.”

Her gaze flicked to mine.

“When I sent you home.”

She narrowed her brows, her eyes searching, probing.

“But I need you to understand that I never meant to hurt you. And I never meant for any of this to happen.” I looked at her openly, let her see the truth—the sorrow, the pain of regret, but also my determination. “But things have changed; our situation has changed. You’re carrying my child, and I won’t...can’t pretend that that doesn’t change everything.”

She stared at me for a moment longer before turning her attention back to the window. “And what if I don’t want you, Gabe?” she whispered, her voice barely audible over the hum

of the engines. “What if I can’t be happy within the golden cage you want to put me in?”

The words, her voice, sounded so desperate, so miserable, my heart cracked a little.

She wanted her freedom.

Instead, she got me. The head of an Italian Mafia family. An enemy of her family.

“Then I’ll spend every day trying to make you happy,” I vowed, my voice thick with determination. “I will do whatever it takes to show you that I’m worthy of your love.”

Her head snapped to me, and she stared at me, her mouth gaping open.

She didn’t expect those words; hell, I didn’t expect those words.

But seeing the disbelief, the doubt lingering in her eyes, irked me.

I held her gaze until her eyes softened to something beyond doubt. There was a flicker of something else—curiosity? Or maybe even hope?

It wasn’t much, but it was enough for me to cling to.

“You don’t love me, and I don’t love you,” she said, her voice tinged with a challenge.

She hurled the words like a hail of arrows.

And I dodged every single one of them. I nodded, my gaze never leaving hers. “Actions speak louder than words.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“But I need you to remember one thing, too.”

She stared at me, curiosity making her eyes shine.

“To be happy, you need to allow yourself to be.”

It was advice I’d heard a long time ago—one of the guys giving someone else advice on love.

And it was advice not only for her but for me, as well.

To be happy, you need to allow yourself to be.

I needed to remember that, as well.

No more wallowing. No more playing the what-if game.

This was the reality, and it was my choice to find happiness within it.

As we continued our flight toward our uncertain future, I couldn't help but feel a sense of calm settling over me.

Winning Sophie's heart wouldn't be easy, but it was a mission I was more than willing to undertake.

For me.

For our baby.

For us.

I knew we were capable of overcoming anything life had in store for us.

Together.

And I would move Heaven and Earth to make her see that, too.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



We arrived at Calabria in the evening.

And since nobody knew we were coming home, it was only Cristo waiting for us on the airstrip with two black SUVs as an escort.

I opened the door for her and waited until she was inside before taking the seat next to her.

“*Ciao Bella,*” Cristo said and turned around in the driver’s seat. “Great to have you back; I really missed you.” He smiled at her. “You wouldn’t believe how much not-fun Mr. Grumpy-pants is without you.”

Sophie stared at him, then gave me a sidelong glance, then grinned back at Cristo.

Fuck.

How was it that she was blatantly at ease with everyone but me?

And especially with my brothers.

I threw daggers at Cristo, who just chuckled at me.

They behaved as if they were friends, as if they’d known her forever—not cool.

The drive over was uneventful and quick. She seemed exhausted, another minus point on my subconscious guilt-list.

She fell asleep before we reached Castello dei Pietra, and when her head sank against my shoulder, it was as if something within me had re-arranged itself.

We were home.

Sophie was finally home.

“She will need clothes,” Alessio suddenly said and turned around.

I stared at him for a full five seconds. “She’s my responsibility. I don’t need you to take care of her, or even think of her. Especially not about what she is or isn’t wearing.”

Alessandro arched one eyebrow and suppressed a grin, then turned back and shared a look with Cristo.

Fuck them.

Sophie was mine.

And I would take care of her every need.

We passed the new gate, which closed behind us rapidly.

“How’s the new security system working out?” I asked.

Cristo had stayed back at home these last couple of weeks to oversee the implementation of our new and improved security system.

“It’s good. Actually, it’s amazing. We’re using AI to identify everyone, and its pattern-prediction of movement is eerily accurate,” Cristo said.

“How’s Mamma?” Alessandro asked—the one question I dreaded.

“Well, she went from furious, to pissed, to concerned when Vincenzo Salvini called and told us about Gabe in the hospital. Then she went back to pissed when she found out he released himself,” he said and met my gaze through the rearview mirror.

“Big brother made a big pooh-pooh, and Mommy is very angry.”

I flipped him the bird.

We stopped at the house, and I carried a sleeping Sophie inside, ignoring my aching body and head, which was hurting and throbbing like a bitch.

Craig Donnelly got me good.

Upstairs I opened the door to our room—the one I hadn't been in since she left.

As soon as I'd laid her down on the bed, the phone in my pocket started to vibrate.

I put the blanket over her, then pulled a bottle of water from the fridge and put it on the nightstand.

She hadn't had a single sip since we left Dublin.

I was about to leave the room, when I turned back, then scribbled a short message on a piece of paper.

CALL 3 ON THE HOUSE PHONE IF YOU WAKE UP.

OR GO EXPLORE.

THE HOUSE IS YOURS NOW.

Then I stared at her for a while before I left her alone in the room—with the door unlocked.

Once outside, I pulled out my phone and called back Peaches.

“Hey, Peach.”

“Hey, Falcon, sorry it's been a while though I heard you were otherwise occupied.”

He obviously had heard of my hospital visit—thanks to Hawk, who probably staged a few pictures while I was unconscious.

I chuckled. The first rule of combat—do not show weakness or your brothers in arms will tease you mercilessly.

“So, it's been slow going sifting through the data, but I had some downtime and programmed a nifty little app that analyzes videos and matches frames to search words.”

I didn't even know Peaches was still sifting through the data like I'd done every free minute for the past couple of weeks.

“And?”

“And, there’s something you need to see. I’ll send you the filename.”

“Thanks, Peach.”

“Sure thing.”

I ended the call, then walked into the kitchen—the most likely location to find my mother.

The scent of freshly baked bread hit my nostrils—a welcome home reminder of my childhood.

“Gabriel.” My mother raised her head when I entered, then crossed the room, and I took her in my arms.

“I’m mad at you,” she said, then squeezed me tighter. “My heart nearly stopped when Vincenzo told me you were in the hospital.” She hugged me.

“I know, Mamma. I’m really sorry.”

She took a step back, gave me a once-over, then squeezed me again. This time more carefully. “You’re hurting.”

I smiled. Nobody like my mamma could read me like this. “I’m okay. Nothing a bowl of your minestrone and a piece of freshly baked bread can’t fix.”

She turned back to stir the pot again. “Did you lock Sophie back in your room?” She gave me a sideways glance, her eyebrows wagging.

Even my mother was making fun of me now?

Fan-fucking-tastic.

“Very funny. She fell asleep in the car.”

My mom turned serious all of a sudden. “Tell me what’s going on, Gabriel.”

So, she didn’t know? I was damn sure Cristo, Alessio, or Vince would have blabbered by now.

“She’s pregnant.”

“Ahh.” My mom tried to hide her soft smile.

“What?”

“So that’s the only reason you brought her back?”

I remained silent and just stared at her.

“Alessio told me you’ve been acting like a wounded rhino lately. Stubborn as one, too.”

I cocked my head. “Alessio’s talking too much.”

She sighed. “Just make sure you tell her you love her.”

“I never said that I do.”

My mom’s sigh was as if the weight of the whole world was on her shoulders. “Gabriele Falcone. Don’t make me beat you with a spoon.”

My mother hadn’t beaten us, ever, so the empty threat made me smile.

“Sophie will think you took her back because of the baby. It’s your job to convince her that is not the only reason.”

As always, she was right.

I already knew that.

“How long do you need to plan a wedding?” I asked her.

“Two weeks.”

I closed the distance between us, kissed her on the forehead, and said, “You got one.” And I needed to come up with a plan because I needed to convince Craig Donnelly to pack up his daughters, come to Italy and attend his daughter’s wedding.

My phone dinged—probably with Peaches’ message—and I made my way over to the control room.

I entered and stopped short when Alessio turned around. “Shouldn’t you be upstairs with your pretty captive?”

He made it sound as if I was a creep who would be watching Sophie while she was sleeping.

I ignored his dig, went to one of the computers, opened the search window, and entered the file name Peaches had sent me without gracing Alessandro’s chuckle with any reaction. I double-clicked on the video.

Somehow, I'd expected it to be Sophie—maybe because I'd developed a very unhealthy obsession with searching for and watching Fausto's videos of her.

So far, I'd found one of her sleeping in the cage, one of her serving me a new drink, and the last one I found was of one of her whippings—which poured gasoline into the fire of hatred I felt for my uncle.

But this one was different. It showed Fausto's office, his empty office.

“What are you watching?” Alessio rolled over in his chair.

“Something a friend told me I need to see.”

Three men entered the office. Fausto, my father, and someone else. “Who's that?” I pointed at the screen.

“Salvatore Moretti.”

A moment later, Fausto pulled a weapon, and my father crumpled to the floor.

I blinked.

“Fuck me,” Alessio said, mirroring my thoughts exactly.

Did I really just watch my father's execution? By his brother's hands, no less?

Wow? Wow?

And why hadn't Moretti done anything except gape at my uncle and raise his hands?

Or said something since?

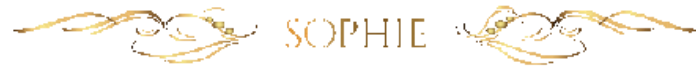
I jumped up from my chair, exchanged a look with Alessio.

“Is Fausto here or in Verona?”

“Here,” Alessio answered, then watched me head toward the weapons department.

I didn't care if I'd have to face Fausto alone. He would die tonight.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



I woke up with a start but beyond exhausted, my eyelids heavy, my mind groggy, and my stomach growling.

But amazingly, I knew exactly where I was. Even the sheets still smelled the same. I inhaled deeply. And detected a faint hint of Gabe's scent on the sheets, that intoxicating mix of cedar, spice, and salt water.

I sighed. My entire body felt sore as if I'd been fighting an invisible war during this short nap.

Or maybe it was the aftereffect of waging a war of will against Gabe.

Who did he think he was to just take me again and decide on my fate?

"I will do whatever it takes to show you that I'm worthy of your love."

Hope mingled with insecurity inside me before reality came crashing in. He'd taken me back because of our unborn child, not because he really wanted me or loved me.

But be that as it may, I was back—for now.

I was back at Castello dei Pietra, Italy.

Did I fall asleep in the car?

Did Gabe carry me up here?

And where was he?

I opened my eyes, which was a harder task than it should've been.

If even opening your eyes became an effort, something was seriously wrong.

My stomach rumbled. Not surprising since I hadn't had anything to eat all day, and I didn't dare to drink something on the plane because throwing up in front of Gabe would've seriously messed with the aloof attitude I used as armor to keep him at arm's length.

I sat up slowly, looked around, and my eyes fell on a note left on the nightstand along with a bottle of water.

**CALL 3 ON THE HOUSE PHONE IF YOU WAKE UP.
OR GO EXPLORE. THE HOUSE IS YOURS NOW.**

The house is yours now.

I scoffed under my breath. As if.

I sighed. If Gabe really loved me and wanted me with him, he would've asked instead of dragging me back.

Which he didn't.

But what did I expect? Did I really think he would leave me be?

I was carrying his child, his heir. And pride and family traditions were probably even more important for Italians than they were for us Irish.

Well, there went my hopes and dreams of building a life of my own or ever finding freedom or true love. And living my very own happily-ever-after.

Now I was a captive for the rest of my life because of a simple mistake.

Fuck me, I went from golden cage to golden cage—with not even three—albeit miserable—months in between.

I took a sip of the water and waited, but nothing happened. Apparently, my nausea had decided to take a vacation for now.

I stepped out of bed.

I would explore this unfamiliar place that was supposedly mine—my new golden cage.

Stop.

This was my life. Just because it didn't pan out exactly as planned—or at all, I wouldn't let that get me down.

“To be happy, you need to allow yourself to be.”

Wasn't he a smart-ass?

Even though, if I was perfectly honest, my weeks in Ireland hadn't been so hot either.

I'd felt more alone than ever.

I'd been miserable.

And I'd missed Gabe something fierce.

But fuck his antiquated Mafia traditions.

And fuck happiness.

If a life without love was my destiny, I would make Gabe at least as miserable as I was.

“Damn it, Gabe,” I muttered, my heart aching with desperation. “Why couldn't you, instead of forgetting to put on a damn condom, just fall head over heels in love with me?”

As I did.

The floor felt cold against my bare feet.

I hesitated at the bedroom door, my heart pounding in my chest. Was I really ready to accept this life?

The house is yours now.

I swallowed hard, then stepped out into the hall, my footsteps echoing softly as I made my way downstairs.

The scent of something delicious and homey wafted through the air and led me straight to the kitchen. My stomach growled, but at the same time, there was this knot. Was I ready to face Gabe's mother again?

Only one way to find out.

I stepped into the kitchen.

Gabe's mother had her back to me but turned around immediately.

"Ah, Sophie," she greeted me, and her eyes held a glimmer of amusement, but her warm smile seemed genuine.

What did I expect?

The last time we met, she'd seen me climb down from the deck with a makeshift rope out of bed linens as if I starred in the role of some bad movie escapee.

And then wrestle in the grass with her son like in a bad porn movie.

But despite the awkwardness, her attitude was friendly, so I relaxed.

"I'm so glad to have another woman in the house. It's been far too long since I've had any female company."

My cheeks flushed with embarrassment, and I couldn't help but feel uneasy. "Thank you," I mumbled.

I caught her staring at my belly.

My stomach grumbled loudly as if it was saying hello.

I groaned.

Even though she seemed genuinely glad about my presence, it didn't change the fact that I was here because of the baby growing inside of me—which added a whole other level of awkwardness.

"Are you hungry? Thirsty? What can I get you?" Gabe's mother asked.

"Water would be great."

Her eyes scanned me up and down. "How are you feeling? Are you experiencing morning sickness? I still remember how awful I felt the first couple of months when I was pregnant with Gabriel."

I nodded. It was a bit surreal, confiding in this woman I'd only met once, but somehow I longed for advice, to talk to someone who'd been through what I was going through. "It's a struggle. These last couple of days, I couldn't keep anything down. Not even water."

She frowned sympathetically, poured me a glass of water, and handed it to me.

I could see concern enter her eyes.

I'd lost some weight and probably wasn't looking so hot after the flight and my nap.

"Here, dear, drink this."

"Thank you," I murmured, my hands shaking as I took the glass from her. The moment the cool liquid touched my lips, I knew something was wrong.

There was a rushing in my ears, and the room suddenly spun around me.

I fought to maintain my balance.

Out of the corner of my eye, Gabe's mother reached out to me, said something I couldn't understand.

Darkness rushed in, and her distant scream mingled with the sound of shattering glass as I lost my balance.

And my consciousness.



A soft murmur of voices was the first thing I heard when I slowly came back—sprawled out on the kitchen floor.

My head throbbed, and the world seemed out of focus as if I was looking through a foggy window.

Gabe's face hovered above me, his dark blue eyes filled with concern. Alessandro and Gabe's mother stood nearby, worry etched on their faces.

"Wh-what happened?" I managed to croak, my throat parched.

“You fainted,” Gabe said tersely, his voice tight with suppressed anger. “You hit your head.”

My hand instinctively went to my head, but Gabe caught it before I could touch the throbbing spot. “Don’t,” he warned, his grip firm but gentle. “The ambulance is on the way. They’ll take care of you. Just lay still.”

“I’m fine.” I tried to sit up, but even before Gabe could push me back, a sharp pain accompanied by a wave of dizziness made me freeze.

“Fuck, Sophie, can’t you follow a single command?”

He was right there, supported me, slowly guided me back down to the ground, and not once did he take his eyes off of me.

It was comforting but also disconcerting.

Why was he looking at me with that unreadable expression?

He looked like he was hurting. For me. With me.

Did he really care for me or was it just because of the baby?

I groaned, then lost consciousness again.

I woke up strapped to a stretcher with Gabe holding my hand but looking over his shoulder.

“Alessio, call the hospital, tell them we’re coming,” Gabe barked, his voice sounded strangely garbled, or maybe it was just my hearing that was impaired.

And then his cold blue eyes locked on mine, and everything came back into sharp focus.

As they carefully wheeled me out of the house, Gabe refused to leave my side, hovering close like a protective lion.

“Signore, I’m sorry, but you need to step aside,” the EMT informed Gabe as he loaded me in, then blocked him from getting in.

Gabe growled something in Italian, his voice low and dangerous.

They stood their ground, caught in a staring contest.

The EMT hesitated, clearly intimidated by Gabe's dominating presence, and when his partner approached from the house and took in the scene, he immediately took the guy aside.

After a murmured conversation, the guy's eyes bulged. He looked at Gabe and said, "*Mi dispiace, signore Falcone.*" Then bowed.

Like honest to God, bowed before Gabe.

Who, with a curt nod, acknowledged the submissive gesture as if it was completely normal and climbed in beside me.

The doors slammed shut, and the ambulance sped off, sirens blaring.

Our arrival at the hospital was equally absurd.

The hospital staff scurried around me as if I was the queen of England—and he the evil king.

The nurses sent stolen glances at Gabe, their eyes following him as he paced like a caged animal, but not once did he leave my side.

They drew blood, took my temperature, and asked all kinds of questions. Gabe answered for me in rapid-fire Italian.

"I'm fine, Gabe."

With an accusatory glance, he regarded me for a few seconds. I could see the storm raging in his eyes, could see the hardly contained fury. "Rest. We'll talk about everything else later."

Then he continued to pace, tension visible in his broad shoulders, emanating restless energy that made him seem larger than life. Deadlier, too.

A doctor approached, and even he seemed to revere Gabe.

It was unnerving, seeing for the first time how truly powerful he was.

An evil king residing in his kingdom.

"Alright, Mrs. Falcone," the doctor turned to me, after finishing his hushed conversation with Gabe that lasted what felt like an eternity. "The head wound isn't too serious, but we

want to make sure there's no lasting damage. We're going to perform a CT scan, just to be sure, and admit you for observation. Your husband told us you're having trouble with nausea?"

My eyes shot to Gabe. How the heck would he know?

"My mother," he mouthed, and I nodded, then looked back to the doctor.

Gabe rubbed his face with his hands, his eyes dark with worry and something else—regret? "She's pregnant," he admitted, "and she's been having trouble keeping anything down, even water."

My heart squeezed at the concern in his voice, then started to race, and suddenly I had the overwhelming desire for him to hold my hand.

But there was also a voice inside my head that wondered. Was he concerned for me or just for the baby? Would he still be as distraught if I weren't carrying his child, or would I be nothing more than a memory—long forgotten?

"We'll need to run some tests," the doctor told us, "to determine what's going on."

The doctor waited until I nodded. "As a first action, we'll get you hooked on an IV to balance out your fluids."

"Thank you," I whispered, grateful for the care but still uneasy about the situation.

Gabe didn't speak, his jaw clenched in silent rage—at what or whom, I wasn't entirely sure—even though it felt like it was directed at me.

Was he blaming me for what happened?

For not taking good enough care of his heir?

I reached out until Gabe took my hand, then squeezed his gently. He looked down at me, his dark eyes softening ever so slightly.

Or maybe I just saw what I wanted to see. "I'm okay," I reassured him. "Really. And the baby, as well."

Because that was his real concern, right? The baby—his reason for taking me back.

He nodded but said nothing, the worry lines between his brows remaining. And at that moment, I wished more than anything that I could read his mind, could know what he was really thinking, what he truly felt for me.

But how could I?

Half an hour later, everything seemed to close in on me as I lay there, the smell of antiseptic and the throbbing headache a constant reminder of my vulnerable state.

Gabe paced back and forth, his frustration palpable, and I wished I could do something to soothe him.

Next came the nurses.

As they poked and prodded me, I tried not to think about the sharp needles piercing my skin or the whirring machines surrounding me. Instead, I focused on Gabe, who stood by my side like a protective sentinel, staring down at everyone who dared to enter the room and come near.

I knew he was suffering, too, and suddenly, I didn't feel so alone in this mess anymore.

I wasn't alone in this mess, and even if he didn't love me, he at least stood by my side.

When they wheeled me to get the CT scan, Gabe marched beside me.

Nobody questioned his presence, and soon we were back in the room.

"Come here," I whispered and reached out to him.

He hesitated but eventually took the few steps needed to sit beside me on the bed. His touch was gentle as he caressed the back of my hand, and for a moment, I forgot about the headache that pounded relentlessly behind my eyes.

Until the doctor returned, his expression grave.

And my stomach tightened.

“Mrs. Falcone, there’s internal bleeding in your brain, which is causing your headache. We’re concerned that we may need to perform a small procedure to decrease the pressure.”

The room seemed to spin, and I struggled to keep my breathing steady.

Gabe’s grip on my hand tightened, but he remained eerily calm. “What are the risks?”

The doctor pursed his lips, concern etching lines on his face. “With every surgical procedure, there’s a risk involved because it might impact the pregnancy.”

I felt my heart drop, panic and indecision gripping me.

The thought of putting our baby at risk utterly terrified me. “Maybe we shouldn’t,” I whispered and glanced nervously between Gabe and the doctor.

But Gabe was resolute, his voice firm with an unreadable expression. “If it’s necessary, we’ll do it. Sophie’s well-being is more important than the pregnancy.”

His words hung in the air, heavy with implication.

Had I been wrong?

What if the pregnancy wasn’t the sole reason he forced me to come back with him?

“Are you sure?” My voice sounded too weak as I asked Gabe.

But I needed to understand his reasoning.

Needed him to say it again.

“Excuse us for a moment,” he said to the doctor, who bowed and left.

Then he took my head in his hands, skimmed my cheek, then petted my hair gently. Our eyes locked, and for a moment, I felt like he willingly let me see deep into his soul.

As he opened his mouth to answer, the door burst open, startling us both.

“Is everything okay?” Alessandro demanded, his eyes darting between me and Gabe. Next came Gabe’s mother, and Cristo

trailed behind her, their faces etched with worry.

Gabe released me and stood up, his posture rigid.

I immediately missed the warmth of his touch.

“The doctors might have to perform a procedure to release the pressure building in her brain. There are risks”—his eyes locked with mine—“but it may be necessary.”

Their gazes turned to me, expressions full of concern, and I couldn't help but feel the weight of their collective worry.

They were all here, united by their love for Gabe and, by extension, me.

And despite the tension in the room, I felt a spark of hope flicker within me.

This was a family who loved each other deeply.

This was my child's new family and maybe mine.

Gabe's mother stepped forward, her eyes softened when she caressed my face, then she squeezed my hand. “Everything will be okay, *cara*. Trust the doctors. And we'll get through this, no matter what.”

The room seemed to close in on me as I looked into her unwavering eyes. A fierce pain of sadness settled deep inside my chest. What wouldn't I give to have my own mother with me, to feel her support?

I bit my lip as tears gathered behind my eyelids.

Fuck.

I inhaled deeply when Gabe replaced his mother and cupped my cheek.

“We're in this together, *mia Stellina*.” His eyes were brimming with feeling. Gone was the aloofness, gone was the coldness or distance.

And with a deep breath, I braced myself for whatever lay ahead.

Because I knew with him by my side, I could get through everything.

No matter what.

And then the door opened again, and a couple of men in suits who I didn't recognize entered. I followed the conversation until the first man stepped to the side, and my blood froze in my veins.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX



The door to Sophie’s hospital room swung open, and two bulky guys in black suits entered, followed by a distinguished man I didn’t recognize.

His black hair was peppered with grey, and his black three-piece tailored suit might’ve made a lesser man look overdressed—but not him.

This was a man used to his status, used to wielding power. And he sure as hell wasn’t a doctor.

I side-eyed Alessio, who had moved next to me, a tense look on his face. When he mouthed, “Moretti,” my blood ran cold.

Fuck me.

Was this Salvatore Moretti? The head of the Moretti family? The same man Fausto claimed had an ongoing feud with my father—the very one who had witnessed Fausto kill my father?

Fausto.

Speak of the devil.

As if I’d conjured him up, Fausto strode in behind Moretti, smiling nonchalantly in that infuriating way that made me long to wipe the smile off his face permanently.

Kill him slowly and painfully.

My vision tunneled, and my pulse pounded as I clenched my fists and widened my stance.

Braced to attack.

Alessio moved behind me, then grabbed my arm in a punishing grip and drove his fingernails into my skin—hard. “Not here,” he muttered under his breath.

I nodded but kept my gaze locked on the intruders.

“Hey, Salvo,” my mother said, looking as surprised as I felt. “Why are you here?”

Moretti seemed taken aback by her question, and it took him a moment—spent staring at my mother—before his tight expression softened. “We heard there was an ambulance called to Castello dei Pietra and a female patient admitted to the hospital.” He swallowed, then looked at Alessandro, Cristo, and Sophie, and then our eyes locked.

He rubbed the back of his neck before he tore his eyes away and gazed at my mother again. “I didn’t know your sons were back, and I thought, it was maybe...you.” His voice trailed off.

What the hell was going on between them? And why would Salvatore Moretti rush to the hospital just because he thought my mother was hospitalized?

“As you can see, I’m perfectly fine.” My mother’s sharp tone of voice cut through the air like a sword. My head whipped to her, and I stared at her in shock.

I’d never once heard her talk to anyone that way—let alone the head of a rival family.

She was the most social and polite person I knew.

Usually.

“You should leave,” I said and stepped forward, with Alessio hot on my heels, both our hands on our guns.

Moretti bowed his head, moved, and I heard a sharp inhale from behind me.

I spun around and looked at Sophie, who had turned white as her hospital sheet—her bulging eyes staring at Fausto, her mouth gaping like she couldn’t breathe.

Fuck.

I whipped back around.

Moretti had blocked Sophie's view of Fausto, but I could see the same shock of recognition in Fausto's eyes as I did in Sophie's.

The same kind of terror.

Was this the moment to draw my gun? Or should I take this outside?

I'd killed in front of Sophie before when I stabbed Enzo at the club. But she wasn't well now. Another blood bath right in front of her eyes was out of the question.

"Let's take this outside," I said with a calm that denied the boiling rage coursing through my body. "Now."

Fausto had killed my father—his own brother—in cold blood.

And Moretti had witnessed it.

I wanted to know why before I killed them both.

Moretti nodded, and his two men exited the room first and held open the door.

"Salvo," my mother said and stopped Moretti mid-turn. "Thank you."

As if that was too much, Moretti hung his head and sighed. "Maria." He glanced over his shoulder at Fausto before he continued. "There's something I need to tell you. Should've told you as soon as it happened."

He took one calculated step, subtly turning, so his back was to the wall instead of Fausto, but his eyes stayed locked with my mother's.

Was Fausto unarmed? Was that the reason Moretti would confess that he watched him murder my father right in front of him?

Fuck.

I shifted to block Sophie from Fausto. And one look at Cristo was enough for him to do the same for my mother.

Would Moretti confess to my mother? Or did I misread the situation?

“I should’ve come clean the moment it happened,” Moretti said.

Fuck.

“No,” Fausto screamed. He crouched, then drew a weapon from his leg holster, and pumped a series of small-caliber shots center mass into Moretti.

I tackled Sophie, cupped her head, and pulled her with me from the bed to the floor.

Cristo took my mother down.

And Alessio?

Alessio killed Fausto with a single shot, neatly placed between his eyebrows.

Fausto looked surprised, then crumpled to the floor.

What a goddamn mess.

“Clear!” Alessio shouted, kicking Fausto’s weapon away.

Then the two men Moretti brought with him entered, their weapons drawn.

Cristo, Alessio, and I faced them. “Fausto did this; we took care of him,” I said in as calm a tone as I could muster in an attempt to de-escalate this situation.

“If you want your capo to pull through, we need doctors, not more bullets,” Alessio said, then tucked his weapon away and bent over Moretti. “He needs a doctor...fast.”

“What will it be?” I asked and lowered my gun—they mirrored my movement, thank God.

Cristo lifted our mother off the floor and into a chair, then vaulted over Fausto’s body, sprinted to the door, and left in search of a doctor—one of the men followed, the other one kneeled next to Moretti.

I looked down at Sophie, who stared at the scene with bulging eyes and a gaping mouth. “Wha—”

I lifted her into my arms and back into bed.

Sophie stared up at me, her eyes wide with shock and confusion. “What...happened?”

I smoothed her hair back from her face, my heart pounding as the adrenaline rushed through my veins. “It’s alright. You’re safe.” That was all I could offer for the moment. I wasn’t ready to tell her the truth about Fausto and my father, not here and now. Not when she was feeling so frail in my arms.

Alessio turned his head and stared at me until our gazes locked as Moretti groaned on the floor, blood staining his white shirt.

My mother rushed to Moretti’s side, taking his hand in hers. “Salvo, you idiot. What did you do?” She glanced over at Fausto’s body with a mixture of hatred and disgust.

Two doctors and several nurses rushed in, stopping short at the scene of carnage before them. “We need a stretcher in here!” one doctor yelled out the door.

They descended on Moretti and went to work trying to stabilize him as my mother was gently moved out of the way.

I looked between Sophie and my family, torn. I didn’t want to leave Sophie’s side, but I needed to speak to my mother and the doctors to ensure Moretti would pull through.

If he died, we would have an all-out war with the Moretti family on our hands.

Alessandro seemed to read my mind. He was still standing at Moretti’s head, next to Moretti’s guy when he mouthed, “I’ve got this. Stay with Sophie.” Then he leaned down when Moretti started to talk—though it was a gurgled mess.

It would be a wonder if he pulled through.

Cristo guided my mother across the room, speaking to her in gentle, soothing tones as tears streamed down her face.

He guided her out of the room, giving me a nod as they left. At least I could count on my brothers when it mattered.

I sat on the edge of Sophie’s bed, taking her hand in mine. Her skin was cold and clammy, and she looked as if she might faint at any moment.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” I said quietly. “There’s more going on here than you realize, but I promise I will explain everything. Right now, I just need you to focus on yourself and get well.”

She gave a shaky nod, then cocked her head and swallowed hard. “Tell me at least what happened. Who is Salvo, and why was Fausto here?” Her gaze drifted to the blood staining the floor beneath Fausto’s body, and her face paled further.

“Shhh. Don’t look at him.” I brushed her hair back, gently caressing her cheek.

“Tell me.”

I sighed, then pressed a kiss to her forehead, breathing in her familiar scent. “Fausto was the one who killed my father. And Moretti was there.”

Her head snapped up. “Holy shit.” She grabbed my hand. “Gabe.”

That one word was layered with emotion, her distress, her sadness, her sympathy.

She offered me a trembling smile, then hesitantly offered me a hug.

My chest tightened as I pulled her into my lap and my embrace and could feel her arms wrap around me, as well.

I held her close, inhaled her scent, relief washing over me at having her here, safe in my embrace.

No matter what else happened, as long as she was safe in my arms, the world could go to shit and I didn’t care.

My family’s business, my enemies, even my demons—none of it seemed so daunting with Sophie next to me.

And I was never going to give her up again, no matter the cost.

“You’re the most important thing in my life,” I said, then sighed against her hair. “I love you, Sophie.”

And just like that, all tension left her body, and she melted against me.

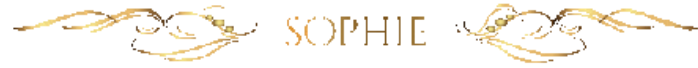
I held her tighter. “I’ve got you. And I’m never letting you go again.”

And she looked up at me with the most angelic smile.

And despite the doctors still working on Moretti right next to us, despite the body of Fausto lying lifeless in his own blood, at this moment, everything in my life was perfect.

Until my eyes met Alessio’s, who was pale as a ghost and looked like he’d just seen one, too.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



Finally home.

I sighed when we arrived at the door to our room at Castello dei Pietra.

Our room.

The concept still sounded so foreign.

But since that one fateful day when I fainted in the kitchen, everything had changed.

After two weeks in the hospital—being fed by the whole Falcone clan—including Gabe, who turned out to be quite the mother hen—I was ready to go home.

Home to Castello dei Pietra.

Home to start our life.

Because, despite the frequent visits, I was sick of the dirty-white walls, the constant prodding, and the hospital vibes.

All I wanted was to enjoy a quiet afternoon without a single person asking me how I was doing.

I was also missing my family something fierce.

I'd talked to Jemma and Cara but had not heard a single word from my father.

Gabe stopped me from opening the door with his hand above mine. "Are you good if I pop down to the control room for half an hour?"

He skimmed over my cheek, then circled my face with both his hands and stole a kiss. “Mamma will most likely check in with you in a minute. But I promise, you will get your break from people.”

I smiled at him. Somehow in the past two weeks, Gabe went from dangerous protector to mind-reader. He seemed to know just what I was thinking before I even voiced it.

He gave me a kiss on my nose—another thing that had changed—his constant need to touch my hair, skim over my skin, hug me, kiss me, or fondle me. As if he couldn’t keep his hands off of me.

I turned, opened the door, and froze.

It looked like the backstage of a runway show had made a baby with an haute couture store—and they had triplets.

There were racks and racks of clothes. Clothes covered every surface except the bed. “What the—”

Gabe came up behind me and put his hands on my waist.

“Fuck. Forgot about that.”

I looked at him over my shoulder. “You forgot you transformed our room into a clothing store?”

He kissed my forehead. “I had those delivered weeks ago.”

“So what? You slept in the middle of that?”

I took a couple of steps, let my finger glide over a beautiful blush-colored ballgown. Then an emerald-green cashmere sweater.

I looked back at Gabe when he didn’t answer. There was a strange energy coming from him.

“What is it?”

It was almost as if he was embarrassed or something.

He stepped up to me, slung his hands around my body, and looked deep into my eyes. “Stellina, I haven’t spent a single night in our room without you.”

My heart pitter-pattered to a stop. “You mean since I went to the hospital?”

He stayed silent, then exhaled. “I mean since we left for Verona.”

I inhaled, held my breath, then exhaled.

Somehow his confession—unwilling as it was given—loosened something inside of me, some deep-seated doubt that still lingered despite his actions and words in the hospital. Despite him choosing me over our baby.

“Then where did you sleep?”

Another sigh. “I didn’t come back here. I stayed in Verona until...”

“Until you went to Boston on a brawl?”

“It wasn’t so much a brawl but a fair fight, which your father won, fair and square.”

I smiled. Somehow the cavalier way he mentioned it made me love him more, not less. “So now what do we do? Those clothes will hardly fit me anymore.”

Those two weeks I had to stay in the hospital had turned out to be a blessing in disguise. With all the anti-nausea medications, I could finally eat and drink again. And since the Falcone family were big on Italian bread, olive and cheese platters and incredibly delicious desserts, gaining weight turned out to be incredibly easy.

“I got a little snack for you.” A voice behind us made Gabe turn us both around to face his mother without him taking his hands off of me.

And wonder, oh wonder—in her hand there was a platter full of delicious Italian pastries.

Gabe immediately snatched one, took a bite, then offered it to me.

When I shook my head, he leaned in, and with his mouth touching my ear, he growled, “Either you eat, or I feed you. But you will not fucking starve yourself again.”

I sighed, leaned farther into him, then took a bite.

“So, there’s something I wanted to show you,” Gabe’s mother said. “Gabe, could you just go somewhere else for a while?”

“Why?” Gabe tightened his arms around my body.

How I loved his possessiveness. How I loved it that he wasn’t cold or aloof anymore. Instead, he took every opportunity to touch me, hold me, or kiss me.

“Seeing the bride in her wedding dress before the wedding is actually bad luck. But if you don’t care, I don’t care,” his mother said, sat the platter down, then crossed the room to one of the racks.

“Wait.” Gabe gave me a quick kiss. “I’ll see you in half an hour.” Then he loosened his embrace and marched toward the door.

“As a kid, he was the most superstitious one of all,” his mother said with a chuckle.

Then she presented me with a beautiful white dress. “It’s just an offer, and I’m completely okay if you want to go out shopping tomorrow to get a new one, but I think you might really like it.”

I stared at the dress, then at Maria, then I broke down into tears and hugged her.

This was exactly the kind of mother-daughter stuff I thought I would never have. And even though it was just a gesture—because no way would my visibly pregnant body fit into this sleek dress—it was immensely precious to me. “Thank you.”

“Try it on.”

“It won’t fit.”

“I promise it will. Come on.”

I agreed and went into the bathroom. Got rid of my clothes, then slipped the white sheath over my head.

Despite the elegant design, it was unbelievably comfortable and when it slid down and sheathed my body perfectly, I recognized what I’d missed before.

Gabe's mother had been pregnant when she got married.

Somehow, through some kind of amazingly magical needlework-wizardry, there were extra layers that both hid and molded the fabric around the belly.

I walked out of the bathroom, and when my eyes hit Maria's, we didn't need words to communicate.

"I loved Gabe's father—as much as a woman can love a man. Despite what Fausto said, despite Salvatore Moretti. But our story's beginning wasn't so different from yours and Gabe's."

She sighed. "My son is his father's mirror. He might be overprotective, he might be dominant and possessive, but if he truly loves you, he will do so until the end."

I nodded.

She grinned. "Just remember this after his next fuck-up, and your marriage will be golden."

"Now, undress again, and let me hide it until the wedding. Oh, by the way, since the wedding is in two days, is there anything you want that we haven't talked of?"

My family—was my first thought. What wouldn't I give to have my family with me on my wedding day? To have my father lead me to the altar, but since that wasn't going to happen, I was happy to go with whatever Maria had planned. "No, I'm good. Thank you so much for organizing everything."

"That's what a mother is for, isn't it?" She winked at me, and at that moment, I was truly happy.

All my life, I'd thought freedom and independence would make me happy. I'd thought I was stuck in a golden cage and only escaping the right bonds of the family would bring me happiness when in truth, it was simply my perspective that made me miserable.

That kept me stuck.

"Thank you so much, Maria."

She smiled. “Why don’t you call me Mamma, and give me the most beautiful grandchild I could wish for, and we call it even?”

I nodded, tears clogging my throat.

I might’ve lost my freedom, but I’d gained so much love instead.

How could I not be completely, deliriously happy?

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT



I was on my way to the control room when I heard raised voices from the kitchen and took a detour.

“Mom, stop fucking around. Stop avoiding me. And now that he’s dead, you’re the only one who knows the truth. And I have a right to know.”

Alessio’s angry voice caused me to freeze just before entering the kitchen.

What the hell was going on, and why would Alessandro talk to our mother like that?

I stepped forward. “What’s going on?”

Alessandro turned to me, groaned, then hung his head while my mother’s face showed signs of an impending breakdown—nothing I would ever have associated with my mother.

And then I knew.

Now that he’s dead...they were talking about Salvatore Moretti.

Whatever caused the shock I’d seen on Alessio’s face two weeks ago—the news he’d refused to talk about—he wanted some answers.

And I wanted some answers too.

I crossed the room and laid one hand on Alessio’s shoulder, squeezed, then turned my stare on my mother.

“Mamma, whatever it is, he’s a big boy; he can take it.”

My mother's sob almost made me waver.

"Should I go?" I asked Alessio, who shook his head.

"If what Moretti told me was the truth, you need to know anyway."

"Or not," my mom interjected. "We've kept it a secret this long. I don't know why he told you. He should've never told you."

Alessio bristled next to me, then scowled. "You should've told me. You and Dad." He scoffed as if he had just swallowed an insect. "I deserved the truth, and not through the deathbed confession of a virtual stranger!"

A heavy weight settled on my chest. I'd never seen Alessio so angry—especially not with my mother.

"Can someone please clue me in?"

"How about you talk, right now?" Alessio raised one eyebrow, staring at our mother. "Explain things?"

Tears gathered in my mother's eyes, then spilled over while she shook her head. "Well, then, I guess I will."

There was so much menace in Alessio's voice, it gave me the chills.

"I'm your father...those were Moretti's last words." Alessio's eyes remained locked on Mamma.

I ignored the tingling sensation on the back of my neck. This couldn't be true. "So? People on the verge of death say all kinds of shit," I said, in a futile effort to end this toxic situation.

"Yes, I thought so, too," Alessio muttered, then his gaze sharpened. "So, I asked Mamma to set the record straight."

"And?"

"And..." Alessio made a sweeping motion in my mother's direction.

"It's not what you think it is," she begged.

Alessio chuckled. “It isn’t? Because you refusing to talk to me feels suspiciously like Moretti told the truth and you can’t handle it.”

Mom sighed, straightened, wiped her tears, then met Alessio’s gaze head-on. “When your father and I were young, we liked to experiment. He liked to experiment.”

Alessio’s face showed the same confusion mine probably did. What the hell was she talking about?

“Sexually.”

What the actual fuck? I wanted to take a step back and put my hands over my ears. I did not sign up for this.

“Your father liked to watch,” she said, her voice firmer now.

“Watch?” Alessio folded his arms across his chest, confusion written all over his face.

“Watch me.”

Oh shit.

My stomach hardened.

Watch her, as in watch her have sex with other men?

“Doing what?” Alessio stared at her—slow on the uptake.

“Have sex with other men,” she said, then looked down at her feet. “We only played a handful of times, and only with one other person,” my mother said, her voice barely above a whisper. “The only person your father trusted at the time.”

“Salvatore Moretti,” I muttered.

I could feel the realization slam into Alessio, and he physically stumbled back.

She nodded. “Salvo and your father were best friends before they became heads of the families.”

She shrugged. “We had fun, fooled around. Enjoyed ourselves. And nine months later, you were born.” She raised her head and stared at Alessio.

“But you had me already?” I asked because suddenly, I wasn’t sure if Moretti would have told me the same thing if I was the

one by his side instead of Alessio.

My mother moved toward us, then cupped my cheek and Alessio's, who shook her hand off and stepped back.

My mother let her hand hang in the air for a moment, then focused solely on me.

"I had you, Gabe, when I was barely nineteen. I was so young when I met your father. Had no experience."

Her words were like a gut punch to me.

Had my father done the same thing as I? Had he seduced my mother like I seduced Sophie? Had he caught her, taken away her choices along with her freedom?

Was this history repeating itself?

Was I the one repeating my father's mistakes?

As if my mother could sense where my mind was going, she continued, "Your father and I loved each other from the first time we met. But he wanted me to explore. He wanted me to not miss out. He wanted me to be truly happy."

"So, Gabe is his son, but I'm not," Alessio deadpanned. "That's why he never even entertained the thought of making me the head of the family—even after Gabe bailed. That's why he completely discarded me as an heir."

My mother's chin trembled. "It was an accident. We stopped fooling around afterward. And vowed to never talk about it. Your father loved you very much. He never treated you any different than Gabe and Cristo."

"Only I was different." Alessandro stared at her, his eyes cold.

Hurt.

He swallowed hard, then lowered his head. "I was a Moretti by blood. Not part of the Falcone family."

The pain in his voice was like a knife to my chest.

"Alessio," my mother begged, but Alessio turned away from her. "I need to get out of here."

“Alessandro, wait,” I cut him off, and when he bumped into me, he raised his head.

“What?” There was wetness in his eyes and barely contained rage.

“I’m sorry.”

He scoffed, malice emanating from him in waves. “I need to get the fuck out of here before I do something I might or might not regret.” He threw a dirty look at Mamma.

Fuck.

I’d never seen him like that. Furious. Out of control. “How about a trip to Malta? There’s some irregularities in one of the casinos, and I need someone I can trust to look into it.”

Our gazes locked. He glared at me. “I don’t need your fucking pity.”

I nodded. “Either you go to Malta and take care of our business there, or you turn around, apologize, and I kick your ass until you take a time-out in the hospital. Your choice entirely.”

His self-deprecating chuckle was nothing short of heart-wrenching.

Then he nodded once.

I grabbed his neck. “Call in as soon as you arrive.”

He gave me a hard stare, then sidestepped me and left without another word.

He didn’t even go up to his room to pack his things. He just went straight out the door, turning his back on everything.

Fuck.

My mother started sobbing, then escaped through the other door.

And I was left alone in the kitchen, my mind still reeling.

I switched off whatever had been simmering on the stove, then turned to leave.

I got my phone out of my pocket, my mind circling around what had just happened.

And what I had to do.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE



“**W**here are you taking me?” I asked Gabe, my heart pounding with anticipation as soon as we arrived at the private airstrip. As it turned out, there wasn’t a single uneventful day in the Falcone family.

And it was kinda fun to be right in the middle of it.

Contrary to my father, Gabe had no intention of keeping me hidden somewhere or even keeping me in the dark about what was going on.

“Verona,” he replied, and his voice had a strange calming effect on me.

“Are you nuts? Why? Did you forget tomorrow’s supposed to be our wedding day?”

I ignored the twinge in my chest. My family wouldn’t be there, but my new one would be.

Well, almost, since Alessio stormed out yesterday, without so much as a goodbye.

Gabe told me about the shocking news, and since yesterday, he always had his phone nearby—as if he was waiting, only for what, I didn’t know.

Though I could see the worry etched into Gabe’s face, his eyes betraying the carefully crafted façade of calmness he usually wore like armor.

He was worried about Alessio going off the deep end.

Doing something stupid.

But then why were we going to Verona instead of following Alessio to Malta?

“You’ll see,” was all he said.

And that cryptic message was as much as I got out of Gabe before we boarded the private jet.

At least he’d told me our destination before take off.

Small improvements all around.

Even though by now, I would probably follow him wherever he went—no questions asked.

The plane roared to life, and I felt the familiar pressure against my seat as we took off into the sky.

As the ground disappeared below us, I couldn’t help but marvel at how far we’d come—literally and figuratively.

Gabe’s concerned gaze flickered over me when he brushed gently against my arm. “Are you feeling okay?”

I leaned into his touch, craving the warmth of his skin against mine. It was amazing to see and feel just how much he cared about my well-being. Now that I knew it was both the baby and me he was looking after.

“Better than okay.” I winked. “Since I’m with you.”

He rolled his eyes at my corniness even though I knew he secretly loved my occasional silliness and our playful interactions.

And it was so easy to be playful with him.

I unfastened my seatbelt, climbed onto his lap, and wrapped my arms around his neck. “You need to stop being so tightly wound.”

“Tightly wound?”

I nodded. “Bordering on anxious.”

He arched a single sexy eyebrow in that dominant way—and caused a resounding quiver in my core.

Hot damn, my man was sexy.

“Anxious?” The hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth should’ve lessened the hotness—only it didn’t.

His hand crept under my shirt, slowly making its way upwards. “I’m a big, bad Mafia boss, remember? I don’t do anxious.”

“Of course not,” I teased, rolling my eyes but smiling nonetheless. We both knew that beneath his tough exterior, he cared deeply for those he loved—his friends, his family, and especially me.

“Enough about us,” I said and sat back in his lap so I could take in his reactions. “How’s Alessio holding up?”

Gabe hesitated, his gaze flitting around the cabin before returning to me. “He’s... angry at the world,” he admitted, his voice softer than before, “and I’m concerned.”

It was rare for him to show his vulnerable side so freely, and it only made me realize how far we’d come.

There wasn’t any pretending, no holding back. This was him letting me in, letting me see.

And it only made me love him more.

“Is there anything we can do?”

He leaned his forehead against mine. “Not right now.”

I cupped his cheeks, then leaned in to press my lips against his and whispered, “Then let’s not think of him right now.”

He sighed into the kiss, then wrapped an arm around my waist, leaned back, and pulled me even closer.

His lips twitched into a smile when he hovered right in front of my face, his breath hot against my skin. “Are you offering sex to take my mind off of things?”

I laughed, when he thrust upwards, letting me know just how much he was on board with that.

And even though I didn’t intend to instigate sex to take his mind off of things, I was totally game.

Joining the mile-high club.

Gabe slid his hand up my thigh while he wrapped the other one around my neck, his grip possessive yet gentle. The heat of his touch sent shivers down my spine, igniting a deep hunger within me.

We'd had a rough couple of weeks, and he'd held back—sexually—despite the doctor telling us it was okay.

“Sophie?”

“Maybe,” I murmured, then leaned in for a kiss. Our tongues tangled together, exploring and tasting each other with searing passion.

How I'd missed this.

Him.

Gabe growled low in his throat, the sound sending a jolt of desire straight to my core.

“Then let me show you just how not anxious I am,” he whispered against my lips.

He moved his fingers beneath my skirt, pushed aside the flimsy fabric of my lace panties, and went right for the kill.

My throbbing clit.

I arched into his touch and gasped.

“Please,” I begged, desperate for more. “I need you inside of me.”

He didn't hesitate, lifted me back in my seat, unzipped his pants, and freed his hard cock.

My eyes widened at the sight, and I looked over the cabin. Thank God the door to the cockpit was closed. Then I looked back at him, and the desire in his eyes made anticipation coil tight in my belly.

Finally.

We hadn't had sex since I came home from the hospital. And as much as he'd spooned me while sleeping and kissed me and cared for me these past couple of days, I was ready for more, was ready for him to be his usual dominant self with me again.

“Are you my dirty girl?”

I inhaled sharply.

He lifted me onto his lap, turned sideways, then lay down on both seats and urged me to move up to his face.

My breath stuck in my throat, but his eyes glittered with a challenge.

I held on to the backrests of the seat and the one in front and scooted over—his hands splayed on my ass, urging me forward until I was straddling his face. “Gabe?”

I looked down, and our eyes clashed, then he grinned, a positively mischievous grin, before he gripped my hips and dove under my skirt, nuzzled the lace to the side, and swirled his tongue over my clit, then he urged me forward to tilt my hips and entered me with his tongue, then back to my clit, and on and on.

Holy shit.

He played with me like that for a couple of seconds, guiding my hips to wherever he wanted me.

I groaned, closed my eyes, and reveled in the dirtiness and sexiness of it all.

Then suddenly he closed his lips over my clit and sucked—hard.

I arched my back, pressed down against him, dug my hands in his hair, then begged.

The pressure, the sucking, he didn’t let up and sent me careening over the edge only seconds later—a surprise to us both.

My thighs shook, and I gasped for breath when my eyes locked with his.

His grip on my hips never lessened. He scooted me back down his body, came back up, sat up, and positioned me firmly in his lap before he stared into my face—and licked his lips.

“Delicious.” He kissed my nose. “That might’ve been a new record.”

I rolled my eyes but was still panting.

“So, you are my dirty girl,” he whispered in my ear, then followed the shell with his tongue and sent shocks of pleasure down my spine. “You like it when I play with you, when I make you come, don’t you, Stellina?”

I nodded.

“Say it.”

“Yes,” was all I could say because a second later, he pinched my overly sensitive nipple between the fingers of one hand and my clit with the other.

And I was back to panting.

“Now, brace yourself, baby,” he warned and lifted me up.

He pushed my skirt out of the way, then my panties to the side before he positioned himself at my entrance.

With one powerful thrust, he impaled me, filling me completely.

“Ah...yes,” I hissed through gritted teeth, the sensation of him inside me overwhelming and intoxicating at the same time. He held me tight against him. Our breaths mingled together.

It had been months, but as if our bodies still remembered, we started moving in perfect harmony.

Harder and faster, he slammed into me over and over again. My pleasure built and climbed higher and higher until I was teetering on the edge.

“Come for me, Sophie,” he demanded, his voice rough and commanding. He pinched my clit again—giving me the little bit of extra pressure I needed.

My body convulsed with wave after wave of ecstasy as my orgasm shattered me completely.

“Fuck, Sophie,” he groaned, his thrusts becoming erratic as he neared his own release. And with a final, deep stroke and a grunt, he came deep inside of me.

Bringing us full circle and making me whole.

He slung his arms around me, and I clung to him. My breath came in ragged gasps as I slowly came back down.

Gabe pressed tender kisses to my temple and cheeks, his love for me evident in every gentle touch.

“God, how I missed you, how I missed hearing the sound that you make and watching you come for me,” he whispered, staring down into my eyes and stroking my hair. “You’re my everything.”

The depth of emotion in his words left me breathless, my heart swelling with love for this amazing man.

Surrounded by his warmth and affection, and firmly satiated in post-orgasmic bliss, I knew without a doubt that no matter whatever challenges life had in store for us—I would never again leave his side.

“I love you so much, Sophie. I’d rather die than ever live without you again.”

He snapped his mouth shut, then his body beneath me tightened.

“Gabe,” I whispered, touched by his words mirroring my own thoughts but worried about his body’s reaction.

But then he pulled away slightly, and his eyes clouded with something that looked dangerously like the hard, emotionless stare of my blue-eyed devil.

What was going on?

He’d told me he loved me before. So, what exactly had tripped him up?

Me not saying it back? Me not telling him I loved him?

Had I told him?

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to... I just...” He hesitated, stumbling over his words—a novel occurrence and one that made my heart beat faster. “What?”

As if sensing my concern, he forced a smile and kissed my forehead. “Don’t worry about me, cara. Just know that I love you more than anything in this world.”

Right then, the private jet started its descent.

Gabe fastened my seatbelt, then helped me clean up before he fastened his.

But he avoided looking me in the eyes until the private jet landed smoothly in Verona.

He avoided my gaze still as he helped me into a sleek, black car—not an SUV this time—and he avoided my gaze as we headed downtown but not toward the family home where I expected.

Instead, we cruised through the bustling downtown streets, passing charming cafes and picturesque squares in silence until he stopped in front of a beautiful old bookstore.

“Where are we?” I asked, gazing at the ornate façade and intricate ironwork of the building through the windshield. Somehow even though not an exact match, it had the same feel to it as the bookstore in Dublin.

My bookstore in Dublin.

My chest tightened with longing. I’d forced myself to forget about my dream. And I couldn’t be happier to be by Gabe’s side. But building my very own business, having my own shop and standing on my own two feet—that dream, that desire was still in me.

He exited the car and held the door open for me.

“Gabe, what’s going on?”

“Come on, let’s go inside.” He took my hand and led me through the heavy, wooden doors.

Inside, the scent of old books and polished wood wrapped around me like a comforting blanket. Rows upon rows of shelves stretched out before me, each one filled with books. Old mixed with new.

Love stories, beautiful fantasy covers, leatherbound editions from past centuries.

Heaven for a book lover like me.

I looked at Gabe, my eyes wide with curiosity and suspicion. “Why are we here?”

He smiled gently, looking both proud and vulnerable at the same time. “This is yours if you want it. I want you to have a place of your own, where you run the show, be independent.”

My breath got stuck somewhere between my throat and my chest.

For real? He bought me a bookstore?

My heart swelled with love for this man who understood me so well.

But then he hesitated, and his expression shifted into a hard mask. “But if you prefer the bookstore in Ireland, I understand. I realize the way we started out, the way I dragged you back... If you want to live there, we will somehow make it work.”

I stared at him, speechless.

He was willing to sacrifice his own destiny for my happiness?

Tears clogged my throat, and wetness pooled in my eyes, and the vision of the shelves blurred.

This gorgeous man was willing to do whatever it took to have me by his side.

Love, so absolute, settled into my chest that I could hardly breathe.

And I knew, with absolute certainty, there was only one answer.

“Gabe,” I said softly, tears streaming down my cheeks, “thank you.”

He pressed his lips into a white slash and nodded, bracing for whatever I would say.

“Thank you for this, and for giving me the choice.” I hesitated, then smiled. “But you said it yourself. My place is by your side. I choose you, and I choose us. So, wherever you go, I go. And together, we’ll make it work, no matter where we are.”

He grabbed me so forcefully that I couldn't breathe for a moment, but then I hugged him back and inhaled his familiar scent, and as I hugged him tightly, I could feel the tension finally leave his body.

And mine.

Wherever the future would take us, we would be okay. Together.

We ended the embrace and went exploring.

The scent of old paper and leather filled the air as I ran my fingers over the spines of the books lining the shelves. The joy bubbling within me couldn't be contained any longer.

I turned to Gabe, my heart full of love and happiness deep within every ounce of my being. "Gabe, I love you."

I could see the impact those words had on him for a split second before he contained himself.

"Fuck," he chuckled, then scraped his hand through his hair. "If I'd known books have that effect on you, I'd have bought you some sooner."

I stepped up to him, cupped his face in my hands, looked into those soulful blue eyes that had captivated me from the beginning. And with my voice trembling with emotion, I said, "It's not the books, Gabe. It's you. You have that effect on me. I love you."

He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me closer. For the first time since we'd met, I saw a glimmer of tears in his eyes, accompanied by a joy so absolute it made me laugh in return.

Our love would be enough to face whatever challenges lay ahead.

And as we stood there, the warmth and strength of his embrace enveloping me like a protective cocoon, surrounded by the stories of countless lives lived and loves found, it was impossible not to believe that our love was destined to be just as powerful, just as enduring.

“Are you sure you will be happy?” he murmured, his breath tickling my ear.

“More than anything,” I replied, my heart pounding against my chest. “I can’t wait to be your wife and spend the rest of my life by your side.” I cupped his cheek. “Now I know you’ll always put my...our well-being and happiness before everything else.”

A soft smile played at the corners of his lips as he pressed them against my forehead, sealing the promise of a future together.

At that moment, surrounded by the comforting presence of books and the man I loved more than anything, all my doubts and fears vanished like wisps of fog chased away by the warmth of the sun, leaving only certainty and anticipation for our future.

I felt a sense of belonging and freedom I’d never experienced before.

No matter how much darkness and violence would threaten our lives, together, we would face it with courage and the power of our unwavering love.

And then the bell above the door rang and announced my first clients.

And my heart stopped.

CHAPTER FIFTY



I locked eyes with Craig Donnelly as my private jet began its descent through the clouds, bringing us back home to Calabria.

I was running out of time.

Donnelly wasn't showing a wink of emotion—and neither was I.

Staring at Craig, I could feel the tension between us like a thick fog.

We hadn't spoken for the last hour, and I didn't intend to break the silence.

Not this time.

This was a battle of wills—and if I had any hope of keeping a modicum of respect, I needed to stand my ground.

I'd done the first step by asking him, begging him to come to the wedding—for Sophie's sake, but I wouldn't grovel in front of my soon-to-be wife.

No fucking way.

I stole a glance at Sophie and her sisters, whose laughter filled the cabin with happiness—a stark contrast to the ice age between Donnelly and myself.

Sophie's cousin Fiona spoke animatedly, and the sound of Sophie's laughter warmed me right up.

Not as much as when she sighed in my arms or whispered, *"It's you. You have that effect on me. I love you."* into my ear,

but enough to keep me warmed up.

I sighed.

Fuck this. Her happiness was all that counted anyway.

And if Craig Donnelly needed me to grovel, I would do that, too.

I met his eyes with determination and broke the silence. “I’m sorry for the kidnapping and everything else.” My chest tightened.

Everything else included seducing Sophie, taking her virginity, and not protecting her from becoming pregnant. “But in all honesty, I’m also not.”

Donnelly arched an eyebrow, his expression unchanging.

“I can’t be sorry. Because I truly love her, more than you can imagine. More than I ever thought possible. I promise, her happiness is my top priority—for the rest of my life.”

“Really?” Craig challenged, his voice cold. He scoffed, then folded his arms. “You think being the wife of a fucking Italian gangster is what will make Sophie happy?”

Anger flared inside of me, a raging fire that threatened to swallow me whole.

I clenched my fists, feeling my muscles tensing and my heart pounding. Then I took a deep breath and exhaled longer than the inhale and forced myself to breathe through the fury until I gained back control and could detach from my feelings.

Keeping my outwardly calm composure—cost me a ton of effort.

And he didn’t buy it one second.

This was a test.

I knew it.

He knew it.

And the knowledge helped me to let go and relax.

I knew where he was coming from, and part of me could even empathize.

Fuck, what if our child was a little girl who looked just like Sophie? A little girl—a little angel—and what would I do if she grew up and fell for someone like me—or worse, an Irish mobster?

I shivered at the picture. Fuck me.

Then I shook my head and chuckled.

Karma is a bitch—wasn't that what people said?

Craig looked at me as if I was a lunatic—and from his perspective, it probably looked like that.

Which sobered me right up.

“Love doesn't always make sense,” I replied, my voice now low and controlled. “But ours is real, and it's powerful. And I'll do whatever it takes to keep her safe and happy.”

Craig studied me for a moment, his eyes locked with mine, unwavering.

I met his gaze head-on, refusing to back down. I needed him to see my resolve, my dedication to his daughter's happiness.

Even if it meant swallowing my pride, facing off against her own father, or letting him beat me to a pulp.

Again.

Donnelly glanced over at Sophie, who was still giggling with her sisters. He slumped back in his seat and turned his attention back to me.

“Fine,” he finally said, his voice heavy with resignation. “I haven't seen her this happy.” He looked at Sophie again. “This carefree, ever since she came back.”

He turned his narrowed gaze back at me. “I don't like you. And I will never forgive or forget about what happened.” He paused, narrowed his eyes even more, and a small, bitter smile played on his lips. “But punching you unconscious was a pretty good way to express my feelings.”

His eyes bore into mine, shimmering with determination and a challenge.

I swallowed hard, keeping my surging anger in check.

“Consider it a taste of what’s to come because the second she’s unhappy, I will kill you.”

I nodded, feeling the weight of his threat settle heavily in my chest.

I had no doubt he meant every single word. I would have to make damn sure to keep Sophie happy—not that I wouldn’t do that anyway.

But the added incentive didn’t hurt.

Craig’s gaze shifted away from me, a sudden weariness etching the lines on his face. “Talking about potential threats to my daughter’s happiness, I heard about the shoot-down in her hospital room with Salvatore Moretti.”

His words sent a jolt of surprise through me. But I schooled my features and played it close to the vest.

Salvatore Moretti’s death at the hands of Fausto Falcone had caused some waves—despite us trying to control the narrative of what had happened.

I’d tried—unsuccessfully—to establish contact with the Morettis, as well. However, my priority these days had been Sophie’s well-being. “What have you heard?”

Craig chuckled. “Just the play-by-play of Fausto Falcone killing Salvatore Moretti.” He stared at me, gauging my reaction.

I didn’t give him the pleasure. “And?”

“And now the Moretti clan is gunning for retribution.”

“Fausto is dead.”

Craig smiled and cocked his head. “As if that would solve the issue. You crazy Italians and your crazy sense of family and honor.”

Now it was my time to give him an evil lopsided grin. “You’re part of the family now.”

He groaned. “Not something to joke about.” Then he turned serious. “There are also some rumors floating around about your brother Alessandro being Salvatore Moretti’s firstborn—and hence the rightful heir to the Moretti family.”

I continued my stare. “Seems like you’re becoming well-versed in Italian-Mafia internal politics—or gossip.”

He nodded. “Trust me. Much more than I’d like.”

Because of Sophie. He didn’t need to say it, but having Sophie as my wife would mean a shift of power.

An alliance between the Falcone family and the Donnelly’s.

An alliance between the Italian and Irish Mafia.

Unheard of until today.

“Alessandro is a Falcone—unless he decides otherwise,” I said.

“And when he decides he’s a Moretti?” Craig muttered, his voice low. He leaned in, fixating me with his stare. “There will be a power struggle for the next head of the Moretti family erupting.” He sighed and shook his head. “So, it’s either straight-up retribution, or they’re gunning for his head. Either way, Alessandro better watch his back. There’s a war coming, and he won’t be able to hide.” His gaze hardened. “Not even in Malta.”

I blinked, my mind racing as I processed the information. How did Craig know where Alessandro was? But more importantly, what would this mean for my brother, and for our family?

I couldn’t leave him alone right now.

Never leave your wingman. “Thanks for the perfect summary of our current situation,” I muttered, my thoughts already spinning with plans and contingencies.

Whatever lay ahead, I wouldn’t, couldn’t let him face it alone. We were a family, a united front.

But I couldn’t shake Donnelly’s words—Alessandro was in danger, and I had to act.

But first, I needed to make sure our wedding tomorrow would happen without any interruptions—from her family or the Morettis, it didn't matter; I needed her by my side, married, our union unbreakable, so I could focus on what I had to do next.

“Hey,” Sophie called out softly, her eyes on me. “You okay?”

I forced a smile, not wanting her to worry about anything. “Yeah.”

She nodded, but I could see by the line between her eyebrows she wasn't buying it.

It took another ten minutes spent in silence until the jet had landed and taxied to our parking position, where Cristo was already waiting for us with an escort, not unlike the first time I touched down on Calabrian soil.

I unfastened my seatbelt, grabbed Sophie, dragged her to the leading vehicle, then helped her into the passenger seat and took the wheel. “Get the family home safe,” I ordered Cristo before I took off without a look back.

I could feel Sophie's eyes on me the whole time. She knew something was bothering me; she'd just waited until I was ready to talk.

I squeezed her hand, then kissed her palm.

“What's going on?” she asked, her green eyes searching mine for the truth.

“I can't wait to be married,” I lied, but only partly.

She chuckled. “Me, too, but that's not what's bothering you. Talk to me. Was it something my dad said?”

I shook my head. “Our honeymoon. What if we changed our plans? Instead of Aruba, why don't we go to Malta?”

“Malta?” She raised an eyebrow, curiosity dancing in her gaze.

“Beautiful beaches, rich history...” I trailed off, not wanting to reveal my ulterior motive. “It's a perfect romantic getaway. And besides—”

“Alessio is there, and you’re worrying about him.” Sophie bit her lip. “Am I close?”

I should’ve known my woman was smart, and I should start trusting her.

“He might be in danger.”

She mulled over the idea and then nodded. “Alright, let’s do it. Malta it is. Under one condition.”

I narrowed my eyes. “We’re not even married, and you’re already bargaining with me?”

She chuckled. “I’m not bargaining. I’m demanding, now that I’m your queen.”

Her sassiness made me grin. “Tell me your condition, and I’ll tell you mine.”

“Fiona is coming with us.”

I needed a couple of seconds until it sunk in. “You want your cousin Fiona to come with us on our honeymoon?”

She nodded.

“Is this some kind of threesome situation you want to tell me about?”

She laughed. “No, future husband. This is a kind of ‘my cousin and best friend is mildly depressed and/or traumatized and I want to keep an eye on her’ situation. If I wanted a threesome, Alessandro would do.”

Fuck me.

I knew she was a menace—a sassy brat who would probably lead me to an early grave.

But fuck, it was probably worth it.

I grinned. And I could always punish her later.

“No comment?” She grinned, as well. “What’s your condition then?”

I exhaled. I needed some time to mull things over. Was she attracted to my brother? Did she secretly want a threesome?

“Come on, I was joking. What’s your condition?”

“I’ll show you later tonight, but it involves you following my every command and trusting me one hundred percent. Do you trust me?”

“Not fair.”

“If I can put up with your sassy cousin during our honeymoon, and your secret desires of having my brother fuck you, you can put yourself in my hands for one night.”

She stared at me. “Has this something to do with all those naughty promises you made and never kept?”

“Promises? What promises?”

“Like, you will take me over your knee?”

“Haven’t I kept that one?”

She cocked her head, then nodded.

“Are we talking about the promise of me taking your beautiful ass?”

Her sharp inhale was too enticing to let go. “Is this what we’re talking about, my beautiful soon-to-be-wife?”

I could see an endearing pink tinge on her cheeks.

“Eyes on me,” I growled.

The command had her head snap back and her eyes lock with mine.

Such a delightful reaction. She would make a perfect sexual submissive. “You’re mine for the rest of our lives. We will explore, and we will find out what we like, together. So, are you game?”

She nodded.

“Great,” I replied, relief flooding through me.

I knew I was the luckiest bastard on Earth just to have found her and have her be mine, but to have her willing and open to explore and share our sexual desires with each other had me rock hard and ready.

“And tomorrow after the wedding, we’ll leave immediately.”

And I could keep an eye on Alessio while still celebrating our honeymoon.

A win-win as long as we played our cards right—and the Moretti’s didn’t fuck everything up.

“There will be Mafia business, won’t there?” Sophie asked, her voice laced with vulnerability.

“There will always be Mafia business,” I whispered. “Do you want out?”

She shook her head.

My wife, my woman.

Strong. Fearless. Mine.

This wedding, this marriage, our love, would be my top priority—but so would the safety of my family.

Always.

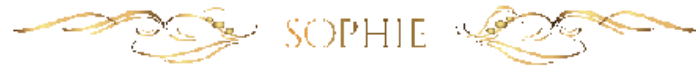
“Good,” I said, and caught her hand again. My heart swelled with love for her, and when she leaned in, I pressed a tender kiss against her forehead while keeping my eyes on the road.

The promise of our life together danced in the air between us, sweet and intoxicating.

I exhaled, steeling myself for the challenges ahead.

But no matter what came our way, I’d go to any lengths to protect those I loved.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE



When we finally got everyone settled, Gabe led me to our room and immediately buried me beneath him on the bed.

His lips pressed against mine, forcefully, demanding entrance.

I surrendered willingly, tangled my hands in his hair and pulled him closer.

But right before he lost his balance and I could feel his full weight, he lay down beside me, grabbed my hips, and pulled me on top of him and thrust up between my thighs.

I panted. “More.”

The burning fire he ignited within me was a living, breathing thing.

And then I remembered his promise. Hesitancy doused some of that flaming fire.

He immediately froze. “What’s wrong? Is it the baby?”

I stared down at him. “No, the baby is fine.”

“Then what is it? You hesitated.”

“I’m just... What exactly did you mean when you said complete trust?”

He smiled. Then pushed me aside, got up, and pulled me upright, as well.

“Let me show you,” he whispered in my ear, then bit my earlobe.

Hard.

I groaned.

He marched me to the closet—the one with the secret door—and opened it.

My breath hitched.

My thoughts drifted back to when Gabe had led me through the secret door in the closet, months ago.

When I thought for sure he would die. “Tell me how to activate it.”

“The hanger on the right?” Gabe murmured against my ear, his breath hot and heavy. “Turn it up 45 degrees, and the door unlocks.” He showed me, and the door slid open.

“Where are you taking me?”

He pushed me forward. “Now that, Stellina, is part of the trust thing.”

His words sent shivers down my spine, an odd mixture of excitement and fear coiling in my belly.

He led me through the safe room.

Where was he taking me? And why couldn't we just have sex in our bedroom?

But he had other plans.

He guided me along a dark corridor before opening a heavy door on the left.

I looked at him, focused on his smoldering gaze, those deep blue eyes filled with a blend of love and dominance.

Oh boy.

Then he urged me into the room and closed the door behind us.

Surrounded by complete darkness, I pressed my back against his front, my heart pounding and my breath shallow. I didn't like the dark, had avoided it these past couple of months.

He leaned in close, his warm breath tickling my ear as he whispered, “This is the playroom. My parents thought us kids didn’t know about it, but with three adolescent boys—there’s not much you can hide.”

With a flick of a switch, the room was bathed in soft, golden lighting, illuminating an array of black furniture, a bed, a chair, a giant TV on the back wall, and a...leather sling?

Glass shelves lined the walls and showcased an array of BDSM equipment that I’d only ever seen in movies—well, one movie to be exact.

Heat rose in my cheeks as my gaze wandered over cuffs, dildos, and nipple clamps laid out like jewelry.

Holy shit.

Intricate ropes, whips, and various restraints glistened under the soft glow, their presence both intimidating and captivating. It felt high class and expensive, and I couldn’t help but feel both curious and afraid.

“Wow.” I breathed out, my heart pounding with a mix of fear and curiosity.

As my eyes met Gabe’s again, he was close, stroking my arm in a tender gesture of support as if he’d sensed my apprehension. “We’re playing it completely safe for the baby...and you,” he assured me, his eyes locked on mine.

I could see the love and devotion shimmering in them.

He led me to the full-body leather sling.

I bit my lip. It resembled a hammock chair, if not for the leather, chains, and D-rings.

I shook with both worry and anticipation when he turned me to face him.

“Stay still.”

His command, the dominance in his voice, stirred something primal within me—a need to submit to him, a need to see how far he would take this.

He undressed me, his fingers slowly unbuttoning my blouse and slipping it off my shoulders, revealing my heavy breasts beneath my bra.

His touch was sensual and deliberate, then he turned me around, and pressed himself against my back, his cock against my ass.

“So fucking beautiful.”

He skimmed his fingertips over my skin in a sensual caress, sending shivers down my spine and my heartbeat into a frenzy.

He growled, deep in his throat, when he traced the lines of my healed scars, reminding me of his protectiveness, the love, and care with which he'd treated me right from the very beginning.

Was all of this his way of erasing the painful memories they held?

Was this his attempt to free me from the residual trauma, by making me trust him completely?

He snapped my bra open, cupped my heavy breasts before he let his hands glide and linger over my small baby belly and farther down.

He went down on his knees and took my skirt and panties with him, then kissed the upper curve of my asscheeks. “So fucking beautiful, it hurts,” he murmured against my skin, his voice delicious and dark.

Wetness pooled between my legs.

Once fully undressed, Gabe led me to the swing and helped me onto it. The leather was warmer than I'd expected and cradled my body much more comfortably, too.

His eyes slid over me, from my mouth, to my breasts, to between my legs.

A thrill of excitement coursed through me when he hummed low, then slowly unbuttoned his black shirt, his eyes devouring my body as if I was lying there as some kind of sacrificial offering, exposed and completely vulnerable.

For him.

Gabe unbuttoned his cuffs, then shucked his shirt.

The sight of his strong, muscular body, his tattooed chest, and chiseled abs, made me grab the chains and sit up.

I needed to touch him.

The full force of his dark eyes hit me. “Do not move.”

I froze, my heart did a double beat, and my breathing became erratic when I slowly lay back down.

My gaze locked with his. His dominance was like a physical force between us.

Holy shit.

For a second, my stomach tightened. This was too much; I couldn't do this.

He must've felt my panic because he was immediately by my side.

Gone was the dominance, the hard edge; instead, the weight of his gaze settled on mine, his eyes full of intensity and kindness as he assessed my reactions.

“Tell me what you're feeling.” His voice was like a velvet caress. He cupped my face with his hands, and I could see everything I needed in the tenderness of his gaze—the love, the determination, and the promise that he would do everything in his power to ensure my happiness and safety.

“Exposed...vulnerable, frightened,” I admitted, my voice barely a whisper. “But...safe.” My heart slowed in my chest, and the feeling of fear slowly subsided.

“Good,” he murmured, his breath warm on my face. “I want you to feel safe with me, always.” He gave me a kiss on the lips.

“Here's the rules,” he said, then kissed me again. “If it gets to be too much, if you need to pause, you say ‘yellow’, and if you need to stop, the safe word is ‘red’.”

“Yellow and red.”

“Good girl. You will use them if you need them, understood?”

I nodded.

“I need to hear you say it, Mia Stellina.”

“Yes.”

“Good,” he murmured, a small smile playing on his lips.

He let go of my face, then moved to a shelf behind me.

I strained my ears, waited.

When he came back around, the silk ties in his hands caught my attention, and my stomach twisted with a mixture of anticipation and fear.

Could I really do this? Could I fully submit to him?

Could I trust him completely?

“Eyes on me.”

My gaze snapped up and met his. “I’ll leave your hands free... this time,” he said, then gripped my hips and shifted my body until my butt rested on the edge of the sling.

Uff. My heart raced with anticipation.

He lifted my left leg, tied the silk restraint around my ankle, then lifted it up and fastened it to a D-ring above. He did the same with my right, and when he was finished, my legs were bent and suspended in the air, as if I were lying in a gyno chair, leaving me completely open and exposed.

My heart pounded in my chest, anticipation and trepidation warring within me.

“Are we green?” Gabe asked while he slid his hand up and down my inner thighs.

Memories of my captivity—before Gabe took me—flooded my mind. The cold cage, the lash of the whip, the utter helplessness I’d felt.

Fear threatened to suffocate me.

Without warning, Gabe flicked his finger against my clit, snapping my attention away from the past and into the present.

“Are we green?”

I nodded.

“What was that thought?” Gabe asked, concern etched on his handsome face.

“Just a memory.”

“Of what?”

“The cage.”

The storm brewing in his eyes was all I needed to completely calm back down. “I’m good.”

He held my gaze. “Use your safe words, Stellina.”

I nodded. “I will.”

He pulled a flogger out of the back pocket of his slacks.

I hissed.

Bound to the sling, I couldn’t move.

My heart raced. Fear clawed its way back into my chest.

Gabe’s dark eyes held mine. “Relax.” His voice was filled with warmth and understanding but also steel. “Follow my breath.”

He inhaled and exhaled visibly, deeply.

Once, twice.

I followed his rhythm, focused on the rise and fall of his chest and abdomen.

A hint of a smile played upon his lips when I relaxed and lay back.

“Remember,” he said, lifting the flogger and letting the strands run along my thigh. “This is about trust. About showing you that there’s pleasure in surrendering control. About showing you how much I like to be in control. And it doesn’t necessarily mean inflicting pain.”

There was a tender intensity in his eyes. “I promise I will never hurt you...too much.” His dark promise, paired with an evil half-grin, sent an unexpected jolt of arousal through me. My skin tingled, and wetness pooled between my legs.

Holy shit, yes, please, yes.

He waited, took in my reaction, then his grin deepened.

I nodded, swallowed, and relaxed. Surrendered completely.

He would protect me. He would take care of me.

He loved me.

And I him.

I let my eyes fall closed.

Gabe began to caress me with the soft strands of the flogger, starting at my breasts and trailing down my body. The sensation was unlike anything I'd experienced before, both intimate and exhilarating.

With each delicate touch, the tension within me began to dissipate, replaced by a growing desire for his skilled hands, his body against mine.

"See?" he whispered, his breath hot against my ear. "There's so much freedom in giving up control."

He continued to swirl the strands over my legs, starting with light flicks drawing ever closer to my exposed center. My arousal grew, and so did the force of the strands hitting my skin.

Enticing and arousing but never painful.

When the strands of the flogger finally brushed against my clit and settled there, I gasped, a zing of pleasure shooting through me.

I strained up against the strands.

More, I needed more.

"Ah, there you are," Gabe murmured, his voice rich with satisfaction. He moved the flogger over my folds, tiny flicks, sending sparks through my body, and then lower, over my exposed ass.

Each touch sent shivers up my spine.

"Does this feel good?" he whispered, his voice husky with desire.

“Yes.”

“Good girl. Let go. Trust me to take care of you.”

As he continued to tease and tantalize me with the flogger, everything else melted away.

I let go completely and felt a newfound sense of freedom.

I was no longer a victim.

Nothing could touch me.

And as long as Gabe held the reins, I knew I could surrender myself completely.

To him.

His fingers gently slipped between my folds.

Spread me open.

His breath hit me a split second before he teased my clit gently with his tongue.

A soft sigh escaped my lips as he lapped at the sensitive bundle of nerves.

“Mmm,” he murmured against my skin.

The reverberations of his hum sent tiny shockwaves against my sensitive flesh.

“So fucking delicious.”

Pride and pleasure surged through me.

I moaned.

Then his fingers left my folds, only to come back a second later...with something bigger, harder.

My stomach tightened, and uncertainty flashed through me.

“Trust me,” he whispered.

And I did.

With every fiber of my being, I trusted him.

He inserted—what could only be the handle of the flogger—inside me, filling me with a delicious pressure.

My breath hitched as he began to expertly fuck me with it, the smooth wood sliding in and out of me in perfect juxtaposition to the rhythmic lapping and sucking of his tongue on my clit.

“Yes.”

The combination of sensations was overwhelming, and I found myself lost in a whirlwind of pleasure, each stroke pushing me closer and closer to the edge.

I moaned, feeling the familiar tightening in my core.

“Come for me,” he urged, his voice strained. “Now.”

He quickened the movements of both his tongue and lips and the flogger handle, driving me closer and closer to the edge.

I surrendered to it completely, trusted Gabe to guide me through the pleasure that threatened to consume me until, finally, I shattered.

Wave after wave crashed over me, and as my climax washed over me, I cried out his name, clinging to the chains beside me.

And in that moment, as my body trembled with ecstasy, I suddenly felt a newfound sense of power over my own fears and insecurities.

I suddenly understood the true meaning of trust.

It wasn't just about relinquishing control; it was about allowing someone to see the most vulnerable parts of yourself, about showing them the most vulnerable parts of yourself and knowing, without a speck of doubt, they would cherish them.

And as Gabe continued to caress me, I opened my eyes.

Our gazes locked—his dark eyes, those stormy depths so full of love.

Full of burning desire.

Full of promises about our future and our shared journey into this uncharted territory.

Gabe never wavered and continued to hold my gaze with unwavering love and trust.

And in that moment, I knew—the trust and intimacy we had forged in this dimly lit room was his present to me.

His way to give me back my freedom.

Until Gabe straightened and, with a wicked grin said, “And now onto the good part.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO



“The good part?” The way Sophie looked at me, satiated and drowsy, like a cat taking a sunbath, but also hesitant of what to expect next, had me in a delightful mood.

She was a beautiful sub.

Should've known.

Little brats made the best subs...once they trusted you.

“You know.” I moved around her, opened a drawer, took out the lube and a small anal vibrator. “What we talked about before...” I returned to stand between her legs.

What a gorgeous view of her glistening folds, ripe for the taking.

Time to make good on my promise and test her boundaries and her trust, a little bit more.

I snapped open the cap and watched her eyes bulge.

I took my time and enjoyed her increased breathing while I coated my finger.

Anticipation was half the fun.

And half the high.

Then I looked back at her with a slightly menacing smile. “The promised part.”

Her breath hitched when I touched her cute rosebud. I circled it slowly, swirled my finger around, awakening her nerve

endings there.

The juices of her arousal mixed in with the lube. “Are you ready?”

She shook her head.

“Just one finger—I’ll go as slow as you need me to—remember how you liked it.”

She leaned back, relaxed.

Such a beautiful sight.

I slipped my finger inside.

She moaned.

“See. Such a good girl.” I pulled out, added some lube, then slipped back in, deeper this time. “So fucking beautiful.”

She relaxed even more.

Seeing her trust me so completely felt amazing. “Look how wonderfully open you are for me.”

She moaned again.

I added a second finger, encountered minimal resistance.

“So beautiful.”

In and out. I circled the nerve endings around her beautiful rosebud, then thrust back in.

Over and over.

“God, look at you, taking it so beautifully.”

I moved my other hand to her clit, coated my fingers in her own wetness, and spread it. “So wet.” I pinched her clit, and she tilted her hips in response and let loose a guttural scream.

My little minx was a screamer.

I repeated the motion: swirl, then pinch, matching the rhythm of my fingers deep in her ass.

She panted.

“Such a good girl, so hot.”

I spread my fingers in her ass slightly.

She pushed back against the pressure, then relaxed even further.

“You’re ready,” I said, my voice husky with anticipation.

Her moan only stoked the fire, and my cock jerked.

“This might hurt a little. Tell me your safe words again.”

Her voice came out a little rough. “Yellow and red.”

“Good, girl. Now focus on your breathing. Deep breaths, and don’t tense up.”

She nodded again.

“Stellina?”

“Yes.”

“Good girl.”

I turned on the vibrator, lubed it up, then nudged at her entrance.

“Inhale, little sub.” I waited until she followed my command.
“Now exhale.”

I breached her with the vibrator, but only just.

She stiffened, opened her eyes, and stared at me.

“Relax, little sub.”

It took a while. I waited.

Then I could finally feel her relax, and I pushed the vibrator forward, then stopped again.

Inch by fucking inch.

“Fucking gorgeous,” I added some lube, then drove in forward again.

“Sophie?”

“Yes?”

“What color?”

She swallowed. “Green.”

“See how beautifully you can take it. All the way, right, my little sub?”

She nodded, and I rubbed the pad of my thumb over her clit, faster and faster, while pushing it all the way inside until it settled and only the flared base was still visible.

Then I pulled again. Thrusting it in and out.

Her panting became erratic.

I let it sit, turned up the vibration to full speed, then grabbed the chains, pulled the sling towards me, lined up, and thrust into her beautiful pussy.

I could feel her clench around my dick, accompanied by the vibrations in her ass.

I pulled back and plunged in again.

The perfect angle.

The perfect sub.

My spine tingled.

Her muscles contracted. And just like that, she exploded around me with a scream.

I gripped her hips, used the swing’s motion to drive deeper into her, all the way in.

Once, twice.

There.

I buried myself in her, then came with a low grunt.

I stayed buried inside of her for a couple more breaths before I slowly retreated, turned off the vibrator, then buried myself back inside and just stayed there, basking in the velvety heat.

“Next time, it will be me in your ass. Would you like that, little girl?”

She sighed and relaxed, and just when she started to nod, I froze as the TV turned on, and I stared into Alessio’s oversized face staring directly back at me.

“What the fuck?”

“Hey, bro. Uh.”

Sophie squealed, and Alessio’s eyes flicked from me farther down, probably at Sophie’s legs—because that was the only thing visible of her beyond the back support of the sling.

At least, that’s what I hoped.

An evil glimmer entered Alessio’s eyes. “Fuck, Gabe, I’m sorry. I had Cristo patch me through when I couldn’t reach you. I just didn’t think he despised you enough to interrupt your playtime.”

I growled.

Fucking little brothers. “Well then, see you.”

Alessio nodded, then an evil glimmer entered his eyes. “I just thought there was an emergency, seeing as”—he looked down—“you called me ten times within the last three hours and left a shit ton of voice messages, which I haven’t yet listened to.”

“Well,” I growled, “pick up your phone, next time, asshole.”

“Yeah.” He scratched his neck, then turned around and looked behind him, and I could see a glimpse of a completely shattered window and—were those bullet holes in the wall over his left shoulder?

“I encountered some unexpected trouble. That’s why I was unavailable. So, what was it you needed?” he asked as if this was a normal video call and I wasn’t buck naked with my cock still buried deep inside my beautiful soon-to-be-wife.

I looked down at Sophie, who was trying to make herself smaller and cover her tits with her hands, while still bound to the sling.

I squeezed her hip and gave her a wink before I focused back on my irritating brother. “Nothing. Let’s talk tomorrow.”

As it seemed, I was too late anyway. Trouble had found him, and it would only get worse.

“Yes, let’s. And maybe—if Sophie is game—we could have ourselves some fun while you’re here, for old time’s sake,” Alessandro said and raised a single eyebrow.

I growled again. “Fuck off. And abso-fucking-lutely not. This is my wife you’re talking about. Show some respect, tonto.”

Alessio grinned, saluted, then cut the feed.

And I looked into Sophie’s grinning face. “If I’m game?”

I sighed.

“For old times’ sake?”

I hung my head.

“What haven’t you told me, husband?”

I slipped out, leaned down between her spread legs, kissed her belly, between her breasts, then her sweet lips, then grinned at her. “So, so much, wife.”

And then I moved back, untied her legs, and carried her into the en-suite bathroom and into the shower. Happier than I’d ever been.

I couldn’t wait for tomorrow. Couldn’t wait to make her mine.

Forever.



I hope you had as much fun reading Gabe and Sophie’s story as I had writing it, and if you now think—but Kat, you didn’t give us the wedding, you’re right—lucky for you, I’m mean but not that mean.

You can get the whole experience of Sophie and Gabe’s wedding in the bonus epilogue here.

You won’t believe the outrageous and very sexy gift Gabe has in store for Sophie and personally makes her wear. And just thinking about the deal the two of them strike makes me giddy. And if you’re wondering how exactly Fiona ends up in Malta to meet Alessandro—it’s all Gabe’s and Sophie’s doing. So, head on over and read about their shenanigans in the [bonus epilogue](#).

Find the bonus by going to:

<https://links.katbammer.com/rr1-bonus>

The series continues with Alessandro and Fiona's story in [Tainted Desire](#).