



THE  
**DOONS**  
FORBIDDEN  
**OBSESSION**

AVA COX

# **THE DON'S FORBIDDEN OBSESSION**

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AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE MAFIA  
ROMANCE

ITALIAN MAFIA SERIES

BOOK 2

# AVA COX



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Epilogue

Epilogue

Also by Ava Cox

# LUCA

I SAT ALONE IN THE DIMLY LIT LIVING ROOM, A GLASS OF whiskey in my hand; a bitter token of an even more bitter existence. I twirled the glass slowly in my palm as I pondered what this life would look like now that I was Don of the family.

Me...

A crime boss.

I've always had my parents at the helm of the family. Now, they'd decided to retire and leave me in charge. If I was being honest with myself, I was a little worried.

One question kept plaguing me.

Do I have what it takes to run the family?

The story of my parents was a crazy one, to say the least. Victor and Charlotte. Mom and Dad. Twenty-two years had passed since their union, and man, that union was one of the biggest doozies in crime family history.

My father, Victor Esposito, was the boss of the notorious Bonanno crime family, known for its ruthless tactics and widespread control over the illicit trades in our great city. My mother, Charlotte, on the other hand, was the Princess of the equally powerful Colombos. Her father was big-time. He'd done things that most only dreamed of by basically having the entire NYPD in his back pocket. To say my father wanted a piece of that pie would be an understatement.

He wanted the whole damn thing.

And he was going to do anything and everything it took to get it.

It wasn't like my grandpa was going to hand it over to him. The tension between our families had always been thick with violence and bloodshed.

But somehow, against all odds, my parents' love brought the warring families to a truce. Their relationship forged an alliance, uniting the Bonannos and Colombos in a way no one could have predicted. Especially considering the Colombos were responsible for my other grandfather's death.

Hell, *I* still couldn't even fully grasp how such a union had worked, and I was the product of it. How could they set all of the bullshit aside?

How could they fall for one another in the first place?

The story of their love was actually kind of a twisted one.

Dad had kidnapped Mom. Pretty messed up, right?

It was an act that should have fueled her hatred toward him. Something that should have done nothing but sealed their fate. And yet, as time went on, it was the exact opposite. Something shifted between them. They started to see each other as more than enemies, and in the end, love blossomed.

Talk about the most unlikely of places.

Amid their unconventional romance, there was still the mob.

There was still the crime.

Honestly, I witnessed things no child should ever see. Murder, bloodshed, and the dark underbelly of the criminal world were my everyday reality. It was a constant reminder that my parents' love wasn't the only unconventional thing.

We all lived a privileged life.

There's a price for everything.

Murder. Bloodshed, drugs, dirty cops, underground casinos...

That was ours.

It wasn't *all* crazy, though.

Despite the chaos and danger that surrounded them, and us, my parents managed to build a big, beautiful, fruitful life together. They have retired from their criminal activities, passing the torch onto me, their oldest child.

Now, they were living the dream.

Somewhere out of the bitter cold of New York. Somewhere tropical.

Now, they were sipping Mai-Tais and enjoying the fruits of their labor.

As I sat there, swirling the amber liquid in my glass, shifting until I was comfortable in my leather armchair. I couldn't help but wonder how they achieved their "happily ever after." How had they moved beyond their troubled past, the violence and betrayal, to find solace and peace in each other?

It kind of felt like I was stuck in it all.

But I supposed that's a testament to the complexity of human emotions and the power of love. Perhaps, in their case, love could overcome even the darkest of circumstances.

We could all be so lucky.

Lucky or not, I tried to keep hope. If anything, their story served as a constant reminder that life is unpredictable, and sometimes, the most extraordinary things can arise from the most unlikely beginnings.

I took a sip of my whiskey, contemplating the legacy my parents had left behind. The weight of their past and the responsibility of our family's future now rested on my shoulders. It was my turn to navigate the unpredictable waters of the criminal world.

I just hoped I was good enough.

Hope is a funny thing, though.



I also hoped that, like my parents, I would find my version of happiness in the middle of all the chaos and uncertainty. These thoughts usually only plagued me when I was drunk, though.

Normally, I wasn't too keen on the idea of settling down.

I liked the notches on my bedpost. I collected them like I used to collect baseball cards.

A loud burst rang out across the room as my younger siblings, Dimitri and Viola, barged into the room. Their struts were arrogant; cocky, even. A little too ballsy for second-ranked mobsters in my opinion. They walked toward me like they owned the place. Dimitri was in front. I smirked. Since puberty, he'd been this massive dude with shoulders as wide as a doorway. On all accounts, the guy was intimidating, but he still didn't scare me.

Not by a long shot.

Then there was Viola, petite and shorter than any of us. She almost disappeared behind him. If they were a little more in sync as they walked, I would have thought Dimitri was alone.

A small chuckle escaped as I placed the rim of the glass back to my lips. Viola had our mom's face copied and pasted onto hers. She was conventionally beautiful, but almost as annoying as they came.

Together, almost in unison, they plopped onto the couch next to me, invading my solo drinking session. Their demeanor was too comfortable.

"Why didn't we get an invite to this party?" Viola sneered. I could hear the sarcasm dripping from her tongue.

I scoffed as she pointed judgmentally at the array of booze cluttering the coffee table, teasing me about my little self-celebration. I chuckled again, and that was when I realized I was probably way more buzzed than I had originally thought.

Normally I would have been pissed at her casting judgment on me.

But at the moment, all I could feel was amusement.

And that in itself was an oddity, because tonight had been rough, which is why I was drinking in the first place.

It was nights like tonight that made me feel almost defeated.

I just couldn't wrap my head around how anyone could find a happily ever after while still being neck-deep in the mob.

I had just had a front-row seat to another man's demise. It was starting to mess with me.

How could anyone be happy seeing that day in and day out?

Lately, my dreams had haunted me.

Dreams that show all my victim's faces. Dreams where I'm the fucking monster. I'm the one causing the pain and suffering.

Dreams that caused me to wake up in a cold sweat.

The last thing I needed was for my siblings to catch wind of the chaos brewing in my head: the internal monologue of helplessness.

It was pathetic, and they didn't need the ammo.

So, I shrugged off their judgmental looks. Even though Dimitri — who's a lot more perceptive than he looks — tried to dig deeper.

"What's eating at you, bro?" he asked, his voice laced with worry.

I shook my head, trying to brush off his question with a dismissive wave of my hand. I didn't need him prying too deeply and opening Pandora's box here. "Nah, nothing," I slurred, the alcohol doing its thing.

Feeling like a wobbly mess even as I sat, I figured it was time to hit the sack. So, I yawned dramatically so the nimrods would get the hint, and clumsily got up from the couch. I struggled to find my balance and staggered a bit.

My coordination decided to take a complete leave of absence, leaving me high and dry.

My feet pulled away from my body, and I faceplanted right on the floor.

That got a good laugh out of the asshole twins.

Ignoring their offers to help, I managed to hoist myself back up, although still swaying like a palm tree in a hurricane.

“Goodnight...” I muttered, walking to the nearest bedroom. “I’ll be jus’ fine...”

The room spun around me like some jacked-up carnival ride on steroids. I stumbled toward the bedroom, hoping that the booze-induced fog would knock out any lingering thoughts and nightmares. Because there was no escaping the sleep that was coming.

As I collapsed onto my bed, wishing for the sandman to grant me a temporary escape from my invading memories from earlier that night. I groaned into my pillow, the scent of whiskey permeating the air. I couldn’t help but wonder if there was a way out of this messed-up life. A way to break free from the cycle of violence and darkness that had plagued our family for as long as I could remember. But for now, all I could do was drown my sorrows in the sweet embrace of alcohol and pray that sleep would grant me some sort of reprieve — even just temporary — from the demons that tormented my mind.

## ANNABELLE

I PLOPPED DOWN IN MY BLACK PLASTIC DESK CHAIR, UTTERLY drained, as the stacks of paperwork mocked me. I knew that this cubicle housed a plethora of secrets that I hadn't uncovered yet. It had to.

The case I was knee-deep in seemed to be running circles around me, though. No matter how much coffee I chugged, it never seemed like enough.

The caffeine wasn't cutting it anymore.

There weren't enough hours in the day.

A yawn stretched my tired face, reminding me that sleep was long overdue. But damn it, I could feel it in my bones: I was onto something big. The thought of catching some z's while a breakthrough might be within reach made me hesitate.

Just as I wrestled with the decision of powering through or surrendering to exhaustion, my boss's elephantine footsteps thundered down the corridor. His booming voice shattered the silence, and my head snapped up like a startled deer.

"Annabelle!" he bellowed, his presence demanding attention. I locked eyes with him, his expression a mix of concern and authority. He was a tough cookie, but he knew we needed to take care of ourselves.

"Get some sleep!" he ordered, the weight of his words sinking in. "It's one o'clock in the morning!"

I gazed over my cubicle toward the windows. It was pitch dark outside; no wonder I was so tired. I sighed and nodded,

reluctantly acknowledging his wisdom. Deep down, I knew he was right. I couldn't afford to let fatigue cloud my judgment or slow the progress I'd made, whether or not I was on the brink of something.

This case was my baby, and I needed to be firing on all cylinders to crack it wide open.

With a heavy sigh, I pushed back from my desk, leaving the paper tsunami behind — for now. The weight of the investigation still pressed on my shoulders, but I had to trust that a few hours of shuteye would do wonders for my focus and determination.

As I trudged toward the break room, I couldn't shake the itch in the back of my mind. I was so close! The case had its hooks in me, urging me to keep pushing and digging. I was going to find out what the hell was going on in this city, and why no one seemed able to shut down the underground crime. I would find out why the streets ran rampant with drugs and illegal dealings, and how the hell that was just ok.

But for now, I had to surrender to the call of sleep. I had to believe in the process and my gut instinct. So, with a shrug and a “what the hell” attitude, I decided to take my boss's advice. A well-rested mind would only serve me better in my pursuit of justice.



I DRAGGED myself through the front door, bone tired from the grueling day on the case. All I wanted was to crash onto my bed and disappear into dreamland, but as luck would have it, my dad, Dominic, was wide awake. At two o'clock in the freaking morning. On his day off. It was bizarre seeing him up and about when the entire world was supposed to be asleep, but it was probably hard to change your schedule when you were used to working overnights.

I squinted at him through heavy, tired eyes, taking in his rounded figure.

His white hair showed his age, but the clean-shaven baby face gave him a deceptively youthful appearance. If it wasn't for the mane of snow, people might mistake him for a man half his age.

“What're you doing up, Dad?” I asked, my voice laced with a mix of curiosity and exhaustion. Why would anyone willingly choose to be awake at this ungodly hour?

He shrugged, a nonchalant expression on his face. “Can't sleep, baby girl,” he replied.

He had been working at the fish market overnights, getting the extra fish off the boats before the market the next day. Anything really, to keep him busy after Mom left.

I let out a tired chuckle, running a hand through my disheveled hair. “Tell me about it,” I muttered. “Sometimes I wish I could stay up forever, you know? Cases just keep getting tougher.”

A soft sigh escaped his lips, and he looked at me with concern. “You know I'm proud of you...” he started, and I rolled my eyes. I knew where this was going. “But you're too good for all this police work, Annabelle,” he said, his voice filled with fatherly sincerity that made me want to gag. “It's taking a toll on you and your health, and for what? Pennies!”

“Dad...” I said, warningly. “We've been over this.”

He rolled his eyes and with a mocking tone, “It's my passion.”

I laughed.

“Yeah, yeah.” He sighed and waved me on as he approached the fridge. “I just know you could be rich with those smarts of yours, but I'm in your corner, no matter what.”

I couldn't help but laugh again, even though my yawn cut it short. Dad always had a way of seeing the best in me, even when I doubted myself. He believed in me when I struggled to believe in myself. And man-oh-man, did he make it known that he hated police work. But I knew it was only because he loved me and wanted more for me than what he had.

Even working at the factory all those years, my dad made more than I did as a police officer.

I think that was why he was so upset.

And of course, he was worried I'd get shot.

Leaning over, I planted a tired kiss on his cheek. "I love you, Dad," I murmured, my voice muffled by exhaustion. "Goodnight."

With a nod and a smile, I felt his eyes on me as I stumbled toward my bedroom, ready to collapse onto my bed. I knew he'd always be on my side, even if he couldn't understand my love for the job. I felt lucky to have him as my rock, a constant presence in a world that sometimes felt too chaotic to handle. A world that was far eviler than most realized.

I mean, really. How could New York be so ok having the mob around?

As sleep started to claim me, his words echoed in my mind, reminding me that I was never alone.

## LUCA

I LEANED AGAINST THE BAR, NURSING MY DRINK, SURROUNDED by two women who could've passed as clones. Both blondes, they rocked the same shade of fiery red lipstick. They looked like they'd walked straight out of a magazine, but they also seemed about as deep as a kiddie pool. I was convinced their personalities were as basic as it got.

The noise of the lounge and the clinking of glasses filled the air. The scents of whiskey and perfume mingled, creating an almost intoxicating atmosphere. There were two great loves in my life: women and booze.

And at the moment, I had both in my company and in my grasp.

The women, vapid as they came, were stunning. They had long, luscious blonde hair that cascaded down their shoulders and perfectly framed their flawless faces. Their figure-hugging dresses accentuated their curves, leaving nothing to the imagination.

I had approached them with confidence, closing in on my prey. I was only originally going to try for one of them... but the longer I talked to them, the more I figured I'd challenge myself.

When their eyes met mine, I could see a flicker of intrigue in their gazes. It was game on. I turned on the charm that had won over countless hearts and made my way toward them with a confident and arrogant stride I knew women drooled over.



I could already envision both of them in my bed and their laughter echoing through the room.

I felt the sexual energy crackle between us. “So, what brings you two beautiful ladies to this part of town?” The women looked like upper-east-siders. Why the hell were they out in Hunts Point?

Part of me wished I could remember their names, but the other part didn’t give a damn. One of them leaned in closely, her lips tugging into a smile. “We were hoping for a little excitement.”

I wanted to laugh.

These ladies had no idea what excitement they could be in for with a man like me.

I leaned in closer, my voice dropping to a low, seductive tone. “Well, tonight won’t be lacking in excitement if we keep drinking.”

One of the girl’s fingers traced the rim of her glass, her eyes locking with mine with an intensity I didn’t quite expect. “Oh really? What did you have in mind?”

A mischievous grin spread on my lips. “How about a night we won’t forget? Maybe something that involves the three of us.”

What the hell, I figured. The worst they could do was storm off, pissed at such a notion. If that happened, I’d just laugh and continue drinking.

No worse for wear.

“Careful what you wish for,” the other girl said. “We’re not easily tamed.”

I leaned back and smirked. “I think I might be up for the challenge.”

The flirtatious banter continued as the night wore on. We clinked glasses, sipped drinks, and let desire continue to stir.

I played the playboy, turning on the charm and spitting out cheesy pickup lines like a pro. It was all part of the game, a

way to keep my mind off the guilt and heaviness that weighed me down. I was on the hunt for a night of passion, hoping it would drown out the memories and make me feel alive again.

But damn, the more I talked to these girls, the more I realized they were as empty as a pauper's purse. It was like talking to mannequins, their minds stuck on fashion trends and celebrity gossip. I wasn't sure I could go through with it.

Part of me needed something real; something with substance. But I knew I didn't want that, either. Because that would mean getting attached, and if I've learned anything in my line of work, it's that getting attached is not a good move.

I had to keep reminding myself that one-night stands were better.

Taking a swig of my drink, I tried to hide my frustration. I didn't know what I expected. I wanted to add two notches, not choose a partner.

These encounters were starting to feel like a cheap band-aid, a temporary fix for a much deeper wound. I craved authenticity and connection, something that would truly make me forget about how fucked up my life was.

How fucked up this world was.

At that moment, it hit me like a ton of bricks. No amount of one-night stands or meaningless encounters could fill the void. I couldn't keep running from the consequences of my actions. It was time to face the music and confront the darkness that haunted me.

Letting out a heavy sigh, I excused myself from the mind-numbing conversation and bid the blonde bimbos farewell. They rolled their eyes but barely seemed to notice. I had no sooner reached the front door of the bar when I heard their intense laughter thunder out. Tossing a glance over my shoulder, I saw they were already on to the next guy.

I shook my head, an exasperated laugh escaping.

Maybe I was only supposed to be a notch on their bedpost, too.

It was a neverending cycle of shallowness, and I was sick of it.

Day in and day out of meaningless sex and conversation.

I couldn't do it anymore.

I left the bar behind and walked the streets alone, the weight of my choices hanging over me like a dark cloud. It was time for a change. Maybe a redemption story. I needed something more meaningful — something that would make me feel alive —not a rush of adrenaline like in my everyday life. I wanted something to make me feel alive in a genuine way. It was time to find my path, one that didn't rely on empty encounters and fleeting pleasures.

One that wasn't focused on screwing my way out of the guilt I felt in this line of work.

## ANNABELLE

I DRAGGED MY TIRED BODY BACK TO WORK AFTER MANAGING to snag a measly four hours of sleep. I was still groggy as hell, but compared to before, I felt like the freakin' Energizer bunny. Coffee in hand, I plopped down on my uncomfortable desk chair. I felt like the stack of paperwork had gotten bigger since I left, and I'd already been drowning in a mountain of case files. I was working through those damn things like it was my second job, but it didn't even look like I'd made a dent.

And then, Davis, my partner in crime, strolled in looking bright and shiny like a brand-spankin' new toy.

I rolled my eyes.

The guy never looked one ounce disheveled.

He made me look like a heaping mess almost always.

Salt and pepper hair, sharp jawline, and just the right amount of stubble. He wore a suit that fit him so well that he looked like he'd stepped right out of a magazine for distinguished men. I swear that guy had some secret potion for getting enough sleep and staying unfazed by the crap we dealt with. It annoyed the hell out of me.

I yanked my hair into a ponytail and grumbled. I was wearing yoga pants and a sweatshirt. It wasn't a patrol day, so I figured I'd at least be comfortable while we did paperwork. But here this guy is, looking like a model.

"Already at it?" Davis quipped, a grin on his face as he peeked over my cubicle. "Or did you even bother going

home?” He leaned further over, his eyes scanning my outfit.

I shot him a look that could've melted steel. “Captain practically kicked me out and ordered me to get some shuteye,” I grumbled. “Managed to squeeze in a *few* hours of sleep, thank you very much.”

He shrugged, a mix of caution and exhaustion in his eyes. “I’ve told you before, Anna. Don’t go all-in on this. Those big shots always find a way to slip through the cracks.”

I felt my blood boiling. How could he be so jaded? This was no ordinary case. This was the freaking mob, and we were on the verge of exposing their dirty little secrets. All of them. It was going to be a game-changer.

“These are scumbags!” I fired back, my voice filled with determination. “We’re about to uncover the top men responsible for a slew of messed-up stuff. We can’t just let ‘em walk away.”

He sighed, looking defeated. “I’ve been down this road before, Anna,” he muttered, his voice barely above a whisper as he leaned back over the cubicle. I could tell he was trying to rein me in. I knew he was trying to quiet me because there was only one thing Davis spent more time on than looking in the mirror: Worrying about what other people thought of him. “These guys have connections, and they know how to work the system. They *always* find a way out.”

My irritation level shot off the charts. I might have already cracked the case wide open if my partner gave enough of a shit to put in some effort. Instead, he seemed all too content with accepting defeat before we even started the battle. But I wasn’t backing down. It wasn’t in my nature.

It wasn’t in my blood.

This was my chance to make an impact, to bring some justice.

If it weren’t for these mobsters, our city would be mostly safe. There wouldn’t be rampant drugs. There wouldn’t be people getting knocked over because they owed money to the wrong sorts because of some underground gambling.

“I’m not throwing in the towel, Davis,” I declared, standing up, fists balled, my voice filled with stubborn determination. “We’re going after these scumbags. And we’ll see who walks away in the end.”

With that, I turned my attention back to the neverending pile of case files, vowing to shut out everyone’s cynicism, especially his.

Clearing my throat, I sat back down and shuffled through the papers.

I would figure this out if it was the last thing I did.

I had a fire burning inside, fueled by the desire to make a difference. The mob might think they’re untouchable, but they were about to get a reality check they never saw coming.

**LUCA**

I COULDN'T SHAKE THE HEAVINESS THAT WEIGHED ON ME. I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. The fact that my hands were perpetually stained with blood haunted me. Being the boss was a whole different ballgame. It wasn't just about enforcing the rules or carrying out the killings anymore; it was about making the decisions that ended lives. It was a level of responsibility that felt like an anchor.

I had just given the order to kill a man, and I felt like my entire being was crumbling on top of itself.

The room spun.

My breath hitched.

I grabbed another bottle of scotch before leaving my club.

I couldn't be there.

Not after what I'd just done.

I needed escape.

I needed solace.

Before I realized where I was going, I found myself at The Flask.

It was an old vintage bar that was nothing but familiar.

I sighed heavily.

I hadn't been here in years.

I hadn't finished the bottle I had in my hand as I wandered the streets, but something was pulling me toward the old bar. I

grimaced. I was a fucking alcoholic.

The air was thick with cigar smoke, creating a hazy atmosphere that brought me some sort of twisted comfort. I didn't usually drink at bars my family didn't own, but the fact that this wasn't my bar gave it a newfound appeal.

This spot, in general, held a special place in my heart.

To be honest... it just made me *feel* better.

This was the place where my old man first took me for a drink, back when I was just a young buck trying to figure out the world. I wasn't even of legal drinking age. Hell, I was barely that now. But Tony, the bartender, let it slide.

He'd known my old man for years.

And his father before him.

It seemed to be a place for my dad to escape, too.

I didn't understand it back then.

Why would we spend money going somewhere when we could get free drinks and be in the comfort of our home turf?

We didn't have to worry about anyone starting shit.

I understood now.

Sometimes, it was nice to get away from all the bullshit and unwind.

Not that I didn't know The Flask.

I just didn't come here anywhere near what I used to — and none of my men ever came here. Neither did my brother or sister.

I could be alone here, except for the few drunks at the other end of the bar.

“Hey, Tony...” I slurred, feeling the weight of the scotch bottle I'd brought with me.

“You can't bring that bottle in here, Luca...” he said sternly.



I nodded. “One of you gentlemen interested in a 50-year-old scotch?” I drunkenly asked the men at the other end of the bar.

Every one of them perked their ears and stood almost immediately. “I’ll give it to ya if you get the hell out of here.”

Tony glared daggers at me.

“I’ll make it up to ya, Tony.”

I held out my bottle to the three men, and with a nod and a friendly jerk, they took it and piled out the door.

You could usually count on alcoholics wanting free booze.

“You’d better pay their tabs,” Tony sighed, wiping the bar with a blue rag.

I laughed. “I’m good for it,” I said, digging into my breast pocket for a cigar.

“You can’t smoke that in here.”

“What the fuck, Tony,” I asked. “What *can* I do in here?”

“You can drink.”

I grumbled and stuffed the cigar and cutter back into my jacket. “Whatever my dad has in his private stash.”

He nodded, and before I knew it, I was already on my third drink and completely lost in my thoughts again.

One thing I liked about Tony was that he was generally a good judge of when to talk and when not to.

Right now wasn’t a good time to talk.

I was perfectly prepared to scare off or bribe every single customer he had while I was there.

I just wanted to be alone.

The sound of wood slamming against wood pulled my attention, and my head jerked to find the commotion.

My eyes widened.

A particularly pissed-off brunette had stormed in.

“Easy on the door!” Tony complained.

I laughed, and damn, did I look at her.

She wore yoga pants and a sweatshirt, but you could tell there was plenty underneath worth looking at. Even though she was covered up, I just knew she had a body to behold.

I’m talking curves in all the right places. Full breasts, wide hips, and thighs that could make a grown man weak in the knees. Naturally, my jaw nearly hit the floor as I watched her strut toward the bartender. Girl had confidence; I’d give her that. But she mostly just looked pissed.

She leaned over the bar, her eyes piercing Tony. “Double whiskey,” she said without sparing me a glance. She was all business.

Focused on nothing but getting her drink. That demanded my respect.

She wasn’t here for thrills. She wasn’t here to get laid.

She was here for a drink after what looked like — if her expression was any indication — a shit show of a day.

This woman had my attention.

“Hey, Tony,” I called out to the bartender. “Give her a taste of my private stash, will ya?”

He nodded and reached for my dad’s whiskey. He poured a healthy glass and slid it her way, none of it spilling as she tightly gripped the glass.

Finally, after slinging it back in one go, she turned her gaze in my direction, and a faint smile curved her lips.

When she looked at me, her bright orbs almost took more hold of me than the liquor. It was like she knew something. Like she understood the darkness that followed me around. Like she had the same sort of darkness following her around.

As she took a sip, I couldn’t help but feel a magnetic pull between us. Maybe it was the fact that she was just as comfortable in this part of town as I was; or maybe it was that she seemed plagued by something pretty heavy, too.

Whatever it was, at that moment, in the middle of the dimly lit bar, there was a spark.

Of something.

I pulled the cigar out of my breast pocket and lit it, tossing a knowing glance at Tony. He rolled his eyes, and I smirked. “Mind if I smoke?” I asked the woman, and she shook her head.

“Do whatever you want,” she sighed, breaking her glance.

She looked down at her hands and then back up at Tony. “Get her another glass,” I said to Tony, and he looked at me hesitantly.

“Luca, this is twenty-thousand-dollar whiskey.”

I didn’t care.

I had the money to burn.

Clearly.

My old man wouldn’t have bought something so stupid if we didn’t have the money.

I shrugged. “Give her another glass,” I said again, but sternly as I let the flame burn the end of my cigar before taking a few initial puffs.

Tony took a deep breath and poured her another glass, his hand shaking slightly before shooting me a warning expression. “If anyone else comes in here, you have to put that out...”

I chuckled.

With the smoke hanging in the air and the weight of my sins on my shoulders, I couldn’t help but stare at her.

I raised my glass, toasting —silently —to the possibility of finding some solace in her presence, even if just for a little while. And as our eyes locked again, I knew this encounter would be anything but ordinary.

This might be a night for the books.

## ANNABELLE

I SAT AT THE VINTAGE BAR I'D HAPPENED UPON, SAVORING THE smooth, velvety whiskey that the only other person in the bar had generously given to me from his private stash. The taste was... out of this world. It was far beyond anything I could afford. I detected notes of aged wood and a hint of chocolate, the flavors dancing on my palate. My dad had taught me about liquor — whiskey, more specifically — from a young age, but this was on a whole new level.

“This is amazing. The wood and chocolate tones... the smoothness...” I said. “Thank you. It’s the best drink I’ve ever had.”

The man seemed impressed by my appreciation for the drink, and we found ourselves reveling in the shared experiences of our fathers teaching us about alcohol.

Before we were even legally able to have it.

The guy was handsome.

I'd give him that.

He had dark hair and piercing blue eyes that almost seemed to captivate me. Although he was sitting, I could tell he had a tall and confident presence. He was definitely a man who could be seen as intimidating. There was a level of mystery to him. He seemed... like a suspense ride tied up in a bow.

Gorgeous on the outside, but possibly a little dangerous.

I wanted to choke myself out for being so attracted to him.

He had just the right amount of stubble on his face, enough to look a little rugged, but not enough to appear ragged. Almost like he hadn't bothered shaving for a couple of days.

I couldn't help but look him up and down as secretively as possible. He wore nice clothes. They didn't scream this neighborhood.

They screamed money — as did his twenty-thousand-dollar bottle of whiskey.

Who in the hell could spend that much money on alcohol?

I thought that was only in movies.

I didn't think that was real life.

His white button-down shirt and slacks gave him a polished appearance, even though his tie was loosened, and his sleeves were rolled up. It was clear by his slight dishevelment and the intense scent of alcohol coming from him, that he'd had just about as good of a day as I'd had. I think that was why I was so intrigued.

Someone to share my pity party with.

Work sucked.

I liked Davis, but he had a way about him that just cut me to the core.

It was like he purposely knocked me down every chance he got; and every time I got closer to figuring something out on the case, something else happened that made me start over from scratch.

I wasn't stupid.

I knew the mob owned a large part of the city. People knew people affiliated with the mob. It wasn't a secret.

But if I could track down the leaders? And find the proof?

I could save this city!

Why was no one helping me? Why was everyone so jaded? Why was everyone so comfortable just turning a blind eye?

As the handsome stranger and I continued to sip our whiskey and sit in comfortable silence, I couldn't help but feel a slight connection.

It was nice not to be alone when I'd had a bad day.

Most times, I was a brooding mess when I went into bars, which was why I almost didn't come in... but the vintage look of the bar and the fact that I'd always passed it and said, "I'll go in one day," got the best of me.

I figured worst case, I'd get a drink and go home.

This wasn't quite what I expected.

I didn't expect to find only one person in the bar and have that person be just as big of a mess as I was.

It was nice to be validated.

Like someone shared an understanding of the challenges life seemed to always have. It was as if, for a brief moment, we were able to forget our troubles and find solace in each other's company.

He had no idea what was wrong with me.

I had no idea what was wrong with him.

We seemed to get the fact that the other needed some sort of escape.

The dimly lit bar and the scent of cigar smoke created an intimate ambiance, drawing us together. He'd long put out his cigar as we continued to sip our drinks and relax.

There was no pressure for conversation.

No pressure to even look at one another.

It was strange. I'd never just sat with a stranger and felt comfortable.

As the handsome man and I continued sipping our whiskey, he leaned in a little closer, his eyes fixed on me with curiosity. "So, what's your name?" His voice was smooth and captivating, but it caught me off-guard.

We'd just been sitting there.

“Anna,” I said. “Short for Annabelle.”

“Well, *Annabelle*,” he said, with a certain sexy emphasis on my full name. “What do you do for a living because you look like you’ve had just as shitty of a day as I have.”

I hesitated. I didn’t know why, but I felt a need to keep my guard up. So, I told a little white lie. “Oh, you know,” I replied casually, flashing a playful smile. “Just some boring office job. Nothing too exciting.” No need for him to know the nitty-gritty of my life, right?

He was just a man in a bar, and we were just casually conversing over a shared drink.

He inched even closer, and I could feel the magnetic pull between us growing. Deep down, I knew something was going to happen between us. All I wanted was something uncomplicated, without any emotional baggage or strings attached.

I wanted something easy because nothing else in my life was easy right now.

There was no need for him to know much real about me because all I wanted was to keep this encounter light.

I wanted it to be a simple scene in the story of my life.

A fleeting moment of simple connection and pleasure.

I didn’t want him to delve into my struggles, and I didn’t want to delve into his.

I didn’t need the drama.

He didn’t look like he did, either.

So, as we moved closer, and the tension between us tightened, I let go.

I lunged forward with more tenacity than I’d ever had before in my life and lingered so close to his lips that I could feel his breath dance across my own.

I gave in to the moment.

We weren’t going to have deep conversations.

We weren't going to reveal any of our deepest, darkest secrets.

We were just going to be two souls seeking a brief escape from reality.



## LUCA

MAN, THIS WOMAN WAS SOMETHING ELSE. SHE KNEW HER whiskey, she even seemed into the hockey game on TV, and damn, she was gorgeous. Most beautiful women I had come across were nothing like this.

The bar started to get a bit hazy, a sign that I had had a few too many drinks. But hey, she had to be in the same boat. She'd matched me drink for drink. And then, it happened. She leaned in close, her hand on my thigh.

A jolt cascaded through my body.

It was a surge of energy I had never felt.

And I knew it was an invitation I wouldn't be able to resist.

Without a second thought, I dove in, pulling her closer so that she lifted from her barstool and sat in my lap.

Our lips met with more passion than I could dream.

They intertwined with fervor as our tongues danced in sync.

And at that moment, it was like Tony and The Flask didn't exist.

We were lost in the heat of the moment, consumed by nothing but desire. When we pulled apart, we were breathless, and I could see that same hunger in her eyes that stirred within me. Her face was flushed, and I was sure mine was, too. "Your

place?” she gasped in a whisper that sent a shiver down my spine. Her voice was filled with impatient anticipation.

I couldn't help but smirk, feeling the heat rise within me.

“I have something even better,” I said, a mischievous smile spreading across my face. I turned to Tony, the bartender, and pulled out a wad of cash. “For all the trouble,” I said, slamming down the bills.

He smiled. “Pleasure is mine, sir.”

I grinned. Sir?

I guess money could buy most people's kindness.

Tony was no exception.

Grabbing Anna by the hand, I led her outside, our fingers interlacing and fueled by a mix of alcohol and attraction.

I led her to the fire escape and tossed a reassuring smile over my shoulder. It was a secret path to another world. She seemed hesitant at first.

“Stranger danger?” I laughed. “I promise, it's just an apartment above the bar that I used to come to as a teenager with friends. I didn't want to go through the bar because I didn't think you wanted Tony to know our business.”

I took her hand and guided her up the steps as a playful giggle escaped her lips.

Step by step, we climbed higher, our bodies fueled by excitement and anticipation. The air was getting crisp and chilly as the sun lowered beyond the horizon, and I took full advantage of that, holding her close as goosebumps formed over her flesh.

Heat from the other brushed against our skin, adding to the intoxicating rush that enveloped us. When we reached the top, I grappled with the bottom of the window and tugged.

My dad owned this place.

I knew no one else would be there.

I climbed through the window without hesitation, and she followed closely behind.

Our bodies crashed together in a fiery embrace as soon as our feet touched the hardwood floor of the empty living room. Lips met, tongues battled, and the room became a canvas for our desires. Time seemed to stand still as we surrendered ourselves to the intoxicating dance of passion, clothes ripping away bit by bit.

When she kissed me, there was no softness.

No gentleness.

She was going straight for the kill. Her soft lips were harsh.

She tugged at tufts of my hair as our mouths collided and we wrestled toward the kitchen. The heat of longing engulfed my being as I pressed her firmly against the marble counter.

I fight to lift her immediately and spread her legs.

I fight the urge to end this so soon.

“Oh, God,” she moaned against my lips, sending another tingle down my spine.

This is what I’d been yearning for all night. Ever since the first moment I laid eyes on her in the bar.

She pulled me closer, and I bent down to kiss her again. Slowly this time.

I was going to savor this.

My hands smoothed down the length of her torso, down to her thighs. Carefully, I spread her legs, my hands gliding over the only bit of clothing she had left on.

Her dampened underwear.

She hissed as soon as my fingertips brushed along her clothed slit, and I smiled against her lips.

“Take these off,” I whispered seductively.

She moaned lightly and hoisted herself onto the countertop, pulling down her panties almost immediately.

Fueled all over again, I planted another firm kiss on her lips, her legs wrapping around me.

Grinning, I kissed down her chest, sucking at the flesh of her stomach.

She whimpered and squeezed her thighs around me.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

I pulled away and looked at her curiously. “What?”

Had I not given her my name?

“Oh,” I chuckled. “Luca.” I kissed her neck.

She wrapped her arms around me. I could feel the pulse in her throat pound against my lips. Pulling back, I look at her for a moment. “Are you nervous?”

“I don’t usually do this,” she admitted.

“I do.” And with that, I kissed her mouth again.

I grasped her hips roughly, pulled her to the edge of the countertop, and spread her legs heatedly. I could feel the warmth of her center radiate against my pulsating member, heating me to the core.

I groaned and took another half step so that the tip of my rod was positioned at her moistened entrance. She held my shoulders, perching and quivering above me. I wanted her so badly that it was almost unbearable.

I held her hips as I inched into her.

All I could feel was... her.

Her walls gripped and massaged my length as I rolled my hips and buried myself to the hilt. The warm, soothing wetness of her cavern was extraordinary. I’d been with a lot of women... but the electricity I felt when I was completely inside of her was unlike anything I’d ever felt.

We locked eyes, her hands gripping the back of my neck.

I’d never felt anyone so soft and tight.

Game on.

Or so I thought.

She was painstakingly unhurried, halting every urge I had to thrust upward and speed it up.

She torturously slowed the roll of her hips, and I growled.

I was painfully aware of the heat slowly engulfing my girth. My member pulsed and the moans she elicited were dangerous as she gripped my neck even tighter, launching herself off the countertop and into my arms.

My hands slid up her back as she eased back down, using my shoulders to propel her body up and down on my entire length.

“Damn,” I breathed heatedly in her ear.

Her arms wrapped around my neck as she hung onto me tightly. Her breasts swayed in front of me as I slid down the cabinet to the floor with her in tow. The view at eye level was perfect, and I had nothing but an incredible urge to bury my face between her breasts.

I laid suckling kisses across them, paying extra attention to her nipples.

She squealed and I smiled into them, fueled even further.

My eyes moved from her chest to her mouth. It was open, her head back. She was panting.

The noises coming from her.

The way her eyes closed in such a way that her long lashes rested on her flesh...

The small crinkle on her forehead.

It was all so much that it launched me into another universe.

Her body was beautiful, but it wasn't flawless.

My fingers spread out over her side, grazing over a small scar. It looked strangely like a bullet wound. I furrowed my brows for a brief moment. She bit my neck passionately and I growled, an animalistic fury awakening.

I held tightly to her hips, thrusting upward. Her head fell back again in ecstasy.

My fingers traveled over her pelvis, guiding her movements as I slammed into her. Her head tipped back, exposing her long, slender neck.

She moaned harder as the pace quickened. She was starting to buck her hips uncontrollably.

Wildly.

Sweat glistened between us as our bodies fractioned together.

My hand moved from her navel up her stomach and back down. I was reveling in her body. In her skin.

I wanted to feel her.

I wanted more of her.

## ANNABELLE

WE WERE IN AN EMPTY APARTMENT. IT WAS BEAUTIFUL, though. The wood adornment of trim around the windows and the fireplace, which was set snugly in the living room, was immaculate.

I couldn't believe what I was doing.

I wasn't usually the type to have sex with a random stranger, but I had also never been particularly connected to someone like this. He exuded sex appeal and an energy that I wanted to match.

It was clear he was having a shitty day.

I was having a shitty day.

And we were both a little intoxicated.

Why couldn't I have fun?

Why couldn't I escape reality and enjoy a good-looking stranger?

His name was Luca.

I liked that name.

I could tell he was Italian just by looking at him, but his name was a dead giveaway.

I was still naked as I stared out the window. It was dark. We had been together most of the afternoon and into the night.

*I need to get my clothes.*

*I need to get some rest and get back to work.*

Those were my inner musings, but as soon as his strong hands firmly took hold of my hips from behind, I found myself melting in his touch all over again. He turned me to face him, and he immediately kissed me chastely before effortlessly hoisting me back into the air.

I was amazed by his strength. I wasn't particularly heavy, but the ease with which he picked me up was appealing and startling.

Instinctively, I wrapped my legs around his waist and tightened my arms around his neck again. With every movement we made, I could feel his stiff rod pressing against me.

I guess we were on to the next round.

He pressed my back to the window I had just been staring out of. The window we'd climbed in through. I looked down at his glistening body. His torso rippled with muscles. His pecs and abdomen were firm and cut to perfection.

I brought my hands down to stroke against his unyielding abs, trembling with excitement all over again.

How could someone be so sexy?

I couldn't help but wonder if he was a personal trainer.

Allowing me to continue my perusal of his body for a moment longer, he grinned. I bit my lip and looked back up into his eyes, my damp entrance rubbing on the tip of his steel beam.

My eyes rolled back, and I began to pant heavily. "Now," I urged.

A noise escaped from his throat. It was guttural. Low.

Animalistic.

He clutched my waist tightly with one hand, the other presumably guiding himself to my waiting center.

I felt his muscles tense as he lowered me down onto him slowly. Pressure built as he worked his thick girth into me. I whimpered.



I wasn't sure how many times we'd had sex, but I still wasn't quite used to how thick and rigid he was.

He stretched my entrance taut.

Luca sighed airily as he buried himself in my depths. My body stiffened, and I wailed in excitement. My fingernails dug grooves into his skin as I raked them down his chest.

His hand reached up and caressed my cheek, pulling me into another kiss as his hips began to roll. The cool glass against my back chilled me, but his hot body pressing me into it was enough to warm me.

I didn't even care if someone could somehow see us from outside.

I didn't care how exposed I was.

The only thing I cared about was feeling him.

“So good,” he cracked, his voice hoarse.

I moaned.

I wanted him to enjoy my body. I wanted him to be satisfied and pleased with it.

No strings or not, I wanted him to crave it and be just as addicted to my physical being as I was to his.



I WOKE up to the sun shining in my eyes, signaling that it was morning and I had to get out of Dodge. As sexy as Luca was, I didn't want any strings.

It was fun.

But that was all it was.

And it's all it could be.

Slowly, I maneuvered out of the tangle of muscled limbs and soft sheets, careful not to disturb the guy who had made my night more than memorable.

*Gotta find my clothes.*

*Gotta get out.*

It was strange really, that the only furniture in the place was in a back bedroom. I didn't even realize that until our fourth or fifth round. I was frustrated that I'd fallen asleep. I had meant to leave hours ago.

As I climbed out of bed and tiptoed around the room, I spotted some items in the hallway.

*Shirt, check.*

*Pants, check.*

*Bra? Check*

*Where the hell are my panties?*

Finally catching a glimpse of them in the kitchen, I sighed with relief.

Time to get dressed and bolt.

As I sneaked out of the apartment — through the window we had climbed in the day before — I couldn't help but take a last craning glance into the bedroom at the slumbering man I'd spent the night with. He looked peaceful, with a contented smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

I sighed, almost dreamily, but then, realizing I had no time to dwell on the intimate moments we had shared, shook my head, and sauntered onto the fire escape.

Duty called.

I bolted through the city streets, my feet pounding with intensity. I was in the same yoga pants and hoodie from the day before. My hair was a mess. I could only hope no one would notice how disheveled I was.

Dodging pedestrians and narrowly avoiding collisions with douchebag cab drivers, I panted. I still had six blocks to go.

Sweat trickled down my forehead and adrenaline drummed in my veins. Today was already not my lucky day, and I knew Captain would be pissed at me for being late.



WITH RAGGED BREATH, I made my way to my desk on the fifth floor. With any luck, I could sneak in and get right to work. But today was not my lucky day.

There he stood.

Captain.

His arms crossed, and a scowl plastered across his face.

His face was red. Jaw clenched.

The man looked like a ticking time bomb. I knew I was about to get my ass handed to me.

I sighed and approached him cautiously. His piercing gaze was locked onto me, and I knew by the intensity of his stare that he was ready to lash out.

I slumped my shoulders and down at the floor as I continued my approach. I felt more and more invaded with every step like he was peeking into my soul.

I was trying to dredge up any type of excuse that I possibly could.

Anything but the truth.

Anything but telling him I'd slept with a random man from a random bar in the middle of a shitty neighborhood.

"Betrami!" he bellowed, his voice cutting through the noise of the office building. "You missed the damn debriefing!"

I could feel everyone's eyes on me as I winced at the volume of his voice.

This is not how I envisioned starting my day.

"Yeah, I'm sorry," I murmured. "I got caught in the damn traffic. It was like a zombie apocalypse out there."

But he wasn't in the mood for my excuses. His frustration simmered beneath the surface as he leaned in close. "How

long have you lived in New York?”

I sighed. “My entire life.”

“Yeah,” he shot. “You know traffic is that way every day. Get your ass here on time!”

“Sorry, Captain,” I whispered faintly.

Apologizing was not my forte.

“What’s with you?” he asked, his brow raising. “I usually can’t kick you out of this building, and now you’re late for a debrief and making excuses—” he took a deep breath and contorted his face in disgust, “—smelling like a distillery.”

I shrugged and he shook his head, frustrated.

“Listen up, Betrami,” he grumbled. “Some big shot got himself killed last night, and the whole city wants answers. So, who gets to give them their answers?”

“Us,” I sighed.

“You and Davis are on it.”

I groaned inwardly. My progress on the underground crime front was being pushed to the back burner.

Did he not give a damn about all the work I’d put into this?

There were plenty of other detectives who could work the case. Most of them didn’t have an assignment. Why me? I was in the middle of something big.

I was only hours away.

I balled my fists and took a deep, frustrated breath. I didn’t want to say something I would regret, but he needed to know I wasn’t happy.

” Captain,” I protested, desperation seeping into my voice, “I’ve been making real headway on my case. I can’t just drop everything now!”

His hardened gaze silenced me immediately. “This is your priority, Betrami,” he replied firmly.

I knew when he made up his mind that that was it.

It didn't mean I wasn't going to push back.

"I understand that this is a priority, but," I continued to protest, my voice tinged with frustration, "I've been getting close. Real close! We're about to expose the leaders of the mafia, and you want me to drop everything and focus on one murder? What about all the murders the mob causes every day?"

"I know you don't have political leaders breathing down your neck, but I do, Betrami," he growled. "They want answers, and I need my best. If you have a problem with that, then maybe you aren't what I thought you were."

I nodded begrudgingly, swallowing the rest of my objections. His words echoed in my mind, a constant reminder of the uphill battle I was always on.

Women weren't taken as seriously.

I had to work twice as hard as the best-working male detective.

If it was one of them arguing, I'm sure their reputation wouldn't be in question. But mine was.

If I kept pushing it, I knew what followed wouldn't be good for me.

I had to suck it up.

As much as I didn't want to pause my case, I knew that this was my priority now.

I had no choice.

"Now, go find Davis and get to work." He dismissed me with a wave of his hand. "This case is high-profile, and we can't afford any screw-ups. You're the best we've got, and I need results. You *will* bring this person to justice."

I sighed, realizing I was defeated.

He held out a folder and reluctantly, I took it.

I skimmed through the details as I made my way to my cubicle. My mind couldn't help but wander back to the tangled

web of corruption I had been unraveling. I wanted to take everyone involved down.

I wanted to work on the bigger picture.

One murder couldn't amount to all the murders the mob caused.

No matter how influential or rich the bastard who died was.

One did not equal thousands.

Davis sauntered over, a knowing smirk on his face. "Looks like we're on the new murder case, huh? Buckle up for the dream team!"

I rolled my eyes, handing him a copy of the file. "Dream team or not, I'm pretty pissed we're putting the underground crime case on hold."

He sighed, patting my shoulder as he sat on my desk.

"We were so close."

He shrugged. "Who knows if we were? Even if we found the leaders, there's no guaranteeing they're going to go down."

I shook my head. "If we had concrete proof, nothing could stop us."

"They have connections, Anna."

I shook my head again. "Doesn't matter. If we find all of them and expose them, no one can just brush it under the rug."

"I get it, I do. But sometimes, we have to play by the rules," he said. "Besides, this murder case might lead us to even bigger fish in the criminal pond. Who knows? We might stumble upon something that ties it all together."

I sighed.

He wasn't wrong.

It *could* be connected.

Influential men dying was either something highly organized or something highly unorganized. Either it was part

of an assassination, or it was a simple, petty, criminal wanting money or fame.

Time would tell which it was.

“Mark my words, Davis, I’m taking the bastards down.”

He chuckled and nodded. “I’m sure you will, Anna.”

With a newfound determination, and hope that it did tie together somehow, I delved headfirst into the case file.

As hours passed, the details of the murder became clearer.

He had his watch on him.

He had money in his pockets.

He had jewelry on his hands and wrists.

This wasn’t a theft.

Was this revenge?

An assassination?

I pushed away from my desk and threw my pen at Davis.

“Let’s go to the crime scene,” I said firmly.

Nodding, he stood.

Little did I know that this murder investigation would take us down a path filled with twists, betrayals, and dangers that would push me to the brink.

## LUCA

I WAS CHILLING AT THE BAR IN ONE OF MY CLUBS, STILL buzzing from the amazing night I had with *Annabelle*. She was something else, no doubt about it. But now she's gone, and I'm cursing myself for even caring. I mean, beautiful women are a dime a dozen, right? So are one-night stands.

Why let this one get under my skin?

Truth be told, she was different.

This is one notch that would be extra-defined. Deeper than the others.

There was a spark, a connection I couldn't ignore.

We brooded together, sat in silence, laughed, kissed, and for a brief moment, everything felt decent.

Which is a lot better than what it'd been before.

Lights began to flash around me, music blared, and people were dancing so spicily that they were bumping into me at the bar. It was sensory overload.

Normally, I welcomed the chaos.

But not today.

Today, I needed some more solace.

The demons that plagued me yesterday were coming back with a vengeance, and I didn't have a sexy stranger to distract me this time.

I needed a breather.



The beat pounded against my chest as I walked across the dance floor, squeezing through groups packed like sardines. The club's energy was good for business, but not for the headache starting to form behind my eyes.

I squeezed them closed, hoping that a moment of reprieve from the lights would help.

But no such luck.

I needed to get somewhere a little quieter.

Lost in my thoughts, I retreated to the back room of the club, seeking peace and quiet. I found myself in my office, staring at the familiar desk once owned by my father.

This was always a place I could gather my thoughts and try to make sense of it all.

It was a place I felt connected to him.

I smiled.

I hated that they were gone on their own adventure. I missed them.

Not that I would ever admit it.

With an exasperated sigh, I sat at my desk and leaned back. I just hoped I could make them proud. I wanted to make a good name for myself and continue the family legacy.

It was a lot of pressure.

I didn't like killing people.

Running businesses? I could do that in my sleep.

But the nitty-gritty? That was the hard part.

I hadn't struggled as much even when I was an enforcer. Being a capo was easy. I followed orders. The guys were shitbags, and I knew that. They deserved what they had coming.

At least, that's what I told myself.

Now? Now I knew not all of them deserved it.

Now I knew that sometimes, you have to protect your reputation so other people don't think you are weak. You have to keep up the image. You have to be a force to be reckoned with.

It was those sorts of killings — and the fact that I was the one to order them — that were starting to destroy every second of sleep.

Those demons haunted me. It caused me to drink myself into oblivion every night lately.

Just as I was about to kick back far enough to steady my feet on the top of the desk and close my eyes for a moment, the whole damn place erupted in gunfire.

At first, I thought my sound machine was busted, but the screaming from the dance floor caused me to leap to my feet and draw the gun I had holstered at my side.

It sounded like a fucking bomb had gone off.

My heart pounded like a jackhammer in my chest as I gripped my piece, ready to defend my turf.

Just as I sprang toward the door, it burst open, and a scattering of bullets sprayed around the room.

Adrenaline took over, and I dove for cover behind my desk, a small gash on my arm. Bullets whizzed and ricocheted off every surface in a monsoon of firepower. Gathering my gumption, I returned fire from my side of the desk, shots echoing through the room as I tried to take down the bastard who was shooting at me.

The air was thick with the scent of gunpowder, and my office sanctuary had become a warzone.

A regular ol' scene straight out of an action movie.

Glass shattered, bullets zipped, and chaos surrounded me — and from the sounds of it, the people in my club, too.

Adrenaline pumped and fueled my every move.

I ducked and weaved — whatever the hell I had to do to survive the hailstorm of bullets bouncing off the walls and

furniture.

I was going to kill the son of a bitch.

Finally, with a tumbling crawl out from behind the desk, I hit my mark and he dropped to the floor.

My ears rang and my heart drummed as I wiped the sweat dripping down my brow and crawled to my feet. I cautiously stepped toward the door, holding my gun at attention, scanning the room and hallway for other threats.

As soon as I stepped out of the office, I was hit with another scene from an action movie. Bullets flew left and right as people dove for cover.

It was chaos.

Pure chaos.

Who the hell just walked in here and decided to turn my place into a fucking shooting range?

My guys aren't taking this lying down. They're firing back with everything they've got, trying to protect our turf and the innocent patrons screaming bloody murder, running out the doors. My security team was hustling people out through the emergency exits. Some were caught up in the mess, though.

I hopped over the railing of my office and down to the dance floor.

“Boss! Stay up there!” one of my capos roared.

I couldn't stand there and watch. It was my responsibility to keep everyone safe. Not them to keep me safe.

I wasn't going to back down.

I'd be damned if I let anyone mess with what was mine.

I was ready to face whatever shitstorm awaited.

Through the chaos, I took special notice of the familiar faces of my loyal crew — my family — as they locked and loaded and took on the bastards scattered inside my club.

From the looks of their faces, they were on board.

We weren't going to let up.

I didn't know who these people were, but I knew one thing: They were going to regret stepping foot into my club.

I would hunt them down.

Track them to the ends of the fucking earth if I had to.

No one was going to mess with my empire; my family's empire.

As the shots kept ringing out, I channeled all my rage into shooting every one of them.

Except one.

That one, I would keep alive to find out who the hell was behind this.

I would deal with the consequences later.

I was not going to let fear cloud my judgment.

I trusted my instincts.

I knew I could navigate this clusterfuck, and I would be damned if these pricks didn't pay for what they'd done.

Step by step, my men and I pushed forward, reclaiming every inch of the place. I wouldn't stop until my club was back under my control.

This was my house.

My turf.

I'd be damned if this was one example I wasn't going to make.

I'd be damned if the demons of this would plague me.

This was war.



# ANNABELLE

TO SAY THAT I WAS PISSED WOULD BE A GROSS understatement.

Being stuck dealing with a murder case when I could be saving our city from its inevitable fall into the sewers was enough to light me on fire.

But maybe Davis was right.

Maybe this did intertwine.

Maybe it could?

And even if it didn't, I could bring down another asshole and then get back to work.

But I was itching to know more. I mean, seriously? I couldn't catch a break.

Top it all off, my partner Davis was giving me the same tired-ass lecture over and over. "Anna, just chill and focus on this, okay?"

"I just don't get why the hell any of these other assholes can't be on this case!"

He let out a chuckle, and I couldn't help but shoot him a look of pure disbelief. How had he found my frustration amusing?

"What's so damn funny?" I snapped.

He tried to stifle his laughter, but his eyes betrayed him.

He thought this was funny.

“You just crack me up,” he chuckled. “You’re actually pissed off that we’re working on a murder investigation. A super high-profile one at that. Most detectives would kill for this kind of case.”

I scoffed. “Oh, spare me. It’s not about being thrilled by a freakin’ murder investigation, it’s about priorities. We’re wasting time and resources on some rich asshole’s death while innocent people are getting caught in the crossfire of the mafia every day.”

“People aren’t usually caught in the crossfire of the mob if they’re innocent.”

“What is ‘innocent’ to you, Davis?” I asked, genuinely curious.

Was “innocent” a dad desperate to pay for his kid’s cancer treatment by any means necessary? Was “innocent” taking out a loan for it from the wrong sorts? And then not being able to pay and getting killed for it?

Because to me, that was pretty innocent.

None of us were perfect.

And none of us had a right to judge.

I could feel the anger course through my veins as I continued my rant. It’d been a long time coming between me and him, anyway.

“How many families have been torn apart?” I asked my emotions ablaze. “How many lives were ruined? And here we are, chasing after one dead man, shoving all our resources up his ass, just because he had money.”

Davis’s face softened. “I get it,” he sighed defeatedly. “I do. But sometimes, we have to play by the rules and follow the chain of command. It’s frustrating, I know, but it’s the system we’re stuck in. I get that you haven’t been eaten up and shit out yet, but some of us have worked our entire lives at justice, only to see it never work out. So yeah, I’m a little jaded, but it is what it is.”

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. As much as I despised admitting it, he had a point.

The system was broken, and there was nothing I could do to fix it.

But it didn't mean I wasn't going to challenge it and do the best damn job I could.

"Fine," I replied, my tone still laced with arrogance and frustration. "I'll play by the rules, but I won't stop fighting to do what's right. We'll crack this case, but I won't rest until we've dismantled every single crime family in the city."

"I just feel like you should slow your roll," he said blatantly.

I rolled my eyes and shot him a look of annoyance.

He could never see the bigger picture.

"Let's just get back to work," I growled.

We went to the crime scene and took more photos, and now that we were back at the precinct going through them, I couldn't help but feel a little backed into a corner.

Shuffling through the images, I grimaced.

I hated not being first on the scene. I didn't get to see the body in situ, and I only had the responding detective's photos to rely on.

It was strange.

Usually, first responding officers determined which detective was going to be on the case and called them to the scene.

I hadn't had any missed calls.

Neither had Davis.

Captain hadn't called either of us.

Why did he want us on the case after someone else had already worked on it?

It didn't make sense.



I would have been perfectly content leaving it in the hands of the original investigator rather than putting my shit on hold.

“Maybe he got pressure after the scene and decided to reassign?” Davis asked as we combed the photos.

I shrugged. “I don’t know, but something seems off about these photos,” I grumbled, noticing something.

“Like what?”

I pointed to the photo of our victim — and I do use the word *victim* loosely. The guy was a total asshole. Had his hand in backhanded stock trades and embezzlement galore. Narrowing down suspects wasn’t going to be fun. A lot of people had a motive to kill this guy.

“Look at how he’s positioned here,” I said. Davis nodded. I turned over another photo. “And then look at this.”

“He’s positioned the same,” he laughed, his face inches away from the picture.

I rolled my eyes and sighed deeply. “No, he’s not,” I said. “Look at the floor. The corner of this board is about an inch away from his elbow in this photo.” I pulled up the other photo. “It’s right against his elbow in this one.”

“So, they moved him an inch?” he asked.

“Yeah, and what kind of dumbass rookie would do that?”

He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter,” he said simply. “Let’s just look at the evidence found and see if we can pin down some of our long list of suspects to start interviewing.”

I grumbled.

Something still seemed off.

About the whole damn thing.

Davis was always about playing it safe. He was always about doing the bare minimum.

“Hey, Cindy!” I yelled over my cubicle.

“Ye-yeah?” I heard a faint stammer before the bulbous, blonde-haired woman stood and looked at me over glasses that

rested low on the bridge of her nose.

“What are you doing?” Davis hissed at me.

“Cindy, can you get me the name of the detective originally assigned to this case?” I asked.

She smiled brightly. “Of course!” Immediately, she fell back into her seat and started typing.

Cindy was our records department coordinator.

She was always eager to please.

And no one ever gave her the time of day because of it.

Davis looked at me through narrowed eyes.

I shrugged. “I want to talk to them.” I chuckled, trying to play it cool.

Truthfully, I didn’t think it was “nothing” that the body was moved.

I didn’t think it was “nothing” that we weren’t originally called to the scene.

If I was going to be assigned to this case, I wasn’t going to play it safe.

I was going to dig deep.

I was going to solve this.



IT WAS GETTING LATE, but the more I looked into this asshole, the more I realized Davis was right.

I don’t think he even meant to be.

This had to be connected to something dark and sinister.

It was like a spider web of connections.

Our victim, Francis Lasiter, was involved in more than just shady shit.

He was tied to the mob.

Not surprising, considering a lot of wealthy and influential people were. That's how they stayed on top. Another pretty interesting thing, though, was that Cindy couldn't find any information on the initial detective.

The case file only had Davis' name and mine all over it.

That was even more curious.

With my frustration transforming into a burning determination to figure out why my gut was in knots over this, I turned to my partner. "Guess what, Davis? This murder case is not just some random crime. It's connected to the mob scene!"

Davis raised an eyebrow, his skepticism was blatant. "Anna, slow down. Let's not jump to conclusions."

I scowled.

I wasn't jumping to conclusions.

The asshole had his dirty fingers dipped in every cash cow and cookie jar known to man.

I lock eyes with Davis, a fire burning in mine. "Listen, you can't keep turning a blind eye to the big picture. We need to follow these leads, dig deeper, and expose these bastards."

"I just feel like you're seeing what you want to see," he sighed.

I shook my head. "You're the one that said they could be connected!" I shot, anger bubbling in my belly.

"I was just saying that to get you to focus on the case," he groaned.

I stood up from my desk. "I'm telling you it's connected, and if you can't be my partner and trust me, then I don't know if I can work with you anymore. So, are you with me or not?"

I looked down at him, desperate.

He hesitated for a moment, torn. Finally, he nodded despite himself. "Alright," he said. "Let's do this. Let's dive headfirst into the fire and try not to get burned."

A surge of excitement rushed through me. I launched my arms around his neck and hugged him tightly.

“Thank you!” I yelled out. “We are going to be a badass crime-fighting duo!” I joked, pulling away from him.

“We’re probably going to get our asses handed to us,” he grumbled.



# LUCA

I STUMBLED ALONG THE SIDEWALK, MY LEGS UNSTEADY AND my mind clouded by all I had consumed.

I was drunk again.

But it was only because it'd been a *fucking night*.

My brother, Dimitri, appeared before me through the shadows of the alley. I could see his face in the faint light of the streetlamp. His face was riddled with concern. But I wasn't in the mood for sympathy.

I didn't need it.

I was angry, furious even. I just wanted to be left alone.

"They have the one you left alive back at The Flask in the apartment up top."

I nodded. Of course, that was where they'd take the asshole.

Our club had always been our safe house.

Now we couldn't even go inside. It was locked up, and I had to get the cops on my payroll to keep it as under wraps as possible.

Still, I couldn't keep gossip from spreading.

There were regular everyday people in my club.

They'd talk.

I knew they would.

“Luca?” he asked, but I shook my head.

My club had been shot up and was now going to be forced into being closed down. I needed a minute.

I didn’t have the calm to question the bastard just yet.

I’d kill him if I got ahold of him right now.

I felt like a failure, like I had let down my entire family. What would Mom and Dad think of me?

I’d let down my guard.

I’d been running skeleton crews on security at the club.

This was my fault, in a way.

There’s no way it would have gotten so far had I had the manpower outside that I should have.

“You need to sober up,” Dimitri said, grabbing my shoulder. “We need to question this guy to—”

“Dimitri, what the hell do you know?” I slurred in passionate anger. The words were heavy with bitterness. “My club... it’s gone. I’m a failure. I’ve let everyone down.”

Dimitri tried to calm me down, his voice firm but I could tell it was also laced with something else. Concern? “Luca, don’t worry about Mom and Dad right now. Or anyone. You’re the boss now, and we all just want you to be safe. You need to get yourself together.”

My frustration only grew the nicer he was.

At that moment, I was fueled by raw emotion and alcohol. A terrible mix.

My senses were numbed.

“You think I don’t know that?” I spat, staggering toward him. “You think I don’t want to *get my shit together*? I’m trying, goddamn it!”

“Okay,” Dimitri said, grabbing me by the arm, jerking me toward him.

I yanked away. “Get the fuck off me!”

His thick, beefy hands slammed into my chest, knocking the wind out of me. My ass busted the ground. “Come with me or get your ass kicked,” he warned. “You might be the boss, but you’re also my brother, and please don’t think I won’t kick your ass.”

I sneered at him, viciousness dripping off my lips as I opened my mouth to speak.

But I couldn’t find the words.

But I didn’t have to.

He yanked me off the ground, holding tight to my collar, gripping it in his fists. “You think because you’re older, you can hurt me? I’m twice your size.”

“Actually,” I laughed, “you’re the one who said you were going to hurt me.”

I thought it was funny; the fact that he thought he could kick my ass.

He may have been bigger. But he wasn’t stronger. He was nowhere near as ruthless.

We continued to argue, our voices clashing together thunderously. There was anger, desperation, worry, confusion, all of it. Encased together. Not to mention a whole slew of pent-up aggression toward one another.

We were not boss/capo.

We were brothers. And we were about to be locked into a messy brawl.

I clenched my fist and launched it at his jaw. The hit was just enough for him to release me, and as soon as I dropped to the ground, he flung a fist wildly at me.

When he landed a solid blow, I felt my jaw snap and my body crashed to the ground.

I felt like I had just gotten run over by a semi.

I lay there for a moment, on the bitter, coarse pavement, dazed and disoriented. I gazed up at my brother’s stern



expression, waiting for him to jump on top of me and continue this maddening fight.

But he didn't.

Instead, he extended a hand like it was a lifeline.

“Enough,” he asserted, his voice tinged with exhaustion as he gasped out. “You’re not helping anyone like this. And you’re not going to win a fight as drunk as you are. Let’s clean you up.”

I knocked his hand away from me, stubbornness and pride welling up so far that I drowning in it.

I wasn't going to be seen as vulnerable.

Or a bitch.

Not to my little brother.

No matter how fucking gigantic he was.

He sighed, resilient, and offered his hand again.

I looked at him for a moment and opened my mouth to pop my jaw back into place. I nodded in pure admiration for the big asshole and accepted his hand. My walls started to fall as I allowed him to guide me down the alley, toward our home.



THE COLD WATER that rushed from the faucet was daunting.

I knew that he was about to make me get in that shit.

I shook my head.

“That’s cold water, dude.”

“It’ll sober you up,” he said.

I shook my head again.

“Either get in, or I’m going to throw you in.”

“Goddammit,” I groaned, lifting my leg over the side. I was still fully clothed.

There was nothing I hated more than sopping wet clothes.

The shock of the water jolted me back into reality, almost like his big fat punch to the face did.

“Now,” he said, “sober the fuck up.”

I could tell this was love more than anything.

And I appreciated it, but I wasn't sure how I felt about my baby brother taking care of me. I was supposed to be the strong one. I was supposed to be the leader.

As the freezing water cascaded over me, I shivered uncontrollably. I felt my breath catch in my throat. I felt my muscles tense.

I needed to stop drinking so fucking much.

I needed to sober up.

He was right.

But I needed to figure out how the hell to deal with feeling like a failure and a way to keep my demons at bay.

I looked over at Dimitri, who held his hand out again. “You ok?” he asked supportively.

I nodded as my lips quivered and my body jerked, aching to stand and get the hell out of the icy prison the bathtub had become.

“Let's go question this son of a bitch,” Dimitri said with a smile.



# ANNABELLE

I WAS SENT HOME AGAIN, BUT AFTER THE DAY'S EVENTS IN this new case, I was too wired.

I wasn't going to be able to sleep.

Not yet.

So where did I go?

To the vintage bar where I had met a particularly handsome stranger.

I was being stupid.

There was no way he was there again. Besides, didn't I want things to be uncomplicated?

Seeing him again would complicate things, wouldn't it?

As soon as I barreled into the now-familiar dimly lit vintage bar, a mix of excitement and curiosity bubbled inside me.

And even more excitement sparked when I caught a glimpse of him sitting at the same spot he had been the night before.

This time, though, he wasn't drinking.

He was just sitting with a look I couldn't quite place.

He looked ... defeated.

His knuckles and jaw were bruised.

I took a seat beside him, flashing a playful smile.

“Well, hello there, stranger,” I said, my voice laced with obvious flirtation. “Fancy seeing you here again.”

He turned his head, his eyes meeting mine, a mischievous smirk tugging at his lips. He hadn’t seen me. “Look who’s back,” he said in a low, husky tone. “Couldn’t get enough of the whiskey, huh?”

I leaned in closer, my tone suggestive. “Maybe I can buy tonight.”

He leaned back, his eyes wide.

“What?” I laughed. “You never have a girl buy you a drink?”

He cleared his throat, a smirk on his face. “Actually, no.”

“What are you in the mood for?” I asked.

He looked at me, hesitantly for a moment. “Honestly, I’ve been drinking all night.” He chuckled. “I just sobered up.”

“Well, then,” I sighed. “I guess you’ll just have to sit there and watch this girl drink alone then, because I’m too wired to sleep without one.”

“Damn,” he whispered. “We can’t have that, can we?”

I grinned, victorious. “So…” I trailed off. “What’s your poison tonight?”

He glanced at the array of bottles behind the bartender, a playful gleam in his eyes. “Surprise me,” he challenged. “I’m in the mood for something tasty.”

I shuddered. There was something about the way he said it, and the dark in his eyes that told me he meant more than just the drink.

He signaled the bartender, a knowing grin on his face. “Tony,” he said. “This lovely lady is going to buy me a drink; let’s see what she chooses.”

His gaze never left mine as he spoke to the man behind the bar.

“Make something tasty,” I said, my gaze not leaving his.

The tension was thick between us already.

At this rate, we wouldn't even finish a drink.

“Sir. Madam,” Tony said as he set orange-colored drinks in front of us.

We clinked our glasses, the atmosphere charged with anticipation. We sipped our mystery drinks, our eyes locked.

I couldn't believe how much desire I had warming my womanhood already.

I wanted him.

Bruised knuckles. Bruised face.

All of it.

“So, Luca, what's your story?” I inquired, my eyes lingering on his jaw and flashing to his knuckles.

He chuckled darkly, and I felt Tony's eyes square in on us.

With a playful smile, he leaned in closer, his voice low and captivating. “Ah, that's the beauty of it,” he said. “You like the mystery of me not having a story.”

I shuddered again.

He was right.

I could make up my own fantasy of what happened to his knuckles and face.

I raised an eyebrow, a teasing smile spreading across my face. “I think you may be right about that one.”

He matched my smile, his eyes still dark with lust. I smoldered under the intensity of the gaze.

There was nothing but desire dripping off of me every time I beheld his sexy body and perfect face.



THAT NIGHT WAS a little different than the first.

There was a little more familiarity, and I wasn't sure how I felt about it.

There was a lot more talking.

Surface-level flirting.

Banter, really.

But a whole hell of a lot more talking.

Every sentence he uttered set me ablaze.

I was intoxicated by his piercing eyes and the sultry silk that dripped off his tongue every time he spoke to me. And by the end of the night, I was completely drunk on him.

The stolen glances.

The shared laughter.

The excitement of the unknown.

The anticipation of another pleasurable night.

As the night draws to a close, the sparks between us are undeniable.

There's basically a fire at each of our feet.





# LUCA

SEEING HER AGAIN IN THE BAR CAUGHT ME COMPLETELY OFF-guard.

I'd just beat the ever-loving shit out of the asshole I spared after the club shootout.

She was the last person I expected to be there.

Not that I minded the escape from reality.

She seemed different tonight. A little less pissed; a little more wound up.

But I couldn't help but smirk the more she flirted with me.

She was back for more, and I welcomed it. She was the best lay I'd ever had. I was perfectly fine chalking this up to a delightful twist of fate that we were even at the bar again.

I wouldn't have been had those maniacs not started a war.

I took a final sip of my drink and leaned casually against the bar. The evening was coming to a close. She hadn't ordered another drink, and neither had I.

She was buying.

I wasn't going to get greedy.

Besides, I didn't know if I wanted to be drunk a second time that night. Dimitri had already thrown me into an icy trough.

"So, I guess I feel graced by your presence," I teased. "And I'm assuming you couldn't resist the lure of my

company as well?”

She met my gaze right after she slammed her last sip of alcohol and smiled at me, mischievously. “Don’t flatter yourself too much. Maybe I just came back for the good drinks, fun atmosphere, and *mediocre* company,” she replied, more than just a hint of flirtation in her voice.

“Playing hard to get now, huh?” I winked, enjoying the banter.

There was an energy that sparked.

I wanted to explore it.

I wanted to take her back upstairs and have my way with her again.

But I couldn’t.

There were a nearly beaten-to-death man, my brother, and a few of my closest men upstairs in that apartment.

She rolled her eyes. “Maybe,” she said. “You might be a little too charming.”

I could hear the sarcasm dripping off her tongue.

I liked it.

This was fun.

I raised my empty glass in a mocking sort of toast. “Well, you’re not the first to fall victim to my charm.”

She rolled her eyes again. “Har har har,” she mocked.

Her laughter followed, filling the space between us.

I was so unbelievably drawn to her.

Her gorgeous chestnut hair.

Her almond eyes.

I felt pulled to her. Almost magnetically.

How was I going to get out of the night without sleeping with her?

That was all that was on my mind, until a moment caught between us.

She smiled at me.

It was different than the other smiles.

It wasn't full of lust or flirtation.

It was kind.

Fleeting, but real.

There was something special about her.

I could sense it.

Something more than a physical attraction. A genuine connection that kept me enthralled.

She was witty.

She was charming.

I knew nothing about her except her name and the fact that she worked in an office building.

She knew nothing about me except my name.

I wasn't sure how I felt this insane connection.

We had absolutely nothing to go on, but it was there.

It was somewhere hidden almost in the dance of flirty conversation and stolen glances. A familiarity that I wasn't sure I liked, but one that was there nonetheless.

"So," she said, standing up from the stool. "Are we going to the fire escape, or is this goodnight?"

I groaned and stood, gesturing to the outside. "We can't go upstairs," I muttered, almost bitterly.

She looked at me, her brows twisted in confusion.

"It's being renovated," I said quickly.

I wanted nothing more than to find a place to go to.

But I couldn't take her home. Too many people were there. Too many clues as to who the hell I was if she was even halfway connected to the city.

“We can go to my place,” she said quietly.

I could sense her hesitation.

I paused, too.

Part of this was the mystery.

The lack of strings.

Knowing where she lived seemed too familiar.

I swallowed. I needed a way to get back on track. A way to keep the mystery alive.

“Only if you blindfold me.”



WE STEPPED INSIDE A BUILDING. It was warm inside. My face was covered with a blindfold.

It was pretty stupid now that I think about it.

What if she had been an enemy?

What if she had somehow been hired to kill me?

I left myself vulnerable, and for what?

Sex?

I sighed as she took off the blindfold, half expecting some dudes to be there to kill me. But that wasn't the case.

I smiled, relieved.

This was more than sex.

There was a connection that I was almost addicted to; but one that I knew I couldn't do anything about.

I took a look around the room, and damn, it was like stepping into a time machine.

The furniture had that old, worn-out sort of charm that one might find in a 1990s Better Homes & Gardens magazine.

It was like Grandma's house.

Strangely cozy.

But weird.

And a little tacky.

“So, what’s the deal with all the vintage stuff?” I asked, raising an eyebrow, trying to sound casual and not judgmental or rude.

She laughed boisterously. It was infectious.

Probably the sweetest sound I had ever heard. “Oh, that’s my dad’s thing. He’s all about the retro vibe. I guess I’ve just gotten used to it.”

Her laughter and explanation added a touch of warmth to the room, making it feel even more inviting than it did before.

“Your dad?” I asked.

“Yeah. He works overnight at a fish market sometimes,” she said. “My mom left us a few years ago without a lot of explanation, and he just kind of keeps busy, but he won’t be back until dawn.”

I couldn’t help but feel a pang of sympathy.

I didn’t know what I would have done without my parents.

Not that she was a child.

She was clearly an adult.

But my parents’ absence for their retirement adventure was becoming too much. I couldn’t imagine being away from them for extended periods.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” I offered softly.

It was weird.

Getting a glimpse of her life.

This was supposed to be uncomplicated, but then again, there I was, in her house.

She shrugged and shook her head nonchalantly, but I could tell by the glistening over her eyes that it was something emotional for her.

But I wasn't going to pry.

She touched my cheek gently, sending shivers down my spine. Every move she made; every time she touched me, seemed to be a secret language tugging at the connection we had. Because the more she did, the more drawn to her I was.

Part of me was afraid, wondering if I should make a run for it while I still could. But her sultry voice and the way she looked at me left me frozen.

There was no way I was walking away.

I hesitated for a moment when her lips brushed my cheek, the intensity of the moment getting real. I just wanted a fuck session. Not to feel attached.

I was steel.

Solid.

Unmoving.

Until I wasn't.

*Fuck it.*

I leaned in and captured her mouth in a passionate kiss.

It was electric. Explosive.

The 90s furniture became nothing but an afterthought that faded into the background of our desire. Moans filled the room and that was enough to give me the burst of energy I needed.

I slammed her against the nearest wall, knocking a photo to the ground.

Neither of us gave a shit.

The outside world was gone.

All that was left was raw passion. All that was left was us. Losing ourselves in the moment. Our bodies meshed together frantically as hands tugged and pulled at clothing. I felt her supple breasts and gasped, pulling away from our kiss.

“You're not wearing a bra,” I stated simply, looking down at her chest. I was itching to touch those perfect breasts. To taste them.

She smiled and leaned close to my ear. “I’m not wearing panties either,” she crooned.

That was all it took.

A possessive growl escaped the depths of my throat, and I grabbed her thighs eagerly. My clothed erection teased me as it rubbed against her pants-covered sex. I pulled and tugged at her pants, yanking them down.

I was going to have her.

Now.





# ANNABELLE

THAT DID IT. AS SOON AS I SAID THE WORDS, I WATCHED HIS eyes change. His pupils dilated so much that I could no longer see his piercing blue irises.

He stopped breathing for a moment before pulling me into the kiss of a lifetime.

I could feel his sex grind against mine as his mouth pulled away from mine to take hold of my neck.

His hands were tight on my hips, and I could do nothing but moan, my mouth agape.

The growls in his throat told me one thing: He was running on animalistic instinct. I jerked him toward my bedroom, clawing at his clothes and skin, helping him every chance I got to remove the barriers between us.

I didn't know where we were in the house; everything was a blur.

All I knew was that he felt so damn good. Tasted so damn good. All I wanted at that moment was to feel even more.

All of him.

Our bodies molded together as the back of my knees hit my mattress, and we fell into the sheets, our pleased mewls and groans filling the room. He growled possessively for the second time that night as he pushed himself onto me. Our lips battled roughly; it felt like our tongues were at war. Who was more dominant?

Luca had one hand on the middle of my back and the other tangled in my hair. He ran his tongue over my mouth, tasting every crevice and then he bit my lip, bruising it.

I loved it all.

I gasped as he ravished my breasts. Kissing, nibbling, sucking all over. His hands felt like hot velvet as they ran over my naked body. “Yesss...” I found myself groaning.

What had gotten into me?

I was never this forward.

There was something about him.

Something that made me feel comfortable.

He brought one of my nipples into his mouth, sucking it tenderly at first. A tingle shot straight to the brewing warmth between my legs.

I frantically tugged down his pants, reveling at the feeling of his hardened rod springing to life as soon as the waistband fell below his ass. My hardened nipples became sensitive to the touch. Every nip, every suckle was almost too much.

I yelped and pushed him back, quickly gathering myself up to my knees.

I wanted to be on top this time.

My eyes, just as darkened with lust, honed in on him.

I pressed my palms to his bare chest and straddled him, ready to feel every part of him.

I kneaded his pectoral muscles. He moaned.

I felt my lower half throb wildly, my womanhood flowing with arousal. I squirmed over him, his thickened girth sliding over my slit. He was pulsating, and so was I. Both of us wishing we could feel the other.

I wanted him to touch me.

I wanted him to taste me.

I reached between my thighs, squeezing around his bulge. I bit my lip, a low moan eliciting from my chest as he pumped

his hips and I held him.

He gasped, his hips thrusting as I massaged his length. He looked up at me as I guided his ready manhood to my entrance. I stared down at him a sudden desire to please.

My breasts were at attention and he lifted his head to take them back into his mouth, an instinctive growl leaving him and rolling over my flesh.

My fingers dug into his chest as I felt him slide into me, filling me to the brim.

He slowly trailed kisses along my neck and shoulders, licking everywhere his mouth journeyed.

He kissed my fingers next, each knuckle, and each digit as he slowly rolled his hips, torturing me. I was so stunned I didn't move. I straddled him, dazed.

“You're beautiful,” he sighed.

I tipped my head back in pleasure, rolling my hips a little faster.

We couldn't get into calling each other handsome or beautiful.

It was too personal.

We couldn't get personal.

“You feel incredible,” he moaned, his hips twisting with passion, his length massaging my tightening walls.

His face flushed as a sheen of sweat glistened over his chest. His eyes closed as he reveled in the moment.

But only for a moment.

Without another word, his eyes shot back open. They were dark.

And I knew that he was in the same position I was.

He realized the moment was getting too tender.

He slid himself to the hilt and quickened his thrusts, and so did I, both of our bodies snapping together in quickened unison.

Enough teasing.

Enough tenderness.

I gasped at his roughness. My hips gyrated against his pelvis as I continued to slide up and down on his length. My thighs tightened at his hips, locked, loaded, and ready to finish.

I felt like I was seeing stars; that I was about to explode, as my sex quivered around him. A jolt of pleasure hit me when his finger found my clit, rolling it softly in a smooth circular motion as he continued to buck his hips roughly into me.

My breath became ragged. Erratic.

My body was shaking, quivering, shuddering without restraint.

I continued to grind myself against his finger and pump his member with my tight walls. The pleasure spread from my womanhood to my toes, shooting, coursing, radiating.

And with a wave of electricity, my entire body twitched as a ball of pleasure mounted in my belly. I could feel it.

I was getting close.

“Luca!” I wailed as I fell over the edge.

He didn’t stop.

He kept going.

Another crash.

Another wave.

Another tingling jolt.

“Yes!” I screamed before collapsing on top of him, our bodies melding together in spent, sweaty fervor.

“Holy shit,” he gasped.

“Yeah,” I breathed. “Holy shit.”



AS I GOT DRESSED, I couldn't help but watch the sexy man I had just had sex with doing the same. There was tension in the air.

An arousal that lingered between us.

I could have gone several rounds with him.

I felt connected to him, in some unspoken way. It was strange because we were strangers. And we both wanted to keep it that way.

As he dressed, I couldn't help but admire the muscles on his torso. I gazed at him, captivated by the sight of his chiseled physique. Every line, every edge was just immaculate. The curve of his sculpted chest and abdomen drew my attention like a moth to a flame. I was bewitched.

I had never seen someone so physically fit.

I had gone to the police academy and seen several young guys with their shirts off. Most of them were fit.

But none as fit as Luca.

His broad shoulders hinted at the strength he exuded, and his body as a whole dripped with sex appeal and confidence.

I liked to imagine him being a personal trainer, but he seemed too brooding and dark.

Like he could be a secret agent.

I wanted to laugh at my musings.

There was no way that was the case.

But it was probably better I didn't know.

I sighed audibly, much to my dismay, as I observed the way his skin seemed to glow from the streetlamp outside. The light highlighted the contours of his body, nearly causing me to drool.

He looked at me, and I looked away.

It was a game of cat and mouse.

I could see him smirk in my peripheral.

But then he grabbed his shirt and threw it on, his muscles flexing as it fell over his arms.

A shiver rolled down my spine.

There was a mutual physical attraction; one I knew I couldn't deny.

I cleared my throat, hoping to maneuver my thoughts away from slamming him back down on my bed and having my way with him.

Curiosity was getting the better of me.

“What brought you to the bar tonight?” I asked.

He chuckled. “I thought we weren't getting too personal.”

I rolled my eyes playfully. “Just curious if I'm going to keep running into you there,” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

“Do you want to?” He walked closer, and I shot him a warning look.

He sighed. “My club got shot up,” he said. “I needed to blow off some steam.”

The words caught me off-guard.

“Your club?” I asked, looking at him.

He was a business owner?

With a body like that?

What club?

What club got shot up?

He flashed an emotion I couldn't quite place.

He cleared his throat this time. “Not to get too personal, but yeah,” he replied. The fact that I hadn't heard about a club being terrorized was strange. I'm a cop.

“Where was this?” I asked, trying to maintain a casual tone. But I knew as soon as the words left my mouth how I might have sounded suspicious. His eyes narrowed, and he studied me for a moment.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said with another sigh.

“It does,” I shot, my voice faint.

Were there casualties?

“Did people get hurt?” I pressed before I could stop myself.

“Sorry,” I apologized. I was asking too many questions, and by the look on his face, I already knew the answer.

He owned a club that had been shot up, and people got hurt.

I knew we had this confidentiality thing between us for the most part, but I had to look into this. How could I not?

“It’s fine,” he said with a half-smile. “I think we should probably cool it, though, if you want to keep this anonymous. We’re starting to know a little too much about one another.”

I nodded, agreeing.

He was right.

It was already getting too comfortable.

He was standing in the middle of my bedroom, for Christ’s sake.

Our encounters were supposed to be fleeting.

It was supposed to be one night.

Now, it’s been two.

Regardless, it had to stay casual.

We couldn’t have strings.

I didn’t have time for a man.

And by the looks of him, he couldn’t handle a woman.

He was a mess, and so was I.

There was a shared understanding between us. But still...

I couldn’t deny the attraction.

It was a good thing he ask to be blindfolded on the way to my place. We had to keep this what it started out to be.

Nothing.





# LUCA

I NOTICED HER CURIOSITY, THE WAY SHE ASKED QUESTIONS about my club and the shootout that took place there.

I was stupid to have said anything.

Careless.

The way she asked about it struck me as suspicious at first, but I dismissed it.

What normal person wouldn't have asked? I just told her about a shooting — possibly in her fucking backyard.

She was also probably interested in the conversation and in *me*. After all, we had just shared our second intimate encounter.

That's what normal people did, right? They asked questions. Got to know someone.

But then again, were we supposed to be getting to know one another?

As a member of the mob, my life revolved around secrecy and keeping a low profile. The less people knew about what I did, and who I was, the better.

I wasn't accustomed to being questioned about my personal affairs, except by those who were trying to dig into my business, for obvious reasons.

I didn't date.

I slept around.

I didn't have friends, unless they were also mobsters.

Life was easier that way.

No attachments.

No strings.

Get in. Get out. Do your business. Go home.

That was my motto.

Always had been, and how it always had to be.

The idea of a second life seemed like too much work and allowed for too many possibilities of getting pinched by some Dudley Do-Right cops.

But with her, it felt different. There was an undeniable chemistry between us, an electric connection that seemed to bridge the gap between our worlds, whatever her world was.

While I was in her presence, I couldn't help but wonder if the second-life bit was the way to go. I liked being around her.

I could get used to it.

Maybe I could just be a mystery enough.

Still own the club, still have the money...but instead of a mobster, just be a normal, run-of-the-mill businessman.

The longer I looked at her, the more I wanted to give in to that idea. I wanted to talk more in-depth; I wanted to get to know her. For real.

But a sense of caution held me back. I knew I couldn't afford to reveal too much, especially to a stranger. And I couldn't afford to get to know her, because getting to know someone meant they also got to know you.

She wasn't part of my world.

I needed to keep it that way.

I had to think about my family. They had to be first.

I was drawn to her, but the danger of getting involved with the wrong person loomed over my head. It felt like a dark cloud warning me.

There was so much mystery surrounding her. I just couldn't put my finger on what intrigued me so much. She enticed me more than anyone had.

"So, this was fun," I said, a sort of debate raging in my mind as I finished gathering my things. I had to leave. It was getting closer to dawn. I needed to get the hell out of there before her dad came in and it became a whole thing.

I wasn't that kind of guy. I didn't do the dad thing.

And I wasn't going to start now.

But I couldn't resist the pull for more.

I just had to keep it casual *enough*.

"Hey," I said, my mind a whirlwind, as I flashed a slight smile. "Would you be interested in exchanging numbers? You know, just in case we wanted to meet up again?"

She met my gaze, her eyes twinkling with a hint of mischief.

I wondered if her alarm bells were going off like mine were, but I guessed they probably weren't. She probably didn't have an entire world to keep a secret like I did, but we were supposed to be keeping this light nonetheless.

Phone numbers might be pushing that boundary.

It could still be light with each other's phone numbers, though, right?

"Sure," she replied, her voice tinged with flirtation. "I wouldn't want you to miss out on seeing me again."

Relief washed over me as she handed me her phone. With fingers slightly trembling, I entered my digits and passed it back to her. "But this is just for fun," she reminded. "Don't go falling in love with me."

I laughed. That would be ridiculous. I didn't have it in me to settle down. Not that a part of me didn't want to; I just couldn't.

As she saved my number, a smirk tugged at the corners of her lips. "I'm also not a booty call, so don't overuse it," she

warned teasingly.

I chuckled, unable to hide my excitement. “Don’t worry,” I replied, matching her playful tone, “I’ll be too busy mowing the lawn of a few others.”

She cringed and then we both — without hesitation — bellowed out in laughter.

“Listen, that sounded disgusting,” I admitted with amusement. “I was trying to be funny, but it came out all wrong.”

We shared another moment of laughter, the tension of anonymity momentarily forgotten as she pulled her hair up into a ponytail and sat on the edge of her bed.

“Alright,” I sighed deeply, with a sense of finality. “I should probably get going.”

As we parted ways, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of anticipation, a tingling excitement. I hadn’t felt giddy to have someone’s number in a long time.

The anonymity we wanted was now going to have to be balanced delicately with the desire to see each other again. Text messages, hidden behind the safety of our screens, with future promises to hang out. That seemed pretty innocent.

Right?

Well, maybe not *innocent*.

Just not harmful to my new position as a mob boss.

I leaned in and kissed her briefly before pulling away. “Until next time,” I whispered.

She smiled at me and rolled her eyes as she swung open her front door and nudged me out. “My dad could be home any minute, and to escape questioning, I would suggest you go.”

I laughed in agreement.

Generally speaking, dads were not super fond of me.

I could only imagine how fond he'd be of me, knowing I'd just had sex with his daughter in his house.

As I walked down the stoop, a grin played on my lips.

It was funny.

I had come there with a blindfold on.

I was leaving without one.

And I had no fucking idea where I was.



# ANNABELLE

AFTER HE LEFT, I CLOSED THE DOOR SHARPLY.

I fumbled for my phone, eager to make the phone call I'd been itching to ever since Luca mentioned his club being shot up.

"Hello?" my captain grumbled exhaustedly over the phone. "Do you have any idea what fucking time it is?"

"Hey, Cap, what do we know about a club being shot up?" I asked abruptly. "I hadn't heard anything."

There was a brief pause on the other end, a moment of hesitation. "Club?" He grumbled. "Who told you about a club being shot up?"

I could hear shuffling on the other end of the receiver.

His words held a certain sharpness, a hint of suspicion that made me second-guess the conversation almost entirely. I didn't know what I was talking about and alerting my boss seemed ... stupid.

Of course, he would have questions.

He was the captain of the NYPD, and I was telling him about a club shooting that I had no idea about.

I decided to stick to the basics, not wanting to disclose too much just yet. Not that I had anything to disclose anyway.

"Just through someone I met at a bar," I replied, allowing a casual air to accompany my response. "A rumor. Just wanted to see if you knew what they were talking about."



The captain's tone sharpened, a note of urgency creeping into his voice. "Which bar, specifically? I need to know the details."

His insistence caught me off-guard, stirring a sense of unease within me. A gut feeling told me to lie.

I made a split-second decision to fabricate a response, hoping it would satisfy his curiosity. "The Orchid Room," I replied, trying to sound as natural as possible. I needed to give myself some time to figure out what happened.

Silence hung in the air, leaving me to wonder if my half-truth had passed the test.

"I was just wondering if you'd heard anything because I thought it was strange I hadn't," I continued, ending the silence.

"I haven't heard anything," he sounded.

"Ok. Just thought I'd check in," I laughed casually. Nervously.

"Betrami, get some fucking sleep," he growled before hanging up.



A FEW HOURS LATER, as I hastily prepared myself for work, my eyes fell upon something glinting just beside my nightstand on the floor.

I bent down to inspect, only to find that it was a coin. It had to have been Luca's.

I couldn't help the smile spread across my face as I swiftly picked it up.

I'd never seen anything quite like it.

It was silver, polished, and clean. With a symbol of a skull and a cigar. The back was a pyramid on fire. My brows contorted and I looked at it front to back, intrigue slipping over me, then I sighed and stuffed it into my pocket.

“Dad?” I called out through the house, figuring he’d be home by now. “I’m about to head into work!”

As I threw my wallet, keys, and phone into my bag, I craned my neck into the living room. “Dad?” I asked again.

No answer.

Weird.

“Dad?” I called out, stepping into the hall nearer his bedroom.

No answer.

Had he not come home?

Searching the house, I felt my heart sink with unease.

Where the hell was he?

As I walked out the front door, almost late for work, I pulled my phone out and tapped out a message to him. My fingers tingled with a mix of worry and curiosity. “Everything OK?” I typed. I needed some reassurance.

I needed to hear from him.

It felt like an eternity as I waited for his reply and received nothing but silence. The weight of an unanswered question always drove me insane, but this nagged at me even more. I was worried. If anything happened to him, I’m not sure what I would do.



AS I SAT at my desk, I wondered if I just had a weird heightened sense of apprehension. I clutched onto the coin inside my pocket and sighed as I pulled it out.

Twirling in my chair absentmindedly, I moved the unfamiliar coin between my fingers. Its unique design and foreign markings puzzled me. It was unlike any currency I had seen.

Which only added to the air of mystery surrounding Luca.

As I contemplated the man from last night and the fact that he had said his club had been terrorized and shot up, a heavy sigh escaped my lips. How had I not heard about that?

And why was I being so paranoid about it?

Being a cop definitely could make you question anything and everything, and I felt like my skepticism was tenfold. I was always suspicious of people. Their intentions.

I groaned as my head fell into my hands. The familiar pounding told me a migraine was around the corner.

My instincts had jacked me up that morning, making me get all worked up — likely over nothing.

Luca's club, my captain's questions, my father — each one had sparked some suspicion inside of me, stirring doubts and raising questions.

Was the weight of this job getting to me? Or was it just my nature to question everything?

Leaning back in my chair, I gazed at the coin once more.

With a determined exhale, I straightened my posture.

I needed to get to work. On my actual case.

But I couldn't concentrate no matter how much I tried.

“That's it,” I sighed. “Coffee. I need coffee.”

My eyes burned from exhaustion. I hadn't slept a full night in weeks.

Coffee was something I needed. So, with a newfound sense of purpose, I rose from my desk and snatched my bag and hoodie. I yawned widely, carefully tucking the coin back into the pocket of my jeans.

I wasn't sure I could get the brown caffeine-laden drink in me fast enough.

Skipping the cramped elevator, I decided to take the stairs. Elevators were not my thing.

Too many bad things happened on those things.

I hurriedly descended to the bottom floor and stepped out into the boisterous street of lower Manhattan.

Queens.

One of my favorite areas in New York City.

It was also home to some of the best damn coffee in the world.

Every street corner had coffee shops. I had been in most of them. And right now, I was on a mission.

I didn't need the best coffee.

I just needed the fastest and the closest.

And I did mean *needed* it.

Right then. Right there.

I knew exactly where I was going. Cafe Bloom.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee called to me as soon as I crossed the street.

"Thank God," I sighed as soon as I opened the door and the jingling bell sounded out.

Ordering my favorite — a mocha espresso latte — I allowed the familiar warmth to seep through my fingers as I cradled the cup. I sipped slowly and let my gaze wander, taking in the sights and sounds of the city around me. And that's when it caught my eye: an old-fashioned collector's store across the street.

*I wonder*, I thought to myself, remembering the silver coin in my pocket.

My feet led me toward the shop almost involuntarily, curiosity overpowering any hesitation I might have had.

I knew I had to work. But I also wanted to know a little more about my mystery man, and wondered if this coin might have held something interesting.

I knew I was getting close to tying my murder investigation to the underground crime world. But something

called me toward that building. Something about Luca beckoned me.

I crossed the street again with purpose and barreled through the store's door, my coffee clutched in one hand and my bag slung over my forearm. I stepped over the threshold, and a treasure trove of trinkets and antiques surrounded me.

This had to be a place where I could find out about this damned coin.

Approaching the glass counter, I met the inquisitive gaze of the clerk. His white hair contrasted sharply against his dark attire, and rectangular glasses were perched at the end of his nose, lending an air of scholarly intrigue.

He looked old, but distinguished.

Smart, but casual.

As he leaned over the counter, he exuded an aura of knowledge and also, maybe a little mischievous curiosity. His eyes were blue, with crow's feet tugging at the corners of each. It looked like he had a lifetime of knowledge hidden away behind them.

They sparkled as soon as I approached, and a devilish smile spread across his lips. I placed the coin on the counter with a clink, and his fingers reached out almost eagerly to take hold of it.

With nimble precision, he held it up to the light, studying its details. His lips pursed in curiosity. "What can I do for you, my dear?" he inquired.

"I came across this coin, and it's like nothing I've ever seen. Do you have any idea what it is?"

"What do you want to do with it?" He leaned forward on the counter, his eyes still engaged with the silver coin. I always wondered why that was the first question they at a pawn shop.

How does what I intend to do with it have any bearing on what the hell it is or what it's worth?

“I just wanted to see what it was. I’m not really looking to sell it.”

“Ah,” he sighed, his smile wavering. He stood up straight, a flicker of disappointment crossing his face. I could tell his excitement had faltered a bit.

“Well,” he remarked, a tinge of longing in his voice. “You’ve stumbled upon something pretty unique.”

I nodded, anticipation knocking at my heel.

“It’s genuine silver.” He twirled the coin between his thumb and index finger. “May I ask where you got it?”

I shook my head.

He cleared his throat. “Well...” he trailed off, almost in a way that made me feel uneasy. “What this is, is a mob coin.”

His eyes met mine, and I could sense the caution in his expression. It was as if he was grappling with the dilemma of just how much information to share.

“These coins were used as a mark of affiliation with one of the five families,” he said. “Only the most highly regarded, most trusted men that carry these. Each coin is different.”

The weight of his words settled on me, mingling with the realization that the man I had shared an intimate encounter with might be a little more dangerous than I gave him credit for.

But as I glanced at the man behind the counter, I sensed his reluctance to divulge any more. He wanted to preserve some sort of secrecy.

I knew that if I delved much deeper, I’d blow my cover and give away the fact that I was a cop.

Would he trust me then?

I’m just glad I no longer wore a uniform. Nor did I ever have my badge in plain sight.

“Thanks for your help,” I said with a smile. “That’s pretty cool. What a rare find,” I mused, acting like I had just happened upon it. It seemed easier that way.

The man's words hung in the air. I really wanted to know Luca's connection to this coin. And better yet, I was just bashing on my cop brain — maybe there was some use to it after all. I mean, wouldn't others have just thought it was just a cool little good-luck charm? Nothing more than a unique novelty coin?

The old man leaned forward slightly, studying my reaction as if gauging the depth of *my* connection to the coin. His eyes narrowed.

“There are collectors out there, my dear, who would give up their most prized possessions to get ahold of a piece like this,” he remarked, his voice tinged with greed. “Are you sure you're not open to the idea of parting ways with it? Especially since you have no ties to it.”

His question threw me for a loop, and I wasn't sure why. Of course, he wanted his hands on it. I shook my head. “Like I said,” I started, “I'm not really interested in selling. I'd like to hang on to it.”

I couldn't tell him what I was thinking.

There was a lot more that I wanted to find out about this coin to even think about parting with it.

But also, I couldn't exactly steal someone else's property.

The man's disappointment was evident, but he nodded understandingly. “Very well,” he said. “If you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

“Thanks,” I said before flashing a final glance and smiling at him.

I slipped the coin back into my pocket and walked out of the door.

With more questions than I had started with.

As I pondered the significance of the mob coin and its connection to Luca, a range of possibilities raced through my mind. Why would he have something like this; something with ties to the mob? Was he a collector, drawn to the danger of the criminal underworld? Or was there a more personal tie?

The more scenarios I considered, the more my curiosity grew.

I was determined to find out the truth.

With the coin nestled safely in my pocket, I walked back out into the street.





# LUCA

AS I STOOD IN THE MIDDLE OF MY LIVING ROOM, A WAVE OF fury washed over me. My brother just informed me that the rat bastards who shot up my club were connected to that asshole Dominic Betrami.

That motherfucker had the audacity to target *me*? My club?

Me and this douchebag have been locked in a tense battle for years. We've had our fair share of scuffles, shedding blood, and drawing lines in the sand. I never expected him to attack my turf.

Not like this.

He knew where my territory was.

He knew where his was.

I respected his space.

He respected mine.

That was the fucking deal, and he had broken it!

I've always been strategic and calculated with my moves. I felt like a fucking moron to have let my guard down with that piece of shit. But we had an agreement.

I thought he was a man of his word.

We might be in the mob, but we generally had some goddamn integrity.

I told the bastard that I had no interest in diving into the drug game. That was his deal, not mine.

I left his areas alone and let him run his game. That was his domain. I respected it. I figured we could, at the very least, coexist, and he agreed. But no more. Since his little stunt, I vowed one thing: I was going to hit the bastard where it hurt.

He had just crossed a boundary with me that was going to make him rue the day he crossed me.

I was going to get into his game. I was going to encroach on his territory and by God, I was going to pull out all the fucking stops. I was going knock down his front door and kill him myself.

It was war now.

“Do we know why he hit us?” I asked. “What message is he trying to send?”

Dimitri shrugged.

Whatever it was, it was a direct challenge.

An insult.

And I wasn't going to back down.

Thoughts of vengeance swirled in my mind, fueled by the memories of all the chaos that went down in my club. I lost good men in there, and some patrons.

I had to work all fucking night to pay off my NYPD staff just to keep it as hushed as possible.

Knowing he was behind it all.

It was lighting a fire inside of me. Igniting a rage.

This was personal.

I was about to get real personal back. Up close and personal.

Dominic's factory. That's where I was going to hit him, and hard

I knew about it. I let him have his little drug operation. I had bigger fish to fry, and I didn't want to risk getting tangled up in it all. But now, it was my target. My only target.

“They’re going to pay for this,” I muttered to my brother as he sat down beside me on the couch. “They thought they could take me down?”

They were in for a rude awakening.

I was going to unleash a storm on them. One that they could have never dreamed of.

“He thinks we’re a bunch of chumps,” Dimitri laughed low in his chest as he crossed his arms over his belly to settle down further into the couch. “But we do need to find out what his motive is.”

“Gentlemen,” Enzo called from the hall. My underboss and best friend.

My head snapped up to look at him. “I have Jacob Kendall looking into Dominic’s security systems,” he announced, pride bursting from his chest. “We’re going to find the weakness in his network and turn the shit off, sneak in, and take down his whole goddamn operation.”

Not bad.

I nodded. “Great job,” I complimented.

“That was the good news,” he said. “Do you want to know the bad news?”

I groaned. “Bad news?” I stood up and walked toward the window where my bar cart was parked. Hastily, I poured myself a drink. Sounded like I was going to need it.

“Your guy at the NYPD said he was going to have to track down some loose ends spreading rumors about the club shooting.”

My brow raised. “How is he gonna do that?” I mused. “We had a club full of regular people. Of course, there are rumors. We’re open to the public.”

“We have to nip it in the bud,” he said.

I shrugged. “How do you propose we do that? Track down all the innocent paying customers who got shot out and knock them off?” I smirked. “He needs to just do his fucking job and

keep it under wraps with the cops. Who gives a shit about rumors?”

“We could be ruined by rumors, Boss,” he replied.

I turned to face him and took a couple of steps closer, my drink clutched tightly in my hand. “Cut the ‘Boss’ shit, will ya?” I snap. He had been my best friend since elementary school, and him calling me boss was fucking weird.

“Sorry,” he sighed. “But anyway, the reason it’s a big deal, apparently a Dudley Do-Right got wind of it and our guy says that’s a dangerous game.”

I shrugged. “Again,” I said, warningly, “tell him if he wants to get paid that he’ll do whatever he needs to do to keep it under wraps there.”

Enzo nodded.

I smiled and patted his cheek condescendingly. “Atta boy.”

His eyes narrowed into slits and his face reddened with anger. He slapped my hand away, fueled.

“Don’t fucking do that!”

I smiled even wider. “There you are, you fucking douchebag!” I laughed, throwing my arm around his neck and pulling him into a half hug, careful not to spill my drink. “Pour yourself a drink and stop being an uptight little bitch. You’re my friend, not my employee.”



“HEY?” I called out to Enzo as he staggered out into the chill of the night.

We’d all been drinking for hours now, planning the doom we were going to bring on Dominic Betrami, but something was eating at me that I needed to ask him about.

“Yeah?” Enzo turned to face me, his brow raised.

“You think your guy can look into someone with just a first name and a phone number?” I didn’t pay attention when I

left her house that morning. I wanted to keep the mystery. But now, with cop contacts telling me to lay low and a mob boss breathing down my fucking neck, I knew I had to be careful.

I couldn't afford any missteps.

He nodded. "He can track them down," he said. "Why?"

I handed him the paper. "I need discretion on this one," I said quietly, leaning forward. "But I need this chick checked in on."

He nodded again. "Quiet as a mouse, Boss."

I trusted Enzo with my life.

I trusted him as much as I trusted Dimitri.

He was just as much of a brother as Dimitri.

But still, there was unease as soon as I handed the paper to him. I wasn't sure if it was because I was worried about what he would find, or if it was the fact that I felt targeted on all fronts.

Something was going down, and I needed to figure it out before we all got screwed.

Information was power, and I needed to be well-informed to get my bearings on all this. I needed to know anything and everything.



# ANNABELLE

SITTING BACK AT MY DESK, CLUTCHING THE CUP OF COFFEE for comfort, I felt a nagging sense of unease. I still hadn't heard from my dad. The collector's shop had left me with more questions than answers, and I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. My instinct as a cop urged me to dig deeper, to follow the trail of information and find the truth about my mystery man.

As a woman who knew she needed to keep her job, I urged myself to do a little less digging on Luca, and a little more digging into the murder investigation I'd been assigned. There was a tie there with the mafia. Francis Lasiter was into a little of everything. The drug scene — for money, and for recreation. He was into illegal gambling. He was into extortion. He had his fingers dipped in every financial scam this side of New York.

He was dirty.

I just needed to find out *how* dirty — and who he'd pissed off because of it.

“Hey!” Davis called out from down the hall. “Betrami!”

I swiveled my chair to face him.

“Want to go on a ride?”

I shrugged. “I think I'll stay here for now.”

“I have a couple of witnesses to interview,” he said.

“On the Lasiter case?”



He nodded. “A few women said they were partying in the apartment across the street and saw him being murdered through the window.”

I jumped up, grabbed my hoodie, and finished chugging my coffee. “Let’s go.”

He clapped his hands. “There’s my partner!” he shouted excitedly. “Elevator?”

I shook my head.

He grabbed my forearm. “You know you’re going to have to get over this fear of elevators,” he said.

Rolling my eyes, I continued toward the stairwell. “Not afraid,” I shot over my shoulder. “They’re just stupid.”

He laughed behind me. “I’ll meet ya down there.”



IGNORING the pile of paperwork related to my ongoing murder investigation and the witness files I’d just created, I diverted my attention to the computer screen. My mind was on Luca again.

I couldn’t shake him.

And maybe it was because I couldn’t shake him — that I was that intrigued, that interested — that I kept wanting to dig into the club incident.

Sighing, I looked over my shoulder like a child about to sneak a treat out of the cookie jar before dinner. With a few taps and clicks, I accessed the database of all the reports in the precinct.

I searched for recent shootings in a club or bar.

It would have been documented, and as much as I had agreed to keep the mystery between the two of us, I had to look. For my peace of mind.

What I was looking for, I had no idea.

But why had I not heard about it?

Why had Captain not heard about it?

To my surprise, there was no trace of it.

Nothing.

Nada.

Confusion washed over me as I scrolled through the pages of all the shootings in the last month, desperately searching for any mention of a club shooting. How could such a significant event go unnoticed or unreported? It was as if the incident had been deliberately swept under the rug.

Questions swirled in my mind, each one leading to more confusion and suspicion. Was there a cover-up? Who had the power to erase something like that from the system? And why?

Surely it would have had to have been reported. *Somewhere.*

A club has so many people in it at any given time. Any one of them had the power to report gunshots. It would have happened.

It had to have.

The realization slowly dawned on me. There could have been other forces at play, operating in a way that manipulated the truth to serve one agenda or another. Moles. Dirty cops.

I knew they existed.

How else would the mafia have been able to continue their antics over the years?

I wasn't stupid.

I couldn't shake the feeling that this was bigger than I had initially thought, and I had quite literally just stumbled into bed with something far more dangerous than I had anticipated.

"You're going down a rabbit hole," Davis said behind me, a tinge of humor in his tone.

My head snapped around quickly. "What?"

“I can see the wheels grinding in your head,” he laughed. “You do that sometimes when you’re making weird connections. But sometimes, keep in mind, your head plays tricks on you.”

I sighed deeply.

Maybe he was right.

Maybe I was making assumptions.

It’s perfectly reasonable for all of this to be a huge coincidence, but something inside of me wouldn’t let it go.

Ding.

An alert chimed on my phone.

A sigh of relief escaped me when I read that it was from my dad.

“Yeah, honey. Worked really late and crashed with a friend. Just woke up. Sorry I didn’t call. See you tonight?”

Thank God.

At least one thing was checked off my list of worries.

One thing down. How many to go?



# LUCA

ENZO'S WORDS HIT ME LIKE A TON OF BRICKS. HE HEARD BACK from his IT friend not four hours later.

"She's a cop," he said. The world around me immediately began to spin.

My stomach dropped.

Color drained from my face.

I felt like I was going to be fucking sick.

"It's worse," he continued, his voice heavy with concern. I stared at him for a moment. What the hell did he mean by that? What could be worse?

"She ain't just a cop, Boss."

"What else?" My voice was trembling now with anger. My fists balled. My jaw clenched.

"Annabelle," he sighed. "Her last name is Betrami."

The world around me seemed to fade into the background as those words sank in.

"Betrami?" I asked, heatedly. "Is this a fucking joke?"

He shook his head. "I wish it were. And it isn't just the same last name. It's his fucking daughter, Boss."

That son of a bitch.

That fucking son of a bitch!

Fury surged through my veins. I wanted to burn the world.

I kicked the coffee table forcefully across the room. I turned back to Enzo, my breath heavy. I seethed.

Had he sent her here?

I felt betrayed.

Manipulated.

What good was I as a don if I hadn't seen this coming?

Still unable to contain my anger, I swung forcefully at the mirror next to us. It had always hung in the entryway.

Until now.

Glass shattered, scattering shards across the floor, and some embedding themselves into my knuckles. I winced.

"Boss," Enzo said quietly.

I turned to him, anger dripping out of me.

I needed to get myself together. I knew I did. But I wasn't sure I could just then.

Breathing heavily, I tried to regain my composure, but the storm within me continued to rage.

*A fucking cop.*

*Dominic Betrami's daughter.*

Which was the reason she was in my life? Was it both?

"Boss, who is she?" he asked. "Why did you have me look her up?"

I ignored him.

Had I let my guard down so much that I hadn't seen a snake in the garden?

I took a deep breath, the broken mirror and damaged surroundings a reminder of just how dangerous I could be.



“I’M GOING TO KIDNAP HER...” I said plainly as we stood in the middle of the office in the back of my shut-down club.

Enzo and Dimitri laughed as I sat at my desk. “Excuse me?” Dimitri asked, leaning forward on the desk, holding his hand to my forehead. “You have a fever?”

I nodded. “I got intel that this woman was trying to make me, and that’s why she’s been hanging around,” I lied. “I’m going to kidnap her. Cut off Dominic at the fucking kneecaps.”

“Dude,” Enzo said. “You don’t think that maybe it’s a—”

I held up my hand to stop him from talking.

Now wasn’t the time to talk “reason” with me.

I’d thought about this.

I’d thought about this a lot.

And I had made my decision.

We kidnapped people all the time. What was the issue?

“Luca, you’re not dad—” Dimitri began, but I flashed him a warning look.

I scoffed. “That’s not what I want!” I snapped. “He’s going to pay for butchering my men.” My fists were clutched tightly. “Because now my NYPD payoffs are breathing down my fuckin’ neck, asking me to lay low. I shouldn’t have to. I’m a fucking Bonanno. Dominic is going to be the one to lay low. He’s going to be the one running away with his tail between his legs. Not *me*.”

Dimitri sighed and grabbed Enzo’s biceps. “Come on, man, let’s get ready for the shit storm,” he groaned. “There’s no talking sense in him when he has made up his mind.”

I scowled. “I’ll cut your tongue out if you keep talking.”

“We’ll tell the rest to get ready to kidnap a fucking *cop*,” Dimitri said over his shoulder as he and Enzo walked out of the room. The condescending tone was enough for me to put a bullet in his head. If he wasn’t my brother, I might have considered it. Something told me my parents wouldn’t approve.

“Pussies,” I muttered under my breath as soon as their footsteps descended down the hall.

I paced back and forth in my office. Frustration and anger brewed inside me like a storm. The revelation that Annabelle was the daughter of my enemy, Dominic, left me burning for revenge. He had butchered my men, shut down my club, and now he would pay.

As I weighed my options, a plan began to take shape. I needed to strike back, to make Dominic feel the same pain and loss.

No!

I needed Dominic to feel *more* pain and loss than I did.

What better way to do it than by taking a page out of my father’s handbook and kidnapping his precious daughter as leverage? It was a risky move, but it was the only way to make him understand the consequences of his actions; to take him to his fucking knees.

With a twisted smile, I reached for my phone and opened a text message. The words were carefully crafted, laced with an air of casualness.

“Hey. You said not to ask for booty calls, but what about a drink? Planned this time?”

I watched as the three dots rose on the thread.

She was typing.

“Same place?” she asked.

“Same place/same time,” I responded.

The thought of seeing her again, knowing the truth, sent a shiver of anticipation down my spine. It was a dangerous game I was playing, toying with her and her father.

But the desire for revenge burned fiercely within me.

Dominic didn’t know anything about me knowing it was him that did this.



I wasn't going to let it be known until I figured out why, until now.

Now I have something a little better in my hand; a far more powerful card to play.

I knew I was treading on dangerous ground. My NYPD contact had already warned me. But fear would not dictate my actions.

I was a fucking Bonanno.

And I would never — ever — run away with my tail between my legs.



# ANNABELLE

AS I WALKED INTO THE FAMILIAR BAR WHERE I FIRST encountered Luca, a sense of unease drummed inside of me. There was a nagging feeling that this place held some significance to him beyond our chance meetings. I looked around, on edge. Was he involved in something?

That coin.

The club shooting.

The fact that there was no information about it in our database.

It didn't look good.

I texted Davis a singular question. "Have you ever heard of the bar, The Flask?"

Was my imagination running wild? Maybe I was reading too much into things. Maybe I was just grasping at straws. Maybe my mind had been rewired to think everyone was involved in the underground crime scene I'd been investigating for so long. Maybe the job was taking hold of me in an unhealthy way.

I hadn't slept properly in God knows how long.

I took a seat at the bar, glancing around the dimly lit room as I waited for Luca to arrive. My mind raced, replaying the events of the past days. The absence of any records about the shooting at his club gnawed at me, but a sudden realization struck me like a lightning bolt.

Maybe I had been looking in the wrong place.

I had focused on the records within the city, assuming the incident had taken place in New York. But what if it happened outside the city limits? I hadn't checked every system in the state. I didn't have the power to do that.

The thought brought a glimmer of hope and an ease of the building pressure in my chest.

There was a chance that I had overlooked a crucial piece of information.

I still wasn't sure why I came. Having the suspicions that I did.

Call it curiosity to learn more.

Call it stupidity.

Call it whatever you want but when he walked through the door, I felt my heart lurch into my throat.

He wore a tight black shirt that hugged his muscles in such a way that I could see every contour.

Taking a deep breath, I reminded myself not to jump to conclusions prematurely tonight, but also to be a little cautious.

I reminded myself not to get swept away.

It was entirely possible that my mind was conjuring up wild scenarios, linking Luca to the mob solely based on the coin and the secrecy surrounding the shooting. But it was also possible I was right.

The closer he got to me, and the moment I smelled his tobacco vanilla cologne, I knew the odds were that my mind was playing tricks on me. He smiled at me. His eyes were soft. Caring. Beautiful.

I couldn't help but smile.

There was no way that the man I'd hooked up with would have ties to organized crime, right?

This man?

The chances had to be slim at best.

Besides, I was been wrong about something being wrong with my dad. Clearly, my instincts weren't always in tune.

As I leaned against the bar, the surroundings offering a hint of comfort, I forced myself to relax.

“Good evening,” he said in the friendliest voice I'd ever heard.

“Hey,” I said with a nervous laugh. It was strange, agreeing to meet.

“You left this at my house this morning,” I said, handing him the coin, waiting for a reaction. Some sort of tell that said, “Yep, I'm a gangster.”

But that didn't happen.

Instead, his eyes lit up. “I didn't even know I'd dropped that!” he exclaimed, looking at the coin with admiration. “Do you know what this is?” he laughed, moving his thumb over the face.

I shook my head. “I've never seen anything like it.”

He smirked, his eyes glistening. “It belonged to my grandpa. It's a mob coin. My dad told me stories about him. I never met him.”

I nodded faintly, slowly.

“He was shot,” he continued. “He was involved in crime, ya know? I guess that's what happens when you're into that kind of thing.”

With each passing moment, my apprehension eased. It sounded more like this coin was his grandfather's — who by the sounds of it, was a mobster. The way he talked about crime was so innocent and detached that there was no way he could be involved.

I sipped my drink and silently hoped that this encounter would bring clarity and dismiss any of the doubts I had.

As Luca and I continued to talk, the tension between us grew palpable. There was a chemistry that I couldn't deny.

That same magnetic pull continued to draw us closer. And closer. And closer.

As our words intertwined, and our bodies moved closer, the heat of the moment and the tension in the air magnified.

I would have jumped him then and there if I could have.

He must have been thinking the same thing because he soon gestured toward the back of the bar, hinting at a hidden spot that piqued my curiosity. I smiled and followed him, weaving through the bar until we reached a small, vintage phone booth tucked in a corner near the stairs that must have led to the apartment we'd utilized before.

"I'm not into PDA, but I really wanted to kiss you," he said.

A shiver blasted down my spine.

The sight of the wooden phone booth stirred a sense of nostalgia, although it was well before my time.

It was completely in tune with the rest of the bar.

Vintage.

Beautiful.

A relic from the era it was built in.

Alluring.

Definitely one of the most beautiful bars I had ever been inside.

Without a word, we stepped inside the cozy confines, the air charged with anticipation. Our gazes locked, silently carrying a shared desire. In that confined space, surrounded by the faint scent of aged wood, we succumbed to the irresistible pull between us.

Our lips met, heatedly, our hands exploring one another.

The world around us faded into nothing.

It was just him and me.

There was an intensity in our kiss, a blending of passion and longing that seemed to consume us both. Neither of us

was in control.

Both of us were running on instinct.

Nothing mattered except the connection we shared that fueled our animalistic desires. Doubts, uncertainties, none of them mattered to me just then.

It had all been eclipsed by a raw, unadulterated need.

Time seemed to stand still in there, as we lost ourselves in each other's touch. Every touch, every caress. It spoke of longing and vulnerability.

It was a moment suspended in time, where our shared passion was clear and was all that mattered.

Luca's presence enveloped me, his lips tantalizing. I couldn't help but succumb to my arousal. The text message I had sent Davis completely drifted from my mind, overshadowed by the attraction that surged between us.

I reached down toward his crotch, but he caught my wrist. He pulled away from our kiss, and I looked at him, confusion setting in.

He smiled and pulled me into another passionate kiss, his tongue finding the trespasses of my mouth with expert precision. I moaned into him, wrapping my arms around his neck.

His scent was intoxicating as it wafted all around me. My nipples hardened as my body molded against his. I ground my hip against him, feeling his erection swell.

Now it was my time to tease.

I pulled away with a sly smile.

I had no idea if the alcohol had gotten to me, or if it was him who had left me drunken — not with alcohol, but with him — to the point of no return. Whatever it was, I was no longer acting like myself.

I was fueled by something raw, barbaric.

An animal.

And I *needed* him.

Skillfully, I undid his belt, just before looking out over the glass to see Tony, the bartender, wiping down the bar. I felt almost naughty knowing he could have come over at any moment.

So could any other patron that wandered to the back. There were at least two other men at the other end of the bar, completely oblivious to what was happening.

I didn't care if anyone saw.

I just wanted him.

I slid down his zipper carefully and snaked my hand over his briefs. He groaned as soon as my hand brushed against his clothed member. I reveled in the feeling of his girth beneath my touch. Smiling devilishly, I wrapped my fingers around it, and he maneuvered his sultry mouth to my neck, sucking on my flesh as moans softly filled the booth.

I pulled back again, my gaze locked in on him hungrily.

I recognized the lust in his eyes. I was sure mine looked the same.

I shot another cautious glance through the glass and was amazed that no one had seen us yet. No one had *heard* us.

My arousal throbbed at my center, and I ached with desire.

Suddenly, he grabbed the phone and held it out to me.

I looked at him, confused, but his smile left me intrigued. "It's for you," he said.

I rolled my eyes, a faint giggle escaping me. "Hello?" I played along, and that was all it took.

He flipped me around to face the phone, my breasts slamming against the machine, while he ventured behind me in the cramped space to explore.

I moaned, low in my throat as I dropped the phone and left it to dangle next to me.



I felt his hands slide over my hips, down over my buttocks, and another shiver rolled through me. My womanhood began to tingle. I wanted him.

Badly.

Now.

I closed my eyes, enjoying the sensation of his hands all over me. He slid them across my front, barely brushing over my nipples and caressing tenderly and gently down my body.

They journeyed downward until he found the button on my jeans.

My entire being was throbbing and aching with want. I pressed my backside against his swollen rod.

With one hand, he held my hips still and traced his hand farther down to the hem of my panties. I heard a low hum in my ear as he slid them down to my thighs and parted my legs with his knees.

I whispered incoherently as my knees nearly buckled beneath me.

Aching with want — *need* — my womanhood throbbed with an emptiness, but only for a moment before his hardened staff slammed deep within me, filling me to the hilt. Holding my hips, he thrust inside me, igniting passion in my depths.

“Yes...” I whispered, biting my lips in passion.

His thrusts were deep and hard and full of lust. His fingers gripped me tightly and I ground against him with everything I had, meeting every forceful thrust.

His pace quickened and one of his hands snuck up under my shirt to grab my breasts.

The sound of skin slapping against skin filled the booth, and I knew it was only a matter of time before the other people in the bar were alerted to what it was that we were doing.

But neither of us seemed to care.

I could feel my juices drip down my thighs as his thrusts became slower and teasingly shallower.

“Faster...” I begged, but I felt his hot breath in my ear soon after.

“Faster?” He mocked, sliding his hand down my torso to my swollen bud. His fingers encircled it, and immediately, I felt a low hum roll all the way from my chest, over my tongue, and out of my mouth.

“Faster...” I breathed raggedly.

“That’s what you want?” His fingers worked faster but his manhood maintained a slow, steady, shallow pace that frustrated me to my core.

“Faster!” I demanded.

And then he slammed into me, burying himself fully.

My walls clenched as he massaged them relentlessly. I could feel myself building, the pressure almost too much.

I was about to scream.

“Now,” he commanded, as I felt him twitch and jerk within me.

And that was all it took.

A wave of pleasure shot through my center, up to my belly and back down to my quaking knees.

My toes curled relentlessly, and I breathed out an exasperated groan that vibrated against the phone booth’s walls.



“GOD, do you think they saw us? What we were *doing*?” I ask quietly, a blush creeping over my face. I’d never done anything like that before.

As we emerged from the phone booth, our bodies still entangled in the aftermath of passion, I retrieved my phone and glanced at the screen. A message from my partner awaited me, breaking the spell of the moment and pulling me back to reality.

My heart quickened and lurched into my throat as I read his response.

A wave of unease washed over me. I felt dizzy and the color drain from my face as my heart fell to my feet.

“The Flask” was not just any bar.

“That’s a mobster hangout,” Davis said in his first text back to me.

“Why?” Was the second.

“You OK?” Was the third.

Were my suspicions right all along?

My mind raced, questioning the choices I had made and the risks I had stupidly taken. Why hadn’t I made damn sure before having sex with him again?

The line between desire and danger blurred at that moment. I’d been weak.

Uncertainty gripped me, mingling with a sense of betrayal. How could I have fallen into the arms of a man entangled in a web like this? Questions and doubts swirled within me, demanding answers I wasn’t sure I was ready to even face.

“I need to get going,” I said faintly, my face drained of color from shock. I did my best to play it off. “I think those gentlemen might know what transpired, and I can’t sit here and drink knowing that.”

But as soon as I went to grab my bag, I watched darkness dance over Luca’s face, and a force slammed into me from behind.

I whipped my head around to see a large, burly man. He was grabbing me forcefully from behind.

I screamed, the other patrons in the bar unfazed as he hoisted me over his shoulder. I clawed and kicked and fought as a wave of shock and alarm engulfed me. My instincts kicking in, I desperately tried to break free.

I was unarmed.

Stupidly so.

But that didn't mean I wasn't going to fight to the death.

It was no use; the man held me firmly, rendering me limp in his arms.

I shot a look at Luca, as the gorilla of a man held onto me tightly. A mix of surprise and betrayal must have been etched on my face. How could this man have sex with me and then take me hostage?!

*Why* was he taking me hostage?!

The tension in the air was thick as the man I'd just been intimate with stepped closer, his eyes scanning me with a cold, dominating intensity.

He patted me down, searching for concealed weapons or hidden surprises. I scoffed. "We just had sex, you asshole," I growled. "Wouldn't you have found it!?"

The touch was intrusive and invasive, more about power than finding anything. I knew that.

I knew his kind.

"What the hell is this?!" I screamed, playing dumb.

How did he know I was a cop?

"No gun on you at all?" he asked, his brow raised. His tone was soft and calculated.

Eerily so.

"If I find one, I'll shoot you with it," he warned with a harsh whisper.

I spit on him.

"Fuck you!" I growled.

He chuckled, wiping his face. "Fiesty."

"I don't have a weapon on me," I groaned. "Unfortunately."

I was stupid to have come unarmed.

My bag had a gun in it, but I didn't have one on me.

“What about your badge?” he asked.

“My bag,” I sighed. “My service pistol is also in there.” I knew he’d find it anyway.

He grabbed it off the chair, clutching it close to his body. “Let’s get upstairs.”

I could do nothing but watch as my weapon, the symbol of my authority and protection, was swiftly pocketed by the mobster I’d apparently and stupidly been sleeping with.

Followed by my badge.

I had no idea what was going on.

And Luca didn’t tell me.

Not yet anyway.

I was met with silence as the husky stranger carried me upstairs.

I couldn’t comprehend the situation.

How did he know I was a cop?

As I was carried away, I knew one thing: I had to stay composed.

I was going to have to analyze every single thing that happened between now and getting free.

I was going to have to find an opening; an opportunity to regain control. I had to remember my training.

I had to be observant; looking for any clues that could help me escape.

As we ventured upstairs, I steeled myself for what I knew was about to come.

It was going to be a bumpy ride.

No doubt about it.

It was becoming increasingly clear that he was no ordinary man but rather a player in the dangerous game of organized crime.

Just before I was carried away too far to still see him, I watched as Luca stepped back toward the bar and shared a quick exchange with the bartender. Their conversation dripped with caution.

My heart raced, hoping this man would save me.

I knew that wasn't going to happen.

This guy and everyone in the bar had to be in on this.

"You didn't see nothin', so don't say nothin'," Luca told Tony and the other men at the bar in a hushed tone, his eyes scanning the room for any sign of eavesdroppers. Tony's face tightened.

"I told you, Luca," he replied with a sigh. "You have to keep this shit under wraps here. It's a balance, ya know?" I could hear it in his voice; the bartender was frustrated.

They were playing a dangerous game.

Getting a business involved.

I wondered if Tony might be my key out of here.

He didn't seem particularly enthused about what was going down.

I wondered if he was a weak link.

I caught a final glance before the man ascended too far for me to see.

Luca's eyes were narrowed, his expression serious. "This one is different," he responded, his tone tinged with warning. "She's playing both sides."

Tony's eyes widened in disbelief, a mixture of shock and concern crossing his face. What were they talking about?

The creaky stairs that led to the upstairs apartment seemed forever long. Each step felt heavy, and each one was closer to marking me for death.

But for what?

I wasn't even investigating them!

The gorilla-sized man carried me with an iron grip, his strength overwhelming as he hurled me onto the cold, unforgiving floor just inside the living room. I hit the ground with a thud, the force of the impact reverberating through my body. Pain shot through me, but I refused to show it. I wasn't going to give them the satisfaction. Instead, I scrambled to a sitting position, my eyes locked on Luca as he entered behind us.

I wasn't going to let them break my spirit. I struggled to gather my thoughts and find a way out of this.

One thing became abundantly clear: Luca's involvement with the mob was surefire.

He approached me, his steps deliberate and purposeful. With a flick of his hand, he tossed my badge at me, the metal glinting as it tumbled. It landed next to my thigh with a mocking clatter.

"So, you're a cop," Luca's voice resonated with a blend of disbelief and rage. He towered over me, his presence suffocating as he waited for answers that I knew I didn't have. "Who sent you? Who's pulling your strings?"

I met his piercing gaze.

If only he knew what kind of dumb luck this was.

My mind raced for a moment — for an escape plan, or something to say that would appease him.

Judging by the look on his face, he wasn't going to buy the whole, "I wasn't investigating you" bit. Even if it *was* the truth.

Despite my fear, I stayed composed.

And I said nothing.

But he wasn't good with nothing, either.

He crouched beside me and grabbed my face roughly. His hands squeezed my cheeks tightly as he forced me to look at him. "Fucking tell me!" he hissed through gritted teeth.

“No one,” I replied, my voice steady despite the new tremor in my heart. He looked evil.

A flicker of doubt crossed his eyes but it quickly evaporated, replaced by an even more hardened expression than before. His face was inches from mine, his breath heavy with a mixture of anger and suspicion. “You expect me to believe that? A cop poking around in my business, sleeping with me? All just a *coincidence*?” His voice dripped with cynicism.

I lifted my chin. I wasn’t going to let him scare me.

“I didn’t know who you were when we met. It was a chance meeting, you dipshit. Besides, sleeping with you for my job would make me a whore.”

“If the shoe fits,” he laughed.

I sneered at him through slitted eyes. That bastard.

“And what about your father?”

I scoffed. “What about him?”

His expression softened for a moment, an odd flash of something playing across his face. There was another flicker of doubt there, but also something else. Something I couldn’t place. Something fleeting. It was quickly replaced with a clenched jaw and coarse demeanor.

He rose to his feet, leaving me on the ground, my heart still pounding. My legs started to twitch as adrenaline pumped through my veins.

I clutched my badge so tightly in my hand that the edge embedded in my palm.

Luca turned away. “Lock her up on the radiator.”

With those final words, he disappeared out the front door and into the darkened hallway.

What the hell had I gotten myself into?





# LUCA

I HELD HER GUN IN MY HAND, TAUNTING HER WITH IT AS I held it against her cheek. I'd left her on the living room floor, handcuffed to the radiator for hours now.

Just trying to break her.

The cold metal of the gun pressed against her delicate features. My eyes locked onto hers, and I studied her expression. It was cool. Calm. Collected.

For now, anyway.

A wicked smile tugged at the corner of my lips. I had power over her; she just didn't know it yet.

"You see, detective," I started, my voice dripping with malice, "you being a cop didn't concern me as much as your little family ties did." I pressed the gun a little deeper into her flesh, the metal biting sharply into her skin, hoping that it was a physical reminder of just how much danger she was in.

But she had balls of steel.

She didn't give a rat's ass.

She was unfazed.

I wasn't sure if it pissed me off, or if I admired it, but her eyes flickered with a defiance I had never seen in a woman. To say that it didn't spark some sort of intrigue in me would be a lie. There was a fire in her.

It was admirable.

But I was going to extinguish it.

“I know who your father is,” I continued, my voice low and threatening.

“And?” She rolled her eyes. “Who is he to you?”

“You don’t know?” I asked, studying her expression.

Would it even be possible for a cop to not know their old man was a mobster?

“Dominic Betrami.”

She nodded condescendingly. “Anyone with a computer could figure that one out, jackass.”

“Yeah,” I laughed, pressing the gun harder into her cheek. “But would a Google search show that he’s the prick who thought he could meddle in my affairs and start shit at my nightclub?” A surge of anger coursed through me, memories of the shootout tearing into the forefront of my mind. “Tell me, detective, how does it feel knowing your dear old dad has blood on his hands?”

Her eyes narrowed, a flicker of pain and anger dancing across her face. I could see the turmoil spread through her. Either she didn’t have a clue what I was talking about, or she was the best damn actor in the world.

She remained silent for a moment.

I lowered the gun.

“Either you’re a really shitty cop or a really good actor,” I chuckled lightly.

I could tell by the look on her face, that it wasn’t amusing to her.

Her lips remained shut, unwilling to give me any sort of other response.

I leaned in closer and pulled the gun back up to her face, my voice a venomous whisper. “Whether or not you had anything to do with this, you’re still going to pay for your father’s mistakes by helping me with a plan. And I’m going to enjoy every second of watching him squirm.”

With a swift motion, I pulled the gun away from her face and tucked it in the waistband of my pants. The weapon was only a prop, a symbol of the power I held over her. It wasn't her life I was after.

That would be too easy.

“Consider yourself lucky,” I sneered, my voice laced with contempt. “I'm not going to kill you. Not yet, anyway.”

I stood up again and looked down at her warningly. “If you try anything stupid,” I started. “I'll kill you with your own gun.”

I turned away, to leave her in the room alone once again.

It was game on.

Whether I was ready or not.

I was going to test her boundaries. I was going to find out how strong she was, and how strong Dominic was.

I knew the stakes were high, but they had to be. I had to be ruthless. I had to have twisted pleasure in fucking with every single one of my enemies; and right now, she was an enemy.

“You're wrong,” she whispered faintly.

I turned to look at her and chuckled mockingly. I knew what she meant.

She meant I was wrong about her dear ol' dad.

My light chuckle turned into a loud, boisterously hard laugh that filled the room.

I could see disbelief all over her face. But her naivete — albeit cute — was a little frustrating.

“Sweetheart,” I sneered. “You might think you're clever, but living in a house of ignorance is fucking stupid.”

I shook my head, still jolted with laughter. “I'm telling you the truth. You might have your little illusions of your old man, but I can assure you, he's knee-deep in the mafia.” At the moment, I relished the opportunity to expose her to the harsh reality she had been shielded from.

It was time.

She was about to be forced into a lot more, and the sooner she got on board, the better for everyone.

Her eyes narrowed with anger, but I ignored it and stepped closer once again, my voice lowering into a sinister whisper. “Don’t fuck with me, and you’ll be OK.”



# ANNABELLE

I STRUGGLED AGAINST THE HANDCUFFS, THE METAL BITING into my wrists. Anger coursed through me, fueling my determination to escape this shitty situation. The pain intensified with every attempt I made to free myself. How could I have been so naive, so *stupid*, to let myself be used by him, to let my guard down?

The living room I was in felt smaller and smaller with every hour that passed. It was suffocating. I couldn't help but feel a sweeping feeling of disgust, in him, and in myself for allowing him to take advantage of me one last time. What kind of monster would have sex with me knowing I was a cop, and according to him, the daughter of his enemy?

How could I have been thinking with my sex instead of my head?!

I wasn't a man!

Women were supposed to be more intuitive.

But it wasn't the time for self-pity.

It was the time to pull my head out of my ass and get things done.

I needed to focus and find a way out of this mess. The pain in my wrists served as a constant reminder of the fact that I was handcuffed to a fucking radiator. With each twist and turn, I groaned and tears burned in my eyes.

I knew only one way to do this.

I wanted to avoid it, had hoped the dumbasses didn't know how to properly put on cuffs.

They did. They were tight. Very tight.

The only thing that could get me out of this was breaking my thumb.

I took a deep breath.

“Shit,” I whispered, my breath ragged.

In the silence of the room, the weight of my predicament bore down on me.

I couldn't let fear take hold. I had to be brave. I had to believe it was my way out.

I breathed heavily, readying myself.

I bit my arm, hoping to muffle a scream.

One.

Two.

Three.

*Crack!*

A sickening crunch rang out followed by agony.

I grimaced as a sharp, intense pain shot through my hand. “Shittttt...” I squealed into the flesh of my arm.

A wave of nausea washed over me.

My thumb hung limply as I squeezed the metal down over my wrist. My heart pounded in my chest as soon as I freed myself, the pain shooting through me. I gritted my teeth, tears streaming down my face.

I took a deep, relieved breath before I made my way off the floor. There was no time to savor victory when I was still in that goddamn apartment.

I pushed the pain aside, steeling myself for what was next. I was going to have to figure out a way out of here. And my destination was none other than the fire escape I'd used with Luca the first night we slept together. I just had to get to it.



Using one hand to pull open the window, I realized it was stuck.

I struggled against it, pulling with all my might. It wasn't this hard when he and I snuck in here a few nights ago!

“Fuck!” I whispered harshly.

If I broke the glass, they'd hear me.

I elbowed the bottom of the window, hoping I could jar it just enough to pry it open. “Come on!” I pleaded, pulling it again. It budged!

Sliding the window open, I groaned, the pain in my thumb radiating up my arm.

A sound burst out across the room, vibrating the walls around me.

“What the fuck?!” a man wailed from behind me, having just blasted through the door of the apartment.

I tried to climb out, but before I could hoist myself onto the windowsill, the man lunged at me, tugging me down to the floor with him.

My breath leaped from my diaphragm as soon as we hit the ground. The man's eyes were burning with fury, and his face was scrunched in anger just as much as his fists were clenched and ready to fight.

His large body straddled me, pinning me to the floor.

My heart raced as adrenaline pumped through me. I could tell, by the look in his crazed eyes that he was ready to unleash holy hell upon me.

I raised my hands, shielding my face. Every movement was excruciating — from a damned thumb. But I wasn't going to relent. I wasn't going to let him win.

I dodged his initial strikes, but my thumb protested with every move I made.

I knew I would have to fight back.

I couldn't just block.

Not forever.

With calculated precision, I aimed for his throat and landed my punch.

He choked and fell beside me, his heavy weight no longer on top of me.

I groaned, the pain intensifying.

I could have just run.

I could have jumped through the window and shimmied down the fire escape like I'd planned, but something pulled me back.

Fury.

Pure, unrelenting fury.

I jump on top of him like a fucking puma pouncing on its prey and unleashed blow after blow to his face. The bone of my thumb ground against itself with every hit, zapping every ounce of strength I had little by little.

Pained tears streamed down my cheeks.

But I didn't let up.

The fight raged on.

This was more than just a desperate attempt at survival.

This was revenge.

My vision blurred, a combination of sweat and tears making it even more difficult to focus. I could feel my body tiring quickly now, the pain seeping into every fiber of my being. Yet, I wouldn't stop.

I couldn't.

Then, in a cruel twist of fate, his fist connected with my temple, sending shockwaves of pain radiating through my skull until I fell back and crashed against the hardwood floor. My vision exploded into a dizzying array of colors.

The world faded into darkness. Everything around me turned black.



AS I SLOWLY REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS, a ringing in my ears exploded.

I struggled to sit up, my entire head pounding with relentless fervor. I sighed, clutching the place where Luca's henchman punched me. My surroundings had changed, and I now found myself in a familiar but unsettling place — the bedroom where Luca and I shared our first intimate night.

Panic surged through my body as I realized I was no longer bound by handcuffs, but locked in the bedroom. The window was boarded up.

I dashed to the door, jiggling the knob.

Locked.

“Damn!”

A muffled — yet heated — exchange of voices reached my ears, and I strained to make sense of the argument taking place in the next room. Luca's voice carried a mix of anger and frustration, his words sharp and biting. I just couldn't pinpoint what it was about.

Maybe that was something I could use against them.

I groaned as I leaned against the door, straining to hear whatever I could.

My mind was riddled with questions.

“Still doesn't give you a right!” Luca barked.

“She was beating the shit out of me, Boss! Like a fucking wild woman!”

“We just fucking kidnapped her!” he hissed. “What did you expect her to do? Hug you!?”

I grinned.

He didn't want them to hurt me.

Good to know.

His plan involved me being unscathed.

I surveyed the room, looking for any advantage or means of escape. Every detail became a potential way out., something I had to make note of.

Every object could be a weapon, too, I told myself as I scanned the room for pieces of furniture and knick-knacks with points or heft behind them.

As their argument escalated, I hobbled to each corner of the room looking for things I could use.

I was going to get the hell out of there.

I was going to expose them. Whether there was much in this room or not.

I would find something.



# LUCA

I TOOK A DEEP BREATH, MY FRUSTRATION ALMOST GETTING THE best of me.

How had things become so complicated? This girl, Annabelle, was never meant to be more than a good screw and a fun time. Yet, here I was, caught up in a shit storm, with her in the middle.

On one hand, the broad was a cop.

On the other, she was the fucking daughter of my enemy.

I turned to Enzo, my loyal second in command.

My underboss.

He had been digging his new role a little too much.

“I don’t understand why I care so much about what happened to her,” I admitted, my voice tinged with frustration. I’d just beat the shit out of one of my capos for hitting her in the head and knocking her out cold.

But why?

It’d prompt Dominic a little harder.

It’d feed into my plan a little better.

So why did I care?

It made sense to rough her up a little.

“Maybe you like her,” he joked, but I scowled in response.

“She’s just a pawn.”

Enzo chuckled again. “And how is she that?” He asked. “You still haven’t told me your plan.”

I knew he and Dimitri didn’t approve of her being a cop. But I also knew that deep down, he understood the complexity of the situation. I also knew he trusted me and my judgment.

“Dominic will be given two choices,” I said, my tone resolute. “Either Annabelle dies, which will completely be his fault, or she becomes my wife, which would be a constant reminder of the leg up I have on him.”

Enzo’s laughter burst out over the hallway.

“That’s fucking insane, Luca,” he bit out. “You know that he’s not going to let you marry her. He’ll find us and unleash holy hell on us.”

I knew Enzo knew about my parents’ twisted history. Everyone in our family knew. This situation was only a parallel to that. This was just a page out of my old man’s handbook. My dad had kidnapped my mom — and it had worked. Her dad relented.

Enzo looked at me knowingly.

“Are you sure this isn’t some weird thing you’re doing to get a bride? Because the fact that it worked out with your mom and dad is the exception and not the rule.”

I rolled my eyes, even more frustrated. “No,” I replied, exasperated. “You know that love has no place in this game for me.”

I sighed heavily.

“This time,” I continued. “There will be no love. It will just be a way for me to make Dominic Betrami my bitch.”

As the weight of my plan settled in my mind, I knew it was almost time to pull the trigger.

I needed to talk to her.

I needed to contact Dominic and lay out his options. But first, I wanted him to sweat it out; to wonder where the hell his precious daughter might have gone.

He wouldn't notice a cop not coming home for a night. Something told me she stayed out often.

But he might notice her not coming home for a few days.

I pushed aside any lingering doubts or moral qualms that I might have had. I pushed them way, way aside.

I was a fucking mobster.

There wasn't time to have a conscience. Whether I was starting to like her or not.

My life measured merit on how ruthless I could be, and I was going to win.

I leaned against the wall at the top of the stairs, my gaze fixed on the door to the apartment.

Enzo leaned next to me, silent.

I could tell he was just going with the flow.

I knew he hated the plan.

But that was why I was the boss and he was second in command.

It *was* a risky plan.

Dominic could come in on us, risk his daughter's life, and make it a total fucking bloodbath.

That is if he had intel on this place.

But I had to trust my instinct.

I swallowed and let my head fall back.

The whole situation sucked. Annabelle was the only woman I had ever enjoyed being around. Of course, she was a fucking cop, and of course, she was Dominic Betrami's daughter.

I mean, why *wouldn't* she be?

I sighed. I never wanted her to be a pawn in anything. I just wanted some sexy company and decent conversation. She was never going to know my business, and I was never going to know hers.



I pulled my coin from my pocket and flipped it with my thumb, catching it midair.

The reality was that I was always bound by my circumstances. I had to live with the flow of whatever shit someone else wanted to stir up.

Love and personal connections are luxuries I couldn't afford. No self-respecting mobster could.

I had to use Annabelle for whatever leverage I could and be done with her forever. I couldn't risk the attraction. I had to cut physical ties if he agreed to the marriage.

I would only be her husband to fuck with Dominic.

For him to have a constant reminder right in front of him that I had beaten him.

There would be no more sex.

There would be no more flirty banter.

There would be no more connection.

It would just be her as my slave and him as my bitch.

I listened to the echoes of my voice, as I continued to discuss the fate of Annabelle and Dominic with Enzo. I sounded like a crazy person.

But this plan had to work.

It had to.

I just had to be strategic.

My dad had wanted the power of more households in combination; the resources my mom's family had. I wanted revenge.

I grabbed hold of the doorknob and entered the apartment, hesitating for a moment.

Pacing back and forth in the kitchen, my steps clanked and drowned out the silence. As I made my way back and forth, feverishly, over the floor, my eyes were fixated on the closed door of the bedroom.

I knew she was plotting a new escape plan just behind it.

It was funny because I knew there was no way she would get out of there.

She was locked away tighter than any prison cell.

A ding from her purse sounded and drew my attention to the countertop where it sat. Curiosity piqued as I dug into its depths and pulled it out.

A text. From dad.

*Dominic.*

“Honey, you OK?” it read across the top of her phone.

Swiping my finger over the screen, I read the entire thread from the day.

“Everything OK?” she asked first thing this morning.

“Yeah, honey. Worked late and crashed with a friend. Just woke up. Sorry I didn’t call. See you tonight?”

“I’ll be in a little late, but I’ll see you tonight!”

It had been hours since she’d sent that last text.

Of course, he would be checking in, asking if everything was OK.

I grinned.

My plan was going to work. He was already getting worried about not hearing from her. A couple more days and he’d be ready to talk.

My eyes drifted back to the door and sighed. My emotions faltered a little.

Despite myself, I grabbed a glass from the cabinet and ran the tap to fill it with water. I was sure she was thirsty.

Why I gave a shit, I had no idea.

She was just some random chick I’d had sex with.

She was no different than any other asshole I had held captive. Why did I give a damn if she drank something?

Whatever it was, with every step I took toward the bedroom door, I felt propelled.

Like a magnet was pulling me to go talk to her.



# ANNABELLE

I LOOKED UP AS LUCA ENTERED THE ROOM, THE THROBBING pain still in my head. I looked at him and sighed before gripping my head dramatically. It was hurting, but I was going to play it up, too.

Clearly, he was pissed I was hit in the first place.

Maybe I could use it to my benefit.

“I have a splitting headache,” I groaned.

He nodded silently and extended a glass of water to me. My hands trembled as I took it.

I looked at him anxiously. Although I hated myself a bit for showing any emotion. I guess it was true: You could never be sure how you would react to a situation until you were in the middle of it. I guess anyone could be affected by circumstances. I was no exception.

I was a little disappointed, though.

I always thought I was Johnny Badass. And that I could get through basically any kind of crisis with grit.

I thought I'd be steely.

I thought I'd give them hell on all fronts.

Not cower and tremble.

As I took the glass from him, I raised it cautiously to my lips.

If I hadn't heard him bitch at his man about hurting me, I would have probably thought the water was poisoned. I groaned, my dry mouth reveling in the cool water sliding down my throat.

Tension permeated the room as he looked at me.

"I'm going to ransom you," he said. I choked lightly on the liquid and looked at him, clearing my throat.

"But not for money," he continued.

What came next was nothing short of stupid.

He presented the most unthinkable, dumbass plan I could have ever fathomed.

My dad had two options: Allow Luca to marry me, or I'd die.

It sounded so ridiculous that I would have thought he ripped it out of the pages of a book.

A bitter laugh escaped my lips. It was laced with disbelief.

Was he serious? How could he be?

"This is real life!" I shot. I get it, the mob had a bunch of twisted realities and preposterous notions. But this took the cake!

I would have never fathomed it could be brought to this extreme.

An arranged marriage for revenge? A pissing match for power and control was more like it.

How ridiculous.

Luca's response to my laughter was chillingly calculated, delivered with almost cold certainty. Like he knew how I'd react and had a rebuttal ready.

"This plan has succeeded before," he said.

My eyes widened in disbelief.

Something so stupid had been put into action before now?

“And if you’re wrong about my dad, and he’s not this crazy mobster man, then what?” I shot defiantly.

He grinned. “He is.”

“He’s not,” I argued flatly. “I know my father.”

“Clearly, you don’t,” he scoffed.

I took a deep breath, collecting my wits.

I needed to stop arguing before I lost my footing in the situation.

I couldn’t underestimate this man and what he would do. I had to play it cautiously. But regardless, I wasn’t going to become a pawn in anyone’s game — especially one that threatened my father. Regardless of whether he was the very thing I had been chasing for years.

I met Luca’s gaze again, and his features softened this time, but only for a moment.

I narrowed my eyes at him and spoke firmly and unwaveringly, “This is not a fairytale, Luca. This is a dangerous game you’re playing.”

His expression changed to a cold sort of indifference. “That’s what I’m banking on.”

I took a deep breath and steadied myself.

This man was freaking incorrigible. He wanted destruction. He wanted to watch the world burn.

“Your old man is the one who shot up my club,” he said, the indifference still hanging on. It was like a mask, tight and unwavering. “Well, his men, anyway.”

There was no way my dad could be the same man he was talking about.

I had never seen my father raise a hand to anyone or anything.

Let alone shoot up a club full of innocent people.

“Where did this club shooting take place, anyway?” I asked.

He smiled menacingly. “That, my dear, is none of your goddamn business.” The mask of indifference was off, replaced with something much darker.

It was at that moment that I realized the man in the room with me — the man I’d slept with — was one of the most dangerous men I’d ever met.

But I couldn’t let that scare me now.

I couldn’t let it break my spirit.

I was going to get to the bottom of all of this. I was going to know everything I needed to about the shooting in the club. How there was no information in police records. How my father was involved. And then, I was going to get the hell out of here.

I was Annabelle Betrami.

I took another drink of water, the moment growing more tense the longer he was in the room. I wanted to claw out his eyes.

“Do you really think he’s innocent?” he taunted.

His cold words brought more weight to his presence.

“So, when are you going to talk to him?” I asked. “To give him his options?”

“Soon.”

If this was true, how could I have been so blind to my father’s involvement? How the hell could he have been in this world?

It would have been a betrayal.

He knew how I felt about the mafia.

Memories replayed in my mind as I searched for clues I might have missed. If this was possible, they would have had to have been there. The late nights when he returned home with bloodshot eyes, I always thought were due to extra shifts.

Not a second life.



There had been hushed conversations and whispered phone calls now that I think about it. I thought nothing of any of it at the time. I assumed they were the normal things that men hid. Gambling, sex ... those kinds of things.

Thinking about him doing some of the unspeakable acts I had been investigating was bone-chilling.

Anger surged within me, directed not only at him for his possible hidden life but also at myself for being naive if this all ended up being true.

I mean, sure, I wanted to believe Luca was wrong.

But at the same time, he didn't seem stupid.

The mafia generally knew who its enemies were.

They wouldn't have mistaken the identity of an enemy that had shot up their club. It didn't seem likely anyway. And if it was a case of mistaken identity, it wouldn't have been with a man like my father.

He was a nobody.

Not worth a mistaken-identity situation.

How could I have been so blind?

I felt my chest quake and ache, the realization hitting me heavily to the point that it was almost suffocating.

Was I about to have a panic attack?

I had to find out the truth.

"Soon?" I asked almost desperately. "I'd like to hear the conversation."

I wanted to know. I *needed* to know. No matter how painful the truth was.

The anxiety of the unknown was starting to get to me.

"Oh, sure," he said. "Would you like fries with that?"

I rolled my eyes. "You weren't this much of a prick when we were sleeping together."

“Yeah, that was when I thought you were just a random chick. Not a cop and not the daughter of an even bigger fucking prick than me.”

Reflections on the cases I had worked on flooded my mind, moments when I thought I had a firm grasp on the truth. Had I missed crucial details because of my dad? Had my biases caused me to miss connecting certain dots?

In the middle of all my incoming self-doubt, a flicker of understanding began to emerge, if for nothing else but self-preservation. I had to tell myself one thing: The world of crime thrived on secrecy and deception. Criminals in the mafia were masters of covering their tracks and manipulating those around them. It was a game for them.

No police officer was infallible.

We were all human. All prone to the same mistakes, oversights, biases, and temptations as everyone else. The criminals we pursued were cunning and resourceful. Luca was a shining example.

The guy was a charmer.

I had to use this situation to grow, not to sabotage myself. I had to use it to hone my skills and sharpen my instincts. I had to learn from it.

If he really was in the mob, I had to recognize that it didn't make me a shitty cop.

It made me a *daughter*.

A daughter who wanted to see the best in her father.

Who still did.

I hoped Luca was wrong.



# LUCA

THE ATMOSPHERE WAS TENSE, CHARGED WITH THE ELECTRICITY of anger and hatred.

It had been three days.

I held a large, white, ceramic bowl in my hands as I crossed the threshold of her bedroom cell.

Her disheveled appearance, with dried blood on her lips and tangled hair, drew my attention. I approached her, and our eyes locked in an intense gaze.

I could tell she was ready to jump up and murder me.

I couldn't blame her.

But we had to keep going.

There was a flicker of hesitation in her eyes, mingled with a hint of defiance as soon as I approached the bed and sat down with my bowl of water.

With calculated care, I pulled a cloth from the bowl. The water was warm.

I wrang it out and moved in, closing the distance between us.

The room was filled with silence, broken only by the soft sounds of water dripping from the cloth and back into the bowl.

Our eyes remained locked as I delicately cleansed the dried blood from her lips. She flinched at my touch, and I cringed.

She'd been pretty violent with every man I had sent in there, except for me.

I wondered if she worried about testing me too much, pushing me too far.

Whatever it was, I was the only one that could go in and get out unscathed.

The fat lip had come from another capo. He'd brought her a sandwich and left with fewer teeth than when he'd come in.

The touch of the cloth against her skin was surprisingly gentle, a stark contrast to the harshness of the situation we were in. It was a paradoxical moment, where tenderness and cruelty coexisted.

I couldn't let her be filthy and beaten.

Call me weak, but I preferred to think of it as preserving an asset. I was going to proposition Dominic any day now. I just had to get him good and desperate first.

My hand lingered, the intimacy of the moment almost overcoming me.

The lines between captor and captive blurred for a second, and a flicker of vulnerability flashed in front of my eyes.

I scowled and pulled away my hand.

"You can't keep being violent or I'm going to let someone kill you."

She didn't respond.

Her silence made the moment even more intense.

I continued to cleanse her, my thoughts wandering. I was unsettled with the way I wanted to look at her. But I quickly ignored it every time I was in the room. I had to push it away. I couldn't afford to be sentimental. I had to remind myself of the game I had to play.

It was the game I *chose* to play.

I had gotten my family into this, and I was going to see it through.

The water was turning a brownish red that intensified with every dip into the bowl.

There was something else that I knew I wanted to do for her.

It wasn't until I set the bowl on her dresser that I realized I was going to go through with it. "Clean yourself up the rest of the way."

She looked at me, wide-eyed but still silent.

She was resilient.

I had to hand it to her.

She had more nerve than anyone I knew.

Walking away, I sighed deeply. I knew what I was about to do was complete madness.

Stupidity.

As soon as I approached the house she shared with Dominic, a sense of unease washed over me. I knew the risks involved in what I was doing, but I couldn't help myself.

I remembered my mom's retelling of her and Dad's story.

I remembered she said having clean clothes was something that made her feel human. It had been days since Annabelle had gotten clean or changed her clothes.

Now, I could have just gone and bought some clothes.

But a selfish part of me wanted to do a little rifling through Dominic's things while I was at it.

Sneaking into her bedroom window, I found myself surrounded by familiarity.

It was strange.

I had only been there once, but it felt like I'd seen it a dozen times.

Small, personal touches.

Photos, yearbooks, ribbons, and trophies.

Little stuffed animals.

Small glimpses of her life.

I smiled faintly before getting annoyed with myself.

What the hell was I smiling at?

I gathered an armful of clothes. A couple of T-shirts. Yoga pants.

I wasn't going to bother with the underwear.

I wasn't going to be accused of being a pervert.

Just as I reached for the doorknob to venture toward Dominic's room, a blast erupted and a tall, bearded man barreled through the door, lunging at me with a knife.

Instinct took over, and although I didn't evade the initial strike, I managed to throw myself out of the window, knowing I needed to leave the scene quickly.

Pain shot through my arm, the blade still in it.





# ANNABELLE

I WATCHED AS THE DOOR SWUNG OPEN, REVEALING LUCA'S towering figure filled with an indomitable rage. The room seemed to shrink in the face of his seething presence. My heart raced.

He had never been more intimidating than at that moment.

His breath was ragged, and his teeth were gritted in anger.

I watched as his chest rose and fell and his eyes honed in on me like trackers.

I saw blood pouring from his biceps, hitting the floor below.

What the hell happened?

Part of me was afraid of him, but I was also worried about the blood spilling from his arm. It was unsettling.

He stormed toward me, his wounded arm leaving a trail of crimson droplets in his wake. My eyes didn't leave the wound, and a wave of empathy washed over me. Why? I had no clue.

The dude kidnapped me and locked me in a room for days! And yet, I gave a shit if he had a wound on his arm?

Without warning, he heatedly flung a pile of clothes at me. "Here!" he yelled. "Change into these!"

I looked down at the scattered fabrics along the top of the bed where I sat and realized something.

They were mine.

He winced and grabbed hold of his hurt arm before turning to head out the door. “Wait!” I called out.

In that fleeting moment, our roles shifted.

He became not just my captor, but someone wounded.

A victim.

It was strange and unsettling, and it evoked emotions within me that I didn’t think I could have for someone like this. But so did the fact that he went and got me clothes.

I was confused, but more than anything, I knew one thing: I couldn’t be like him or the rest of the mobsters I knew.

I couldn’t be a monster.

I had to keep my humanity intact.

I had to do what was right.

I had to help him.

When he turned his head, he was still furious. This must have happened when he got my clothes.

I spoke cautiously, my voice almost trembling, “Luca, please. Sit down.”

Reluctantly, he sank beside me, his eyes never leaving me.

“Don’t try anything stupid.” he hissed. “I’ll fucking kill you. Don’t tempt me.”

I believed him.

I mustered my courage and pointed to his wound. “You’re bleeding all over the floor. It’s grossing me out.” It was a simple truth, but I hoped it would lighten the moment a little, too. “Before I became a cop, I was an EMT. I know a thing or two about taking care of injuries.” My voice held a touch of authority, hoping to appeal to his sense of self-preservation. All mobsters had that.

Taking the glass of water I had on the dresser, I poured it onto one of the dry shirts he’d just thrown at me, saturating it.

Carefully, I approached him and pressed the makeshift compress firmly against his wound, hoping to stop the

bleeding.



# LUCA

I WINCED AS THE PAIN IN MY ARM PULSED WITH EACH BEAT OF my heart. She had broken her silence and spoken more words to me than she had in days. There was a care in her tone — and in her actions.

It didn't go unnoticed.

“Enzo!” I called out loudly.

Immediately, he burst through the door.

“Boss?” He asked quickly. “Shit!” he bellowed, seeing my arm. “She do that?!”

“No,” I said. “Go get the first-aid kit.”

He nodded, and turned on his heel, running into the hallway. There was shuffling in the distance, and he returned moments later. He placed the kit on the bed next to me. “I'll be right out here,” he warned her. “If you try anything with him, I'll shoot you.”

I chuckled despite the pain and watched him leave, the door slowly creaking closed behind him.

I watched her as she worked, my body reacting to her every move. Her touch was gentle yet firm, and the sensation of her fingers grazing against my skin sent a jolt of electricity through my body, sparking what I thought was a dormant flame inside of me.

As her fingers lingered after dressing my wound, I locked eyes with her.

It was almost as if an unspoken understanding passed between us.

Her fingers danced slowly over my muscles, taking them in.

My breath slowed to a near halt.

Every nerve in my body screamed.

It was a dangerous temptation beckoning me closer as the air crackled with intense electricity all around us.

Time slowed as we looked at one another. Our eyes pierced through each other as if we were searching one another's souls.

The space between us was becoming smaller, and my lips slowly hovered just inches away from hers. My emotions flooded through me.

I knew how fragile this moment was.

I knew the consequences of going further.

"How does it feel?" she asked, and although I knew she was asking about the wound, it felt like more.

Each syllable of her words spread over my skin.

My body tingled with warmth.

I didn't want her to stop touching me. Not by a long shot. Why did I want her like this? How had she done this to me? Every motion of her fingers on my skin made me more alive than the previous second.

Turned on in ways I didn't even know were possible.

My lips crashed against hers without even so much as a moment's notice. She squealed in response, kissing me back.

I pulled back for a moment, tracing the outline of her lips with my thumb. "You have perfect lips," I said before nipping them with another kiss. I wanted nothing more than to explore her mouth and have her mouth explore me. All of me.

Heatedly, she lunged forward, her hands on me. Mine on hers.

I pulled back again, almost breathless.

“I want to touch you. And I want you to touch me,” I gasped. “But this isn’t a ... prisoner proposition.”

She nodded, breathless.

She could easily kick me in the nads and run out the door.

She could maybe even kill me. But if she wanted that, why did she help me? Why bandage me?

“Touch you where?” she asked sultrily. My eyes widened. Was she playing a game?

She rubbed my length over my pants. I didn’t stop her. I couldn’t.

Instead, I leaned into her, dropping my guard. My mouth grazed over her ear, a jolt of anticipation and lust shooting through my body.

But then, I growled, pulling back again.

My body wanted to keep going.

My mind kept warning me.

I grabbed her wrists. “Don’t try anything stupid,” I warned. “We don’t have to do this, but you *do* have to stay in this room.”

She looked at me. My stomach flipped, waiting for her response.

She nodded, and an emotion I couldn’t identify flashed over her glistening eyes. I leaned in again, brushing my lips over hers. Once, twice, teasing and nipping until she whimpered.

I backed her up against the dresser after what seemed like miles of floor. She groaned, my erection grinding into her as I sandwiched her between me and the mahogany furniture. I gripped her hips and hoisted her to sit on top.

I touched her cheek and took control of her mouth, exploring her depths with my tongue. I stood between her legs, pushing them apart.

I was addicted to her.

Her hands slid over my chest, and I wondered if she felt my heart racing. It was beating like a drum against my chest. Hard. Intense. “Take this off,” she demanded, yanking at my shirt.

I grinned.

“After you.”

I pulled and tugged on her jeans to yank them off. And as soon as she pulled her shirt over her head, I shoved the cup of her bra to the side so that I could wrap my mouth around each breast, drawing her nipples between my teeth.

I growled in ecstasy, fueled by her flesh.

When I took off my shirt, her hands immediately explored the entirety of my torso, my stomach, and my arms. Her eyes marveled at me, soaking me in in the same way I’d been soaking her in.

Her nails trailed over my biceps and then traced circles over my shoulder. Gently at first, and then, when my tongue danced electrifyingly over hers, she clawed me, eliciting a heated moan from my depths.

She tugged the waistband of my jeans, unsnapping the button and jerking down my pants.

I flicked her hand away.

Now wasn’t the time to get distracted. I ripped off her panties, placing my hands under each of her thighs.

With a devilish grin, I pulled away from her kiss and lowered myself to my knees.

“Oh, my God,” Annabelle moaned, her breath hitched.

My intention was focused and precise as I moved my tongue over her slit, up and down, sucking and licking the swollen bud hidden beneath her petals.

She jerked her hips and entangled her fingers in my hair, her hips bucking against my mouth.



“You taste so good,” I mused as desire dripped from my voice.

I stood again and finished unzipping my pants, my groin straining against the fabric. I pushed my swollen tip at her entrance, the heat radiating over its length.

I stilled when I buried myself to the hilt, the sensation almost overwhelming.

Every inch was lustful and heated as she gripped the edge of the dresser, holding tight as she rocked her hips against me, wanting more.

Her head fell back, and I took full advantage to nip and suck on her long, exposed neck.

I slid all the way out, slowly, inch by inch. “Do you like my mouth?” I thrust back into her, taking her lips into mine again hungrily. “Do you like me kissing you?” I gasped between kisses. “*Everywhere...*” I looked down at her heated center as I thrust into her, marveling at how amazing it looked for my length to plunge inside of her warmth.

I groaned, the passion intensifying to a point that was explosive.

I was on fire.



# ANNABELLE

HE ANGLED MY HIPS IN SUCH A WAY THAT HIS THRUSTS WERE long, deep, and oh-so perfect. My eyelids fluttered closed. I was unable to speak.

I could do nothing but moan.

I wasn't sure what possessed me to even do this in the first place. At first, I contemplated using it as a means to escape, but once I got a taste of him, I couldn't stop.

"Tell me," he dropped a hand to rub circles between my legs.

"You like that?" he asked, darkly, even though I knew he knew the answer.

"Yes," I panted.

He swiveled his hips as he rocked into me. I threw my head back as he brought the pleasure I desperately chased.

He could feel me getting close. I knew he could.

My walls contracted against his stiffened length.

He froze inside of me, wanting the moment to last a little longer.

I grumbled from the lack of movement. My body ready for its release, and his teasing was frustrating. I needed it.

I needed him.

"Say it." His voice was rough and husky. "Open your eyes and tell me how much you want this." His voice, the command

in it, the desire in it, the dark aura of desperation I saw in his eyes, made something burst free inside me.

“Yes!” I screamed.

He continued thrusting through my orgasm as I squealed in passionate release over and over again. I was still limp when he tugged me away from the dresser and spun me around to face the mirror.

“Put your hands on the top,” he whispered in a silky voice, causing a shiver to roll down my spine as his hot breath danced over my flesh.

I listened, flattening my back and spreading my palms to steady myself. I looked over my shoulder at him in a daze. He ran a scorching hand down my back and pressed himself into me all over again.

He went silent for a moment.

All that could be heard was our breath, our mingled moans, and the sound of our skin slapping together.

No words were necessary as he continued to thrust in and out of me. I started to scream but his hand flew over my mouth.

He didn't want his men to hear any more than I did.

I whimpered into his hand. I could only imagine what they would think.

“Shhh,” he said in a low hush that sent shivers across my body, leaving goosebumps in its wake.

I writhed and struggled against him, but it was no use. He was much stronger. His hand was staying put.

He licked the shell of my ear, causing me to shake and cry out into his palm as he clutched my face tightly.

His hot breath fanned over my flesh as he bit my earlobe.

“Want to play rough, huh?”

He thrust even faster. Harder. Until he pulled all the way out and turned me around, frantically.

He licked his lips just before slamming them against mine. I moaned against the roughness, but I liked it. Marveled at it. as I felt my body propel backward toward the bed.

He crawled on top of me, and my legs spread instinctively. Leaning forward, he kissed me feverishly, his tongue battling against mine. He was dominating me.

I wrapped my legs around him as he squeezed my breasts and entered me again, his pace just as quick as before.

His rhythm was hammering as sweat beaded off our bodies.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head in pleasure as my head fell back and buried into the mattress. His mouth latched onto my neck, suckling. I couldn't contain myself.

The sounds that escaped me were telling.

I was spiraling into a sea of pleasure.

He pumped with heated fervor, every stroke sending a shockwave of bliss through my soaked core.

I couldn't believe I was doing this.

I couldn't believe I was letting this happen.

I couldn't believe I wanted it to happen.

There was a distinct arousal as he continued to sink his unforgiving, unyielding, and throbbing girth inside of me.

I had always thought of my body as my own until that moment.

It was no longer my body.

It was his.

He filled me to the hilt, electrifying every sense I had.

He possessed me more than anyone ever had before in my life, and he never once eased up. And each forceful, intentional thrust made me confront the truth.

Head on.

It was humiliating.

I didn't just like it. I *loved* it.

My mind would probably never be entirely on board, but my body sure was, and I knew we could both feel how much I was enjoying myself.

With every forceful thrust, my plaintive mewling dissipated.

Only to be replaced by throaty moans at every violent jerk of his hips.

My mind was still trying to rebel. But my body was completely at his will.

My mind was going to have to accept defeat. Especially as I felt my walls come crashing down around him, squeezing him with all that I had as wave after wave of pleasure coursed through my body, electrifying every neuron that I had.

I squealed as I clutched onto him, riding out every last jerk of his hips.

I couldn't believe I'd had sex with him.

Did I have Stockholm syndrome or something?

Whatever it was, I felt a sense of guilt well in my gut as soon as my climax was over and I fell next to him, breathless.

What the hell had I gotten myself into?



# LUCA

I HELD THE PHONE TIGHTLY IN MY HAND AS I READIED MYSELF to shatter Dominic Betrami. Annabelle stood beside me, her eyes fixed on mine, her presence almost making me feel guilty for what was about to happen.

“Dominic,” I said maliciously into the receiver. “I have your daughter.”

I had waited for this moment.

For him to get good and upset.

And worried.

There was a moment of stunned silence on the other end of the line, followed by a voice of pure rage. “You *what?! What do you want, you son of a bitch!?*”

“I want you to first admit what you did to my club.”

“I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about,” he spat.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my racing heart. I needed to keep my cool. “I’m afraid it’s not that simple, Betrami. I have demands.”

A mixture of anger and concern laced his words. “Demands? What kind of demands?”

I glanced at Annabelle, her eyes reflecting a blend of disbelief and defiance. Her presence reminded me of the gravity of my actions and how stupid I was to have gotten so personal with her all over again.



“I am going to marry your daughter,” I asserted, my voice filled with determination. “I want the union to be the truce. Either that, or she dies, and so do you.”

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line, and I could almost feel the intensity of Dominic’s reaction. I knew he was furious. “What the fuck do you mean?!” he thundered. “She is her own person. I have no say on who she marries!”

I looked at her and she cocked a grin.

I rolled my eyes.

“It’s your job to make it happen, as her father and the don of your family. Or she dies.”

Anna scoffed, her voice cutting through the tense air. “I have no idea how you think he has any say over who I marry. Who would give him the authority to make that decision?”

Her words struck a chord within me. It showed just how different her world was from mine.

In my world, the don had all the say — and they had it over everyone.

In her world, everyone had control over their bodies.

“Annabelle,” I pleaded warningly. I didn’t want to let the prick think she had any control over this situation.

Not with me.

Not with him.

“I’ll kill her if you don’t agree, and I’ll also kill her if she speaks out of turn,” I said. I looked at her through narrowed slits before ending the call.

I wasn’t going to let her ruin this.

“Are you trying to get yourself killed?” I hissed through gritted teeth. “Do you think I’m joking?”

She looked at me, her expression steeled and unrelenting.

“In the world I come from, the mob operates with a set of rules,” I explain. “In my world, the don chooses everything. In

my world, people are murdered for disagreeing.”

Her gaze softened for a second, a mixture of hurt and understanding in her eyes. It tore at my soul — but only for a moment. That was all I would allow.

“Marriage isn’t supposed to work that way,” she said, her voice filled with raw emotion. “Love should be built on trust and respect, and there should be the freedom to make your choices. You can’t force me into a marriage, and neither can he.”

Her words pierced me, a painful awakening to the truth I had neglected. She didn’t live by the same rules I did, so she wasn’t bound by the same loyalty.

She didn’t seem like she would relent. So, maybe I would have to sweeten the deal.

“Marry me, or I’ll kill your father.”

Her eyes widened.

I knew it.

I had won.

A part of me felt guilty all the same. That part was small. And it was weak. Weak enough to be pushed to the side and buried deeply as I spoke to her.

“You’re a bastard,” she whispered, pulling her knees to her chest as she sat on the bed. I stood there, my heart heavy with guilt and regret. That part was starting to edge its way to the surface.

But I knew I couldn’t let it.

I had to remain in control.

The air between us crackled with tension as her eyes blazed with a mix of anger and confusion.

I, too, was confused.

About everything.

Especially about our last physical encounter.

How had that happened? And why?

“Why?” I finally managed to choke out, my voice filled with desperation to understand. “Why did you... why did we... after everything I’ve done to you?”

Annabelle’s eyes narrowed, her face contorted with a mixture of conflicting emotions. “I don’t know,” she trailed off, defeated. “I should hate you,” she whispered. She paused, her voice trembling as she continued, her words now infused with a vulnerability I hadn’t seen with her yet. “But I don’t. I can’t. And I don’t know why.”

Her admission hit me like a wrecking ball, knocking the wind from me and tearing down any walls I had up.

How much more complicated was I making this?

“I don’t understand,” I whispered, my voice filled with equal parts disbelief and longing. “How can you not want to shoot me? How can you stand there and say you don’t hate me?”

Annabelle took a step closer, her eyes brimming with tears. “I don’t know.”

Her confusion about the situation seeped into my soul, poking and prodding at the layers of guilt and shame that weighed down on me.

Did she feel something?

Was this more than what we anticipated?

Or was I being played?

Whatever it was, I wasn’t able to resist it any longer. I jumped onto the bed, closing the distance between us, and cupping her face gently in my hands. Our eyes locked, and a whirlwind of emotions overtook me.

When I kissed her, I could taste the saltiness of our tears mingling.

It was a kiss filled with intensity. Pain. And a whole lot of uncertainty. There was no flicker of hope within us. Despite that, there was a tenderness to the embrace. A solace found; a comfort.

I knew we couldn't have a relationship.

Not a real one.

But maybe we could have *something*.

For now, anyway.

As we broke apart, our foreheads rested against each other. "I'm sorry," I mumbled. "I didn't know it'd be like this."

That moment was fragile.

There was something between us; charged, yet calm.

There was a vulnerability there like nothing I'd experienced.

Slowly, I climbed up her body, covering her. Her hair was fanned out next to her. It was silky. Smooth.

She smelled so fresh, despite having been locked in the room.

Her chest rose and fell with every hitched breath. Her face was flushed the most beautiful shade of red, and I smiled before lightly tracing my hand up her side. My fingertips glided at the hollow of her neck and brushed the smooth pale flesh there.

I frowned slightly She was shaking.

"Maybe we shouldn't be doing this."

I wanted her. But maybe it was too much.

I gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek. Her face flushed even redder as her lips turned up in a faint smile. "If you don't want to," I started quietly, but I was cut off as she grabbed my face.

Her lips crashed against my lips. I was surprised at first.

That was bold of her.

I kissed her back, wholly. Fully. Our tongues battled as our lips molded into one another.

I couldn't help but grin.

She responded by grabbing my shirt and pulling me against her. The kiss was so heated that I was growing more nervous by the second.

I pulled back to brush my lips along the side of her jaw. She tilted her head back, giving me access to her ear.

I took the lobe in my mouth, and she moaned as I darted the tip of my tongue inside.

I could tell she was aroused.

Her hands went to my shoulders, and she held me as her body twisted and shook with every taste, every nip, and every suck. I traced my mouth down to the crook of her neck as I ran my hands up and down her body. I sucked her flesh. She yipped.

Running my hands down her legs, I cupped the back of her knees, soothing the skin there. She sighed and bit her lip as she threw her head back. I sucked harder on her neck, wanting to mark her.

She let out a breathy moan.

I clamped my mouth on the flesh of her collarbone, my hands sliding their way back up her body to cup her breasts. She moaned again, arching her back, grinding her body against me as she rubbed my shoulders.

She was into this.

I dipped my head lower, allowing my nose to trail against her skin as I moved down from her collarbone to the under-curve of her breasts. I kissed the skin there and looked up at her, my eyes pleading.

I had never wanted anyone quite like this.

And it terrified me.



# ANNABELLE

I LOCKED EYES WITH LUCA AND MY HEART POUNDED IN MY chest. The gravity of all of this hung heavily in the air, and I had no idea how the hell to make it better.

My dad. Luca was supposed to be leaving to meet him.

I could feel the intensity and the anticipation fall off of him like beads of sweat. He was pacing in front of my open doorway. His feet clanked against the floor with fervor, and I couldn't help but stare at his feet every time they stomped.

Was he nervous?

I was supposed to agree to marry Luca for some kind of power struggle between him and my father. And I was supposed to do so without batting an eye like some pathetic servant.

I was supposed to be OK with the fact that Luca had given me an ultimatum. I marry him or my father dies.

I wasn't OK with any of it.

And yet, as appalled as I was at the entire situation, I wasn't sure how *torturous* being around Luca was supposed to be in the long run.

Because in every heated moment, I saw something in him that was different than what he wanted to portray.

In every embrace.

In every kiss.

In every moment I had stupidly allowed to happen. There was something there.

I hated that I felt something for him.

Who does that?

Who feels something for their kidnapper?

I knew I needed a full psychological evaluation if I ever got out of this situation.

Not only had he kidnapped me, but he had baited me, lured me, lied to me, and *then* kidnapped me after ensuring we had sex one final time — although, it wasn't a final time.

I groaned slightly and shook away my lecherous thoughts.

Deeper than all that, I was feeling something for a man that not only threatened my life but my father's.

What kind of crazy lunatic *enjoyed* the company of someone like that?

Had I gone nuts?!

And why the hell was I suddenly worried about this asshole?

I stood from the bed and walked toward the doorway.

Luca's men immediately stood at attention, their guns aimed at me. "Don't get a wise idea!" Enzo snapped. I rolled my eyes and Luca waved off his dogs.

"What is it?" he asked, looking at me, his eyes narrowed, jaw clenched.

"You can't go alone," I said matter-of-factly.

I might not have known much about the crime world directly, but I knew one thing: If Luca walked into that meeting alone, they'd kill him.

Not because I knew how dangerous my father was, because up until Luca had kidnapped me and I heard my dad on the phone, I never would have pictured him being the type that was involved in all this.

So it wasn't that.



He wasn't some dangerous man.

Not the man I knew.

But I did know how much he loved me.

No matter what my old man did that I didn't know about, I knew he would do whatever it took to keep me safe.

"My men are going," he grumbled. "Will you go back in there, sit the hell down, and let the men take care of it?"

I laughed mockingly. "That's gross," scoffed. "Men?" I looked around at his guys and smirked. Their expressions did enough to make it worth it. They were offended to the core.

Luca rolled his eyes. "Enough," he warned.

I loved that he acted so tough and brash around his goons.

"I'm going," I insisted, ignoring the situation around me entirely.

"You're not," he laughed, pushing me further back into my room.

"I am!" I argued. "If he doesn't see me there, he'll kill you!"

"That would be stupid," he responded, almost nonchalantly. "Because as soon as he did, my men would kill him *and* you."

"Luca, trust me," I insisted, my voice quivering with determination. "I know my father better than anyone."

"And yet you had no idea he was in the mob?"

A conflicted expression crossed his face and his brows furrowed as he studied me.

"I'm telling you," I said calmly, taking a deep breath as my voice escaped me. "He's going to want to see me there."

I could tell he was grappling with the decision, and I'd made my point with the seriousness of my expression. There was concern etched into every line on his face. "It's going to be dangerous," he said, and I could tell that the look behind his eyes meant it sincerely.

He didn't want me to die.

Strangely enough, I didn't want him to die, either.

"I'm telling you, I can handle it," I said. "Besides, I want to see him with my own eyes. Confront him about all of this."

With more reluctance than I've ever seen, Luca sighed and nodded. "Okay," he said. "But you need to promise you'll stay close."

One of his men moved in, his brows twisted in confusion as Luca's tone of voice seemed to betray him. He cleared his throat, "Or I'll kill you myself," he grumbled harshly. I could tell that was compensating. He didn't want anyone to know that there was something between us.



A RUSH of relief washed over me as we set off toward the front door. My heart drummed rapidly in my chest as a mixture of anticipation and dread surrounded me. I wondered if I could somehow escape, and what would happen if I tried.

The descent down the stairs was the longest in my life as I contemplated kicking Enzo and Dimitri down the steps and making a run for it.

But I didn't.

I couldn't.

This might be my only chance to confront my father.

I was about to see him in a way that I had never seen him before.

Under the worst circumstances imaginable.

I held tightly onto Luca's arm, almost finding a weird sort of solace in his presence. But the way I held him, was almost — defensive. Why would I be holding onto my kidnapper like this?

The warehouse Luca and his men approached in several town cars was rundown, to say the least. It didn't look like

anyone had been here in ages. The cars came to a halt in unison as the tires crunched against the gravel.

I took a deep, longing breath as the driver opened the door.

Stepping out onto the cracked pavement, the air smelled stale. The wind whispered through the emptiness and my head craned back and forth, looking for any sign of life.

All I saw was a desolate warehouse with peeling paint and broken windows.

It didn't scream mob-owned.

I looked at Luca for any indication, but his expression was blank.

Unreadable.

Every step we took amplified the emptiness that surrounded us.

The crunching of gravel beneath our feet was as loud as thunder.

Everything seemed still.

Enzo was up ahead already. He reached down to the large garage door and lifted it. The creaking of the hinges and gears rang out unpleasantly in my ears, and I cringed.

This was it.

The day I die.

Had to be.

With a gulp, I looked at Luca and cautiously, we stepped through the dimly lit hallway. The only light that beamed us was one at the far end, and it flickered ominously like in a horror movie.

My stomach gurgled with nausea, and the air thickened with tension.

Where the hell was everyone?

There was a stale smell in the air. One that almost burned my nose.

I'd smelled it before.

Drugs.

There was a knot in the pit of my stomach. Who had I grown up with?

I glanced around, taking in my surroundings. There were crates stacked haphazardly and mounds of what I could only assume were illegal substances within.

My throat swelled and tugged in fear the closer we got to the light. For somewhere supposed to be packed to the nines with men, the place felt abandoned.

And then, without warning, men dressed in sharp suits and the roughest-looking associates surrounded us from the rafters above. Their whispers were hushed, and that did nothing but add to the eerie undertone.

The flickering light cast distorted shadows. Luca's hand reached out to stop me from moving. "Where the hell is he?" He asked bitterly, to one man in particular.

He was just above us. His shadowy face mocked us from above. He had a menacing smile, and I could tell he was reveling in this little charade.

He was a large gentleman.

Broad-chested and tall, he wore a blue suit.

"He's not here," the man replied as he stared at us. "You the daughter?"

I nodded, and then without warning, a deafening gunshot rang out.

Before I even knew what was happening, the room erupted in frenzied shouts and gunfire.

Bullets whizzed past us, sending sparks flying off against metal and light fixtures. Glass shattered and destruction pounded at every inch of the warehouse as it transformed into a battleground.

The smell of gunpowder replaced the smell of drugs.

“Give me a gun!” I demanded as we skidded toward the walls, as far under the rafter walkway as we could be.

I wasn't a damsel.

I was a fucking detective. I could handle myself.

I just needed a gun.

But it was clear by the lack of response that I wasn't expected to help us get out of this. An explosion erupted nearby, and shards of debris flew through the air.

I felt Luca's strong arms wrap around me, pulling me close. His voice cut through everything going on around us. “Stay behind me!” He jerked me toward a hallway.

“Give me a gun!” I demanded from behind him once again.

I hated repeating myself.

I hated it even more when bullets were flying at me.

“I can't!” He battled, grabbing my wrist as he navigated through the maze of crates, dragging me closely behind him.

We darted from cover to cover. Every step was potentially perilous. Every decision was a matter of life and death.

My training kept me attuned to everything around me, but I felt naked without a firearm.

With another burst of adrenaline, Luca pulled me toward a side door, our best chance of escape. We sprinted through the narrow passage, dodging bullets. Our breaths came in ragged gasps and sweat trickled down our brows.

Bursting through the door, we stumbled into the dusky night.

Our bodies heaved with exertion.

The tension grew palpable as more men flung themselves outside behind us. Our town cars were surrounded by men.

“Fuck!” Luca growled, just before Dimitri's broad form shoved its way between us.

Enzo held out his gun to cover us, while Dimitri unloaded a hellfire of bullets at the men surrounding our cars.

Luca gripped hold of my forearm tightly, yanking me in a different direction. His sweaty palms slid over my flesh. I took a deep breath and swallowed, readying myself to keep running.

The sound of gunfire continued to splinter the air with its screeching pops. Panic ensued and I grappled with my senses, instinctively ducking and tugging away from Luca's grasp. The adrenaline coursed through my veins as bullets whizzed past us.

It was chaos.

Luca grabbed my shirt and yanked me down to the ground as his arm whirled around with a ferocity that made my blood run cold.

He unloaded rounds of bullets, his jaw clenched in hatred.

His instincts were kicking in.

Until searing agony surged through my body.

"Luca!" I wailed, a bullet had just torn through my flesh, finding its mark in my arm.

Time seemed to slow, and the world around me blurred into a haze. Another primal scream ripped from my throat as I got shot a second time, just inches away. It was a guttural cry of anguish and shock.

The pain was immediate and almost overwhelming, coursing through my body like an inferno. I gasped for air as a wave of dizziness washed over me. Nausea twisted in the pit of my stomach.

"Annabelle!" Luca screamed as he scooped me up in his arms.



I CLUNG TIGHTLY to him as we sprinted away, our heartbeats drumming in unison. The streets blurred as he continued to pound pavement. It was all a dizzy whirlwind and my arm throbbed in agony.

He set me down blocks away, lurching over, his breath ragged. The alleyway we were in was foreign, but it was a respite from what just happened and what I knew was to come.

His eyes met mine.

“Thank you,” I whispered raspily, clutching my bleeding arm.

His eyes softened and he grabbed me by the wrist. “Something isn’t right,” he panted. “They shot you.”

He was right.

Something *wasn't* right.

There was no way my dad would have done anything to jeopardize my life.

As I gazed into his eyes, I felt a depth to him that I wasn’t sure I could comprehend.

There was something here between us.

We were no longer two people caught in a web of circumstances.

We were partners. At least, as much as we could be given that circumstance.

“Let’s get you to a doctor,” he sighed, pulling me close, his breathing finally normal.

I shook my head and leaned in, our lips meeting in a breathy kiss. Our bodies pressed together in an intimate embrace. The adrenaline coursing through our veins began to ebb and the fact that I hadn’t died seemed to do something to stir a rush down south.

I held onto him, my fingers clutching onto the fabric of his shirt so tightly that it could have been my lifeline. What we had just gone through jolted through the air.

Tears suddenly welled in my eyes as I became overwhelmed with emotion.

His eyes, filled with tenderness and unwavering devotion, met mine. "It'll be OK," he replied, his voice filled with emotion. "We'll get you back to normal."

I leaned my forehead against his, reveling in the warmth of his hot breath against my skin. I leaned upward, my lips finding his once again. I could tell that this hadn't gone to plan.

I could tell that everything was even more confusing now than it had been before.

As we pulled away, our foreheads still rested against each other.

A quiet calm settled within me. The world around us might be burning, but I knew that there was something more to this.





# LUCA

AS WE SPED AWAY FROM THE WAREHOUSE, MY HEART SANK with a whole hell of a lot of guilt and even more regret. How had I let things escalate to this? Bringing Annabelle into my dangerous world was selfish — but it seemed justifiable up until this point.

Now? Now, I felt like a piece of shit.

I stole a glance at her, her face pale and two streaks of blood marking her arm, a reminder of the two bullets that had grazed her.

A surge of anger coursed through me, directed at myself for putting her in the fucking position in the first place.

I had selfishly put her there.

This was my life.

Not hers.

It should have never been hers.

I was a mobster, a man ingrained in a world of power, betrayal, and bloodshed. Anna was far from pure and innocent, but she should still be shielded from this world.

Dominic's arrogance had infuriated me. Was he seriously that ruthless that he didn't care that his daughter had been shot?

She had no loyalty to the family, no understanding of the ruthless nature of our business. She was a cop, a woman bound

by law and order or some shit, and I couldn't imagine him thinking she was in on this with me.

So why put her in danger?

It wasn't adding up.

I sighed as we left the doctor and made our way back toward the apartment above The Flash.

There was such a clash between our worlds.

My love for her burned deep and rocked me to my core, but it could be nothing more than whatever the hell it was now.

How had I let this happen?

I had a desperate longing to keep her safe, and I knew it was because of my feelings for her. I couldn't deny the truth any longer.

But why had I been so stupid to let it happen?

The mob life wasn't meant for her. I couldn't force her to marry me.

This was a world of treachery and violence, a world that would only bring pain and danger to her doorstep. A world where her father very well could turn his back and shoot her dead in the street.

I couldn't let that be what she knew.

With a heavy heart, I made the decision.

It was what I had to do.

It was what was right.

I had to let her go. I just didn't know how to do it without her getting hurt. The cops were dirty. Her dad was dirty

I knew I had to have someone follow her.

A tail.

But for how long?

"It's weird to be glad to be back here," she mused, The Flask only feet away.

I turned to face her, her cheeks flashing in the light of the neon lights surrounding us on the street. My voice was tinged with resignation. “You’re not going back,” I confessed, my voice hardened by the weight of my decision. “I’m setting you free.”

Her eyes widened, a mixture of confusion and defiance flickering within them.

Why wouldn’t she want to be let go?

I shook it off.

There was no way that was defiance.

Of course, she wanted to leave.

I had to stand my ground. I couldn’t let my mind play tricks on me.

This was what was best.

This is what she wanted.

I just had to keep her safe until I figured out how she would be safe on her own.



# ANNABELLE

AS I STARED AT LUCA, MY MIND WHIRLING WITH EMOTION, I found my voice. “What am I supposed to do now? How do I even begin to process all of this?”

His response was as cryptic as it was open-ended.

“Do whatever you think you should,” he said, as he stuffed his hands in his pocket and turned on his heel.

My arm was in a sling, but I reached out for him anyway. Only the sting brought me back to reality.

I had just been shot not hours before.

His words hung in the air.

Do whatever I thought I should do?

That was something that was still heavy with uncertainty.

Was he telling me to use this information in my case? Was he saying to turn him in? Was he saying to go punch my dad in the throat?

What the hell did he think I was going to do?

I had conflicting thoughts and desires tearing at my soul. Part of me screamed for justice, for retribution against the criminal world. Part of me wanted to nail every person I had found out had been involved in this whole ordeal

That part of me wanted to arrest Luca.

Confront my father. Arrest him.

But the other part?

I was confused.



AS I STEPPED out onto the streets of New York, the cold wind biting at my flesh, I felt torn. My gut was in knots. My mind was jumbled.

I had no idea where to go or who to talk to.

The city that once felt like home now seemed different.

I trusted no one.

I doubted everything.

Even as a detective, I didn't feel quite this much hopelessness. In my city. In my family.

In myself.

My father was apparently a crazy, power-hungry don — and as ruthless as they came.

The towering buildings cast long shadows over me as I walked with my arm clutched tightly to my body.

I had no idea what to do.

I had no plan, no path to follow.

I was adrift, caught between whatever the hell I felt for Luca and my father and my duty as a police officer.

The choice in front of me was daunting.

I walked aimlessly that night.

The honking of cars, the chatter of passersby, the neon signs illuminating the streets — all of it was there, I knew that it was, but I didn't notice it.

Each step I took felt heavy with the weight of my decisions.

Where could I go? Who could I trust? What would I do?

The city lights illuminated the streets, painting the sidewalks with a glow that did nothing to ease me.





# LUCA

“YOU LET HER GO?!” ENZO SNAPPED BESIDE ME AS I continued to slam back shot after shot at the bar. “Are you fucking mental!? And since when can we afford to send our soldiers out to be fuckin’ babysitters?!”

I shook my head. “This is the only time I’ll warn you.”

“Brother,” Dimitri scowled behind me. “Look at me.” His tone was serious. Angry.

I turned to face him, holding onto the bar to steady myself. “She won’t do anything about it,” I slurred.

Dimitri crossed his arms. “Oh yeah?” He mused. “You think she owes you anything?” He leaned close to me, his tongue dripping with venom. “You think kidnapping her and screwing her brains out is going to somehow sway her to give up being a cop?”

My fingernails dug into the palms of my hands as I balled my fists. My jaw clenched as I looked at him. I wanted to punch him in the face.

Just as soon as I stood, the bar doors blasted open.

Our heads snapped toward an imposing figure stepping over the threshold.

“What the fuck do you want?” I spat.

Captain Russo. NYPD superstar.

His presence commanded attention as he brandished his gun immediately and aimed it directly at me. The atmosphere

grew tense, and Dimitri and I locked eyes, silently communicating our readiness for whatever was to come. I glanced at Enzo, too. He nodded.

But before the captain could utter a word, he let out a hearty laugh, the sound reverberating through the room. Confusion washed over us, and I couldn't help but exchange a perplexed glance with my brother and Enzo. The captain's sudden change in demeanor was baffling, to say the least.

As the laughter died down, the bastard holstered his gun and took a step forward, his eyes glinting with mischief and authority.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" he asked, his voice laced with feigned surprise.

"The Flask back to its old tricks, huh, Tony?" he laughed, looking behind the bar.

"We're payin' customers tonight, Captain," I slurred.

He shook his head amusedly. "We both know that's not the truth, but that's not why I'm here."

Enzo arched an eyebrow, a hint of skepticism etched on his face. "Well," he said. "Then to what do we owe this unexpected visit?"

The captain grinned, relishing in the dramatics of the moment.

He loved doing this shit.

He loved somehow having an upper hand, even though he was on my payroll.

I crossed my arms, my expression stoic. "Spit it out."

The captain chuckled, taking a stroll around the bar as he surveyed our surroundings quite nosily.

His head craned to and fro before he rounded back to look at me.

Good luck, asshole.

We didn't have shit here.

“I’ve been hearing some interesting things about your operations since your club shootout, Luca. Rumors of deals. Certain alliances that might or might not be formed,” he said, his tone filled with curiosity and a veiled threat.

Enzo smirked, unfazed by the captain’s insinuations. “Ah. Rumors, Captain. You know how they spread like wildfire in this city.”

I, on the other hand, studied his expression.

He seemed even more wormy than usual, and that was saying something.

The captain raised an eyebrow, a mischievous glimmer in his eyes. “I’m well aware. But you know as well as I do that rumors usually come from a grain of truth,” he said cryptically, his gaze shifting from Enzo to me and then to Dimitri and back to me.

He dug into his suit’s breast pocket and pulled out a cigar. He exuded an air of arrogance that seemed to suffocate the room. Without a hint of finesse, he crudely clipped the end of the cigar, bits of tobacco scattering carelessly onto the floor.

I couldn’t help but feel a surge of suspicion as he walked closer to me, rolling the Colombian between his fingers.

I could tell by the way he was walking around like he owned the show, that he had a reason to be there.

His words held an underlying meaning.

A warning.

I had always known we couldn’t trust anyone — especially him — completely.

But now I wondered what else he was getting at.

His smile widened. “Remember, the city has eyes and ears everywhere. Keep that in mind,” he cautioned, his voice trailing off. “And I know for a fact that there’s a certain cop hot on your tail. And if I’ve heard stuff, I can almost guarantee she has.”

I scoffed.

“What cop?”

“Her name is Annabelle Betrami,” he said, taking a deep puff of his cigar. “But I have put her on a little bit more of a complicated case.”

“What case is that?” I asked, my gaze narrowing. I could tell he was up to something. Captain Russo always had something up his sleeve. Whether it had to do with me or not.

He smirked. “The Francis Lasiter case.”

My jaw clenched.

Francis Lasiter was one of the most recent men I’d ordered to be killed.

It couldn’t be a coincidence that she was assigned that case. “I thought you assigned that to someone else,” I said. “She wasn’t the fucking detective on scene that night!”

Captain Russo chuckled. “How else am I supposed to protect you?” he asked.

“I keep close tabs on the good cops — the ones who are focused on taking down crime. I can’t afford fuckups, Luca .”

He took a puff of his cigar and walked closer. “You were fucking up, sleeping with a cop without even knowing it ”

“And so you got her to work a case I was part of!?” I slammed my hand on the bar. “Why? To fuck with me?” My legs shook with adrenaline. “I’m not the man to fuck with,” I warned.

His demeanor was oddly cool as he waved his hand in my face, a trail of smoke in its wake. “I am setting up Betrami for that murder, Luca,” he laughed. “I was trying to save you from yourself.”

“So, you’ve known she’s been here the whole time?”

He smiled evilly. “I also had Daddy Dearest take a hike upstate for a deal when I had his right-hand man set up your meeting at the warehouse.”

“So, you’re the reason she got shot?” I shot.

He shook his head. “I didn’t know she was going to get shot, but I was trying to prevent you from forming an alliance.”

“What fucking business is that of yours? I pay you.”

“You may pay me, Luca, but our agreement is to not get caught.”

“How would this have played into you getting caught?” Enzo snarled, grabbing Captain Russo’s arm roughly to whirl him around to face him.

“You don’t know the tenacity of Annabelle Betrami!” he hissed, putting out his cigar on the bar and flicking it at Tony’s feet.

I watched Tony’s demeanor shift. His fists ball. That was his family’s bar, and no one disrespected it the way Captain Russo just had.

I shot Tony a warning glance. As his friend more than a keeper.

He was allowing us to use his bar.

We owned the apartment above.

Not his bar.

And I had agreed to keep all this shit out of here. But, desperate times...

“You were scared she’d find you out?” I asked. “So instead of coming to me, you decided to take everything into your hands?”

I was starting to wonder how much Captain Russo was playing me.

I didn’t appreciate it.

And by God, I was going to kill him if he was fucking with me.

“You always said to keep the details to myself and just figure it out,” he replied with a shrug.

I hated that snake charm.

And I hated him using my words against me.

“So, you knew I had Annabelle here and didn’t want an alliance. Did you ever stop to think that I was just fucking with Betrami?”

He nodded. “I did,” he said. “But I also know the romantic side of your parents’ story. I didn’t want to take chances. So I got with Betrami’s men and told them you were going to fuck them over. They were ready for you — and struck first.”

“And how do you plan on setting up Betrami for Francis?” I asked. “You said you were just going to make it go away.”

“This is how I make it go away!” he shot angrily as if I had just stepped on his toes. “Now, trust me to make this all go away and take care of it!” He nodded to me and turned to the door. “I just came here to tell you to stay out of my way so I can fix this mess!”

As the door closed behind him, a heavy silence settled in the room. Enzo and I exchanged wary glances, knowing that the game had just taken an unexpected turn.

The captain’s visit was a stark reminder that trust was a luxury we couldn’t afford in our line of work.

“That fucking bastard,” Enzo whispered.

Dimitri put his arm around my shoulders. “What the hell are we going to do next?”

I shook my head.

“If Betrami didn’t have anything to do with the attack on Annabelle, part of me wonders how much he had to do with the attack on my club,” I said. “He acted like he didn’t, and I didn’t believe him.”

“Until now?” Enzo asked.

“Until now.”

The captain’s words lingered in the back of my mind.

I felt like he was up to more than he let on.

Why would he go to these lengths?

If he was trying to make this all go away, why wouldn't he have just told me about Annabelle from the beginning?

I locked eyes with my brother, a silent pact forming between us.

No matter what, we were going to win.

We would be the last ones standing.





# ANNABELLE

EMOTIONS RAN HIGH AS THE ARGUMENT WITH MY FATHER raged.

I hadn't known where to go, and I knew I wouldn't know until I gave him a piece of my mind.

So, I went home.

Hoping he would be there.

Lucky for me, he was.

I stared at him, eyes burning.

“How *could* you?!”

“You don't understand!” he began, his voice strained from screaming. “There's so much you don't know — *can't* know!”

His face was red.

His vein pounded and protruded from his neck to his forehead.

I scoffed, unable to contain my frustration. “Oh, really? Enlighten me then, Dad. Explain to me why you think it's acceptable to be in the fucking mob!”

“I told you!” he bellowed. “That wasn't me!”

“It was your warehouse!”

“Luca is setting me up! Those motherfucking Bonannos!”

“He wouldn't do that!” I shot back. “I got shot!”

His face tightened with regret and determination. “You’re naive!”

I shook my head, disbelief coloring my voice. “So, that’s it? You think I’m just some idiot?!”

He sighed heavily, his gaze meeting mine. “Anna, I never wanted this life for you. I wanted to shield you from it, to keep you innocent and untouched by it.” His face darkened. “It’s him that pulled you into it! I’m telling you, I wasn’t at the warehouse! I didn’t have anything to do with it!”

“I was already in this world!” I shouted. “You knew that world was what I’ve dedicated my life to!”

“You don’t think I *know* that?” He pointed to his chest roughly. “Every day was walking on fucking eggshells!”

“Who *are* you!?” I snapped.

“I’m your father and the provider of this family!”

“Is that why Mom left?!” I roared. “Did she know the shit you were into!?”

“Back off, Anna!” he growled. “You don’t get to do this! You’re my daughter!”

“Is this why she left!?” I demanded, fueled.

He sighed, his face softening, but only slightly. “Yes,” he whispered, defeated. “I told her I would kill her if she tried to take you I was doing what I thought was right.”

“And once you had enough — why not stop?”

“You don’t just stop the mob!” he cried out. His words — all of them — struck a chord within me, a faint echo of the father who once held me close and promised to keep me safe. But the bitterness remained. “All I have ever done is try to protect you,” he breathed heavily.

“Protect me?” I threw out, my voice laced with anger and sadness.

“Yes,” he choked, eyes glistening with tears.

“And that’s what this is?” I pointed to my injured arm.

His eyes softened, remorse flickering within them. “No.” He shook his head. “And I know it seems harsh, Annabelle, but sometimes we have to make sacrifices for the greater good. I had to make sacrifices to give you a better life.”

Tears welled in my eyes too, my voice cracking with emotion. “Greater good? Selling drugs is for the greater good?”

“Keeping food on the table is for the greater good,” he sighed. “We had nothing; so I did what I had to do, and then you are stuck. You don’t just leave the mob.”

“No,” I laughed with bitterness. “You just end up the don.” I stepped closer to him and jabbed him in the chest with my index finger. “I don’t want safety if it means sacrificing my happiness and freedom. I don’t want to be provided for if it means we’re hurting other people.”

Silence hung heavy between us, the weight of our words sinking into the air. I saw the conflict in my father’s eyes, the battle between whatever game he was in and his love for me. I realized that he, too, was trapped in this world.

Just like Luca.

The bond between us was strained; fractured by choices he made a long time ago from the sounds of it

I felt like my entire life was a lie.

“But I promise you, Anna,” he sighed. “I had nothing to do with the warehouse—”

A boom radiated behind me, and I leaped in surprise as police swarmed in from all sides.

“Get on the fucking ground!” the lead SWAT officer commanded as their heavy footsteps thundered around us. I held up my hands and dropped to my knees, watching wide-eyed as they arrested my father.

Two men pulled his arms behind his back, cuffing him.

I was torn between sorrow and relief. The truth had been exposed without my help.

I hadn't had to turn him in.

But how?

As the chaos erupted around us, I felt a figure approach me.

Turning my head, my gaze fell on my captain.

He approached with a sense of authority, concern etched on his face.

He took a step another step toward me, his gaze filled with sympathy and determination as he grabbed my forearm and pulled me up to stand.

"Betrami," he said, his voice calm yet laden with urgency. "We need to get you the hell out of here."

Confusion swept over me, a whirlwind of emotions swirling in my mind. "What do you mean?" I asked, my voice trembling. "What's happening? Why is my father being arrested?"

I knew. But I was playing dumb.

I had to.

Otherwise, I would lose my job.

Everything I'd worked for.

I wasn't sure how to feel about all of it, but I couldn't risk everyone thinking I had anything to do with it.

I didn't want my father to rot in prison, especially before I knew what the hell was even happening.

If he hadn't had anything to do with the warehouse, who did?

Captain's eyes flickered, his lips pressed into a thin line. "Your father is involved in a lot of the underground crime you've been investigating."

There wasn't shock, just a feeling of everything around me crumbling.

"He was behind the murder of Francis Lasiter."

Something swelled in the pit of my stomach as soon as he said the name of the man whose murder I had been investigating before Luca kidnapped me.

Something didn't feel right.

I wasn't sure if it was because it was my father or if it was more.

But who knows?

Could I trust that he didn't do it?

I'm sure he'd had his hand in killing more than one person.

The mob was kind of known for killing people.

Anger and skepticism battled within me.

It tore at my desire to trust anyone. Something nagging lingered in my mind. Something...off.

I didn't know what it was, but I was going to find out.

Captain Russo guided me up and out the front door, with the SWAT team filtering all around.

There was a single white van amidst all the black ones, and with an outstretched finger, he pointed to it. "That one," he mumbled as he guided me toward it.

My shoulders slumped, and I grabbed at the passenger door as soon as it was close enough, flinging it open.

My world was about to change even more.

I just wasn't sure if it was for the best.

And what about Luca?

If my dad had been caught, would he also be caught?

Better yet, why did I care?

The engine hummed as soon as the captain turned the ignition key and the van lurched forward with a lot more torque than I had anticipated. Questions filled my mind, demanding answers, but I didn't even know what to ask.

The captain remained silent, his focus fixed on the road ahead. I glanced out the window, the city streets passing by in

a blur.

But then something caught my eye.

An old warehouse.

Much like the warehouse my father had been using for drugs. The one Luca had taken me to.

There wasn't a warehouse like this on the way to the precinct.

My eyes narrowed and my neck craned around as I took in my surroundings wondering where in the hell we were and where we were headed.

“Where are we going?” I asked, my voice hoarse.

Fear rose inside of me, but I couldn't let it be known. I had to figure out the truth, and fast.

The tension inside the van grew palpable as we continued on an unfamiliar route, the cityscape transforming into an almost deserted side of the city that I didn't recognize. My heart pounded in my chest, each passing moment fueling a sense of unease. I turned to the captain, my voice laced with urgency.

“Where are you taking me?” I demanded, my eyes locking with his. “I need answers. I need them now!”

I reached for my gun, but it wasn't there.

The captain's gaze hardened. The weight of suspicion had become unbearable.

“Captain!” I yelled out. “This isn't funny!” I was hoping more than anything it was just a sick-ass joke.

“Calm down, Betrami.”

His words sparked nothing but doubt.

I knew his actions weren't noble by the disgusting smirk on his face.

He was taking me somewhere.

His demeanor began to shift. His eyes darted with hidden intentions. “I just have to ask you some questions.” His words

held an edge of calculated charm. It was then that realization struck me like a blow to the chest – the man I had believed to be an ally was another piece in the intricate puzzle of corruption.

He had to be.

This didn't feel right.

My heart raced.

“I'm going to ask this one more time,” I breathed heatedly. “Where are you taking me, Captain? What's your real agenda here?”

A wry smile crept across his face, revealing a glimpse of his true nature. “You're perceptive, Betrami,” he replied, his voice dripping with evil.

I wanted to launch at the son of a bitch and take hold of the steering wheel, but I knew that it would do nothing but get me killed.

I had to bide my time.

Wait for the right moment.

But when the hell was that?

He had no intention of taking me to safety.

Frustration and anger welled inside of me and I steeled myself to mask it. I had to be smart about this.

“What made you do this?” I asked. “What caused you to become corrupt? You, of all people?”

“You have to play the game in this fucked-up city, Betrami.”

His gaze met mine, a glint of malice living there. “There are things you need to understand. It can be a bitter pill to swallow, but this is the reality. *This*. Right here.”

As his words hung in the air, I realized that my survival hinged on my ability to outwit him and stay one step ahead.

I clenched my fists, my resolve hardening with each passing second. I wouldn't allow myself to become another

casualty.

I wondered if my dad had anything to do with the murder of Francis Lasiter after all, or if this was all just some ploy to pin it on him.

Captain Russo's phone buzzed on his belt clip.

Over and over and over again.

By the look on his face, it wasn't a call he wanted to take. "One of your puppeteers calling, Cap?" I asked.

His foot pressed harder on the gas and our surroundings zipped by quicker now. Wherever we were headed, we were headed there at full speed.

I had to figure out how to get out of this.

I was going to expose this prick if it was the last thing I was going to do.





# LUCA

MY KNUCKLES TURNED WHITE AS I GRIPPED THE STEERING wheel, my foot pressing the accelerator to the floor.

He said to let him take care of it.

I didn't like the sound of that.

There was no way in hell I was going to let anything happen to her.

The guys I had tailing Annabelle told me when the police swarmed in and made dead sure to tell me that the captain's ass was there in all his glory as well.

I knew exactly what he planned to do.

I couldn't put anyone else at risk or in the middle. I wasn't going to bring my family into the fire with me. I paid a lot of money for police protection; I wasn't about to ruin it all if this all went south.

I kept dialing his number.

"Pick up, you bastard," I grumbled as the line continued going to voicemail.

The engine roared in response, propelling my car forward with reckless abandon. The weight of the situation pressed heavily upon me, knowing that Anna's life hung in the balance.

I called again, only this time, he picked up. "What!?" Captain Russo said angrily into the receiver. "I said to let me handle this!"

I heard Annabelle's scream and felt a lump form in my throat. "Let her go!" I demanded.

"What?!" Captain Russo shouted. I could understand the confusion.

"Let her go!" I repeated. "Now!"

"I can't do that now, Luca!" He shouted. "She knows too much!" And with that, the line went dead.

"Fuck!" I hissed.

The van seemed to mock me. With each passing second, it seemed like the barrier between me and the woman I loved grew larger. I could feel my heart race.

I had to get to her.

I had to stop him.

I knew all too well what he meant by "take care of it."

He was going to kill her.

And if I was a betting man, he wasn't the only one in that van.

She was outnumbered.

As I punched the gas to the floor, the city lights blurred into streaks of color.

My focus was on one thing only.

Reaching Annabelle.

I dialed the captain's number again, desperation evident in my voice.

"Stop fucking calling me, Luca!" he demanded.

"Pull over, you son of a bitch!" I yelled into the phone, my words full of fury. "You're not getting away with this! I'll have you fucking killed!"

The captain's response was as defiant as I had expected. He laughed, a chilling sound that sent shivers down my spine. "You're not thinking rationally," he shot. "She is going to ruin you *and* me. We agreed to do whatever it takes."

My grip tightened on the phone, rage — and maybe a little helplessness — flooding through me.

He wasn't going to do this.

And if he was, it was going to be over my dead fucking body.

I was determined to get to them.

I pressed harder on the accelerator, my car surging forward, closing the distance between us. I was worried to let him get to his destination. I wasn't sure I could hold off however many men he had waiting for her

I knew he had a lot of people under his thumb.

That's why I'd kept him on the payroll

I knew other mobs wanted him. He could just as easily fuck me over — especially if I died in the process.

Fear would only get me so far.

With protection from other mobs, there's no telling what he would do.

The pursuit reached a fever pitch as both vehicles raced through the city streets.

Sirens roared and whirled behind us as we dodged through traffic.

Finally, I caught up to his van and pulled alongside him. My voice was filled with desperation as I shouted, "Pull over, goddammit!"

I knew he couldn't hear me. Even if he could, I knew he wouldn't stop.

He saw me.

The fucking prick.

His face twisted into a wicked smile as he peered out the window. His eyes gleamed with malice.

I scowled as he accelerated.

Annabelle was struggling with another figure. Fighting.

That's it.

With a jerk of the wheel, my fender collided with his.

The impact jarred me, but I wasn't going to stop.

I didn't want to wreck this son of a bitch with Annabelle inside.

With a surge of desperation, I swerved to the side again, my car colliding with the van's side panel.

*Just pull over, you son of a bitch.*

The impact reverberated through my body. The screeching metal echoed in my ears as the van began to waver, Captain Russo struggling to maintain control.

"Just pull over!" I screamed at the window, hoping he would come to his senses.

But his response was ruthless and unexpected. He veered into my car.

The collision hit me like a wrecking ball and sent my car hurling through the air.

The world spun in a disorienting frenzy as I flipped and tumbled to God knows where. Metal crunched and glass shattered all around me as time slowed to a crawl.

Pain surged through me as I was thrashed violently within the confines of the car. Broken glass bit into my skin. My head thundered against the walls of the vehicle.

And when the world finally came to a halt as my car skidded to a twisted and battered rest, the scent of smoke and burning rubber burned my nostrils.

Every inch of my body screamed in agony as I struggled to breathe, the seatbelt cutting into me.

Pain radiated from every point of impact. But I couldn't stop.

I had to get to her.

Through gritted teeth, I mustered the strength to push open the crumpled door.

Ragged breaths clutched at my chest as I emerged from the wreckage.

The sight before me was terrifying as I saw the van crumpled against a concrete wall.

“Annabelle!” I screamed, adrenaline pumping and allowing me to race toward the scene.

The deafening sounds of gunshots shattered the eerie quiet, and my knees buckled as I watched that bastard crawl through a shattered window, glass littered at his feet.

I crawled behind my car, reaching for my gun.

The street was now a battlefield.

I groaned and grabbed at my side as I pulled my weapon from its holster.

Bullets whizzed past me, rattling against the metal of my vehicle as I struggled to get behind it.

I crouched behind the open door of my car, using it as a shield as I returned fire. Every fiber of my being screamed for her safety.

She could handle her shit, but it didn't mean I wasn't worried.

My heart pounded with fear.

I hope she made it out alive.

I knew I'd have to fight tooth and nail to find out with the heavy gunfire blasting toward my car. Every bullet clashed and rattled against the metal frame, and I took a deep, calming breath.

I had to focus.

As the fight raged, my mind locked onto one thing.

Getting her the hell out of there.

Alive.

Safe.

With every pull of the trigger and step I took, I only had that in mind.

I moved with a calculated grace as I shimmied toward another car, abandoned when the shooting started, if I had to guess.

“Fuck you!” Annabelle screeched, and before I knew it, I caught a glimpse of her darting between cover, her eyes filled with a fierce determination that mirrored my own.

She had a gun.

She was shooting it.

But it wasn't at the captain.

It was at someone else.

We moved at the same time, toward one another, both of us aiming at a side of the van. Our actions synchronized without the need for words, a shared understanding passing between us.

“You okay!?” I yelled out.

“Fine!” she said angrily as she continued to hone in her sight on whoever the hell was on the other side of the van with the captain.

I nodded and noticed an opening, watching as the clip hit the ground. I knew this was it.

With a final burst, I lunged toward the captain, blasting gunshots as I went. My clip jammed, but I didn't care.

I kept running at him.

I knew he was reloading.

I slammed into him, knocking him off-balance.

My body tumbled over his, our fists flinging through the chaotic spark of adrenaline and rage.

The ground shook beneath us as we crashed to the pavement, fighting for control.

For survival.

The sounds of approaching sirens grew louder.

But I wasn't going to let up.

My fists burned with fire as I continued to blast them into his jaw.





# ANNABELLE

MY HEART RACED WITH ANGER, BETRAYAL, AND CONFUSION.

Davis?

He had been my partner for years.

I trusted him with everything I had.

“Stop!” he begged, but I wasn’t going to.

He lay on the ground, clutching his side, wounded by my bullet.

“How did this even happen!?” I screamed, my gun aimed at his face.

I lunged forward, jumping on top of him, squeezing the wound.

He wailed in agony.

But I continued to dig my fingertips into the bullet wound, my anger propelling me with a force I didn’t even know I possessed.

“What the hell were you thinking?” I seethed, my voice trembling. “How could you turn your back on everything you stood for?”

Davis winced in pain, his eyes reflecting remorse.

“Like Russo said, Anna!” he cried out. “It’s the fucking game no. ”

His breath was ragged, deep, and labored. “I was just like you once,” he groaned, struggling to catch his breath. “I told

you that. But the system; it's broken. Corrupt. I realized that I could either be a joke and lose at every fucking turn — or take a piece of the pie.”

His words punched me in the gut. I had always believed in the power of justice, in upholding the law and protecting the innocent. But now?

If Davis was dirty, who else was?

“Why didn't you try to fix it?” I demanded. “We swore an oath to protect and serve. We were supposed to be the ones fighting against this kind of shit, not becoming a part of it!”

He grunted in pain. “I tried, Anna. I did. But the more I fought, the more I realized that the system was rigged. The higher-ups were involved, pulling the strings. What chance did we have against that? Why not get ahead?”

My mind whirled with conflicting emotions. I didn't understand becoming dirty.

But I did understand the frustration with the system.

It was the same frustration I felt all the time when I wanted to bring down the mob. I was told no at every turn.

Sometimes, I get it. You're tired of being told “no.”

You're tired of fighting an uphill battle, knowing there are people in the system who are dirty and need to go to prison just as much — or more — than the bastards you're tracking down.

But to give up everything you believe in for money? For power?

I could never understand that.

I could never understand not protecting the innocent.

I could never understand compromising everything I stood for — all of my integrity.

I was driven by anger and hurt as I looked at him. I balled my fists tightly, my fingertips clawing into my palms, and unleashed a fury of punches.

The blows landed with satisfying thuds. Every strike was a release of pent-up frustration and disappointment that coursed through my body.

Part of me wanted to break through to him; another part wanted to knock his fucking teeth out.

It felt — for a moment — like I wasn't fighting Davis.

It felt like I was fighting all of the corruption.

My body grew tired.

Weary.

More so with every lunging punch.

He was already unconscious, blood sputtering from his mouth.

The only thing that pulled me from my trance was the closing-in sirens.

How many of the police who responded were dirty?

How many were good?

It was all I could think about.

Breathing heavily, I stood over his limp form, relief and sorrow flooding in.

I was enraged. That's why I did what I did.

But this man.

He had been good once.

I cared about him.

He was a partner.

A friend.

He also was a husband. A father.

I had to think about those things.

I kneeled beside him, cursing under my breath, and pressed two fingers at his neck.

Even if I had anger, I also had compassion.

“Come on, you asshole. Give me a pulse,” I muttered.

And sure enough.

It was there.

“Thank God,” I felt a weight lift as I took a relieved sigh. The chaos of the moment seemed to fizzle.

At least I thought it had as I looked around for Luca.

He still fighting with the captain.

Russo shouldered him into the side of the van, fist after fist blasting down on him.

Both men were bloody and battered.

I watched, horrified as the captain raised his gun and pointed it at Luca, who was heaving against the van.

Time seemed to slow and the world around me faded.

My focus narrowed on the scene unfolding in front of me.

With unwavering resolve, I tumbled for my long-dropped gun and squeezed the trigger without a second thought.

The sound of the gunshot echoed through the air and milliseconds later, the captain fell to the ground.

I watched as Luca staggered away from the van, hunkered over, still fighting to breathe.

My heart pounded and my hand shook. I knew I was going to be screwed up tomorrow.

I’d just taken a man’s life.

I exhaled a sigh of relief before crumpling to the ground, tears flowing freely.

I felt a body fall next to me, followed by strong, muscular arms. They tightened around me, pulling me close.

And as soon as I felt his broad chest against my cheek, I broke down into painful, wracking sobs. I looked up for a moment to catch his gaze, and his eyes pierced lovingly into me. There was nothing but gratitude and compassion on his face.

“I’m so sorry,” he choked out, pulling me close once again.

The sirens continued to wail in the distance, growing even louder as they approached.

I knew it was about to go down.

The road ahead wasn’t going to be an easy one.

I grabbed Luca’s face. “Tell them you’re my boyfriend, that the captain kidnapped me, and that you chased after us. Tell them that you were scared and got beside the van when the captain wrecked into your car. Tell them that they were shooting at you.” I was panicked, but he held up his hand to halt me.

“It’s not my first rodeo,” he sighed. There was a pain behind that tone that I hadn’t heard before.

I felt a lump in my throat as I watched him blink back tears. He cleared his throat. “We’re going to be fine.”

If they took us in and I was dealing with any clean cops, Luca would go to prison.

I would be fine.

But I didn’t want that to be the case.

I hurried to my feet, averting my gaze from the fallen captain, my heart heavy. There was something about his demeanor that told me he had ins everywhere.

I wasn’t sure if I should be happy with that or concerned.

Were there any good cops left?



# LUCA

AS I DIALED THE NUMBER TO THAT GODFORSAKEN PRISON, I couldn't help but feel a mix of irritation and anticipation. What I was about to do was against my better judgment, against every instinct I had in this ruthless world. But there was something about Anna that had me willing to break my rules.

It had been a little dodgy getting out of the whole killing-an-influential-NYPD-captain thing. But lucky for me, Annabelle had her own strings and strengths.

And also lucky for me, her partner Davis fessed up to the feds and brought down the captain with him. Lucky for him — and me — he hadn't included anyone else. I had to keep the NYPD in my pocket

Or at least, I had to keep them in my *family's* pocket.

Dominic's voice answered on the other end, dripping with a hardened edge. "You're the only fucking person that can call *into* prison " he growled.

I smirked.

"How are you doing, buddy boy?" I asked.

"Pretty shit; but what's it to ya?"

I smiled. "I'm offering you a truce, old man," I replied.

Silence followed, the weight of our shared history hanging between us like a heavy fog. Then, Dominic's voice sliced through the tension, his voice riddled with curiosity. "A truce?"



I let out a low chuckle, enjoying this dance of power and manipulation. “Well, Dom, you owe me a favor. And trust me, you’ll pay it back one way or another.”

There was a scoff on the other end. “How the fuck do I owe you anything?”

“Haven’t they told you?” I laughed. “You’re being released.”

“That doesn’t mean we’re even, Luca .” he shot back bitterly.

“You’re right, which is why I’m proposing the truce. Because at the end of the day, you closed down one of my clubs—”

“And you got my daughter shot!”

I couldn’t help but chuckle again, relishing in this twisted camaraderie. “Ah, Dom, always keeping score. But that was Captain Russo’s setup, not mine. But your men gladly accepted his offer ”

He was silent for a moment, so I continued. “So by my count, Dom, you’re at screwing me over with the whole club thing and putting me in the middle of a war zone, all because you weren’t able to control your men,” I taunted.

“And I’m in prison for something you did — *and* you kidnapped my daughter — so I’d say we’re even!”

“And, I’m getting you out of prison. So the score is a little tilted.”

He sighed. “Just spit it out, asshole! Tell me what you want!”

“We’re going to go back to our original deal,” I said softly. “I’m going to marry your daughter—”

“Cut the shit!” He interrupted.

“This time, it’s her choice. But if we get married; I want to forge an alliance.” It was a disgusting pill to swallow. My gaze shifted to Annabelle.

Her presence kept me from sinking back into all the bullshit. It brought me back to reality. It reminded me that there were forces greater than our egos at play.



AS DIMITRI and I stood amid our club, I smiled.

It had undergone renovations to transform it into something even bigger and better, and I could tell as I looked at the work that our plan was succeeding.

“Are you sure you wanna do this?” Dimitri asked, breaking the silence that lingered between us as we looked on at the changes.

I sighed and pondered it for a moment.

I knew what he was asking.

The air mingled with dust particles that danced over the streams of sunlight that streamed through the front door as the sound of construction echoed all around us.

The hammers and drills faded, and I took a deep breath.

“Luca?” he asked again, his eyes scanning me. “Are you sure you’re going to be able to be done with all this?”

I took another moment to absorb the transformation of the club.

It was a symbol.

The club always had been a symbol of our family, of our power.

But now, the symbol was that the family as we knew it would be reborn.

We had come so far, but there was so much more we could achieve. The club would be bigger and better than ever, and I had a suspicion that our family would be as well.

We could adapt.

We could evolve.

A deep breath escaped my lips as I met Dimitri's questioning gaze. "Dimitri, this life ... it's not for me anymore," I admitted carefully.

Truthfully, this weight had been too much to handle.

"For years I've wanted something more, something that aligns with who I am. Until I met Annabelle, I didn't even know who that was."

Dimitri's brows furrowed, his eyes reflecting mixed emotions. "But Luca, this life, our family, it's what we've always known. You were supposed to continue the legacy," he said.

A bittersweet smile tugged at the corners of my lips and I continued to gaze back out into the club.

I nodded.

The memories of our past — our parents' reign — came flooding back.

But even then, they weren't necessarily positive.

The mob life wasn't for me.

It wasn't what I wanted.

"I know, Dimitri. *Our* family, *our* legacy," I said. "You are part of that, and I think the legacy is yours to take on. It was never me, and it was never mine."

I gestured toward the renovations taking place around us. "Look at what we're building here. It's not just a club. This place is a symbol of reinvention, of the possibility of creating something greater," I explained. "And you have the ability to be that something greater. To do more than I could have ever dreamed."

His gaze flickered from the construction to me. I could see the uncertainty on his face. "And what about all *you* have accomplished, all that you could still achieve?" he asked almost desperately.

I could tell it was nerves.

I chuckled. “We both know that I didn’t do a lot,” I said. “Maybe put us more at risk.”

I reached out and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “I trust you to carry out our family’s legacy,” I replied, my voice filled with genuine confidence.

Taking a step back, I surveyed the club once more, the transformation nearing completion. Within the next few weeks, it should be done.

And that would give me enough time to tie up any loose ends.

“As for me, I think it’s time for a different kind of legacy,” I laughed. “I have to pursue love,” I affirmed, my eyes shining with emotion.

Dimitri nodded slowly. “I understand.”

“But you have to take Enzo,” I joked.

He groaned audibly before smiling. “He’ll be fine.”

My brow raised. “I’m going to remember you said that.”

With a final glance at the club, I turned away.

I was ready to make my own journey.

To find my own path.

I was ready to embrace a future filled with love and something deeper than these walls could show me.

Just as I turned back toward the door, the sound of heels clicking down the stairs caused me to glance over my shoulder.

Clicking harshly against the newly polished floor were Viola’s heels. Our spirited little sister sashayed into the room with an infectious energy that could lift even the heaviest of moods. And maybe that was a good thing.

Because it was starting to feel a little somber.

A mischievous glint sparkled in her eyes as she took in the surroundings.

“This place is pretty damn nice!” Viola exclaimed, her voice filled with excitement. “It’s going to be epic! I can already feel the energy. Sexy dudes dancing here,” she gestured to the middle of the floor. “Signature cocktails over there — being enjoyed by drunk college students.”

She smiled brightly. “It’s going to be a gold mine.”

“Not to mention the big-ass casino in the back.”

“I love me some underground gambling,” she remarked, amused.

Dimitri and I looked at one another, any solemn expressions we had long replaced with smiles that mirrored her enthusiasm.

She was like that.

Infectious.

Her entire presence had a way of infusing life into any situation.

She had a gift.

I had to hand it to her.

She was probably the life of the party for anyone who didn’t consider her their sister. Because to me, she was also a bitch.

Viola reached into her jacket pocket, revealing a shiny metallic flask. Without any prompting or even waiting for anyone’s approval, she took a giant swig.

One that said that she didn’t have a care in the world.

“Good thing I brought my own supplies,” she quipped with a playful wink as she made a face, the liquid that had just hit the back of her throat burning. “It’s time to celebrate!”

I chuckled, a sense of excitement washing over me as I watched her revel in the atmosphere. “You always know how to bring the party, don’t you, sis?” I asked, smiling.

A laugh escaped from Dimitri. “Our brother is leaving us!” he exclaimed. “Let’s toast!”

She looked at me for a moment, a gleam in her eye.

I could tell she knew, but I could also tell there was emotion there.

She nodded carefully and smiled. “To my dumbass older brother,” she said, holding the flask in the air.

Dimitri laughed. “To Luca. The club looks amazing, and the family is better than before. Thank you!” He grabbed the flask from Viola and held it out to me. “And thank you for leaving it with us. We will do you proud. Here’s to your new adventures with your wife-to-be.”

He put the flask to his lips and took a swig, making a face.

“What the fuck is in this?” he groaned, handing me the flask.

I looked at it, my brows furrowed, and then to Viola.

“I’m not drinking if he’s making a face like that,” I said.

She laughed. “Don’t be a bunch of pussies,” she said, swiping it from my hand and chugging back a big drink. “Tonight, we toast to new beginnings, to love, and to living life on our own terms!”

With that, she took another swig.

Her contagious laughter filled the room and the weight of any doubt I had dissipated.

Everything was going to be OK.



# ANNABELLE

AS THE IRON GATE OF THE PRISON CLOSED BEHIND US, I couldn't help but feel a mix of emotions churning in my gut. Dad had been released. I should be elated.

But there was still so much clouding my mind.

Sure, I knew that Francis Lasiter wasn't him.

I knew he had nothing to do with me being shot.

I knew he loved me.

I knew in his twisted version of fatherhood and manhood, he thought what he did was for the best.

He thought he was giving me more than he could have otherwise — and maybe that was true.

But it's not like I knew we had money. We had lived a modest lifestyle.

Outwardly, anyway.

So, what good did it do being knee-deep in all the bullshit?

A strain lingered between us. So much so that when he placed the palms of his hands on my shoulder, I stiffened at the touch.

An unspoken weight hung tightly in the air, and I wasn't sure how to face it. We walked bleakly toward the cab waiting for us and I mustered a smile when I tossed a glance over my shoulder at him.

“You aren't happy to see me,” he sighed almost sadly.



I looked at the ground, a lump forming in my throat as tears threatened to jerk from my eyes. "I am," I said truthfully, but weakly. "Welcome home," I whispered, pulling him into a faint hug. His arms wrapped around me; his grip tight, desperate.

I could sense the tension in his body; his struggle to bridge the space between us.

Unfortunately, it was a relational gap.

Not a physical one.

"I've missed you," he sobbed, his voice filled with longing. I felt his wet sobs filter onto my hair as I pulled away.

My lips tugged into a half smile.

I did love him.

I really did.

But I wasn't sure how much I respected him anymore.

And that truth was what was so thick between us. Forgiveness wasn't something that could be granted so easily. The wounds were deep. The trust broken. Every time I thought back, I remember my dad telling me how good our word was; how the truth was the best thing we had.

He had lied to me for years.

I still needed time to process it all.

I needed time to reconcile everything I felt for him in the past because of all the pain it had caused me knowing what he had done.

Or at least envisioning all the terrible things he had done.

He had killed hundreds of people in the drug business alone.

I didn't even want to think about all the other crimes he was involved in.

"Are you ever going to forgive me?" he asked sadly.

I nodded softly. "I just need time, Dad," I said tenderly, my gaze meeting his. "Time to heal, time to forgive. It's not easy,

you know.”

He looked at me, his eyes filled with sadness. “I know, baby girl,” he murmured. “But it hurts to know you’re marrying Luca Esposito when he is far bigger and badder than I am.”

I shook my head in frustration, trying to remain calm.

He’d been in prison.

He had no way of knowing

“Luca is different, Dad. He’s choosing to get out of the game. He was in this because of his family. You got in this on your own,” I explained, my voice resolute.

My father sighed, his expression resigned. “I hope you’re right. I hope Luca can leave that world behind,” he replied, his voice laced tinged with a hint of caution. “Because it’s not that easy.”

But before we could delve any further into it, I thought of something.

I looked at my father. “And Dad, don’t even think about trying to back out of the truce,” I cautioned, my voice firm. “Dimitri — his brother — is taking over, so it’s the same family whether Luca is involved or not, and the truce stands.”

He nodded, a flicker of understanding crossing his features. “I won’t, Anna. I told you, your word is everything. I made my decision, and I’ll honor it, as long as you really do want to marry this asshole.”

As we walked away from the prison, my arm looped through his, I couldn’t help but wonder if I could knock down the wall between us.

“Want to grab some ice cream?” I asked, smiling.

“Race you to the cab!” he called out, sprinting toward the cab.



AS I WATCHED LUCA, the enigmatic mobster who had captured my heart, a whirlwind of emotions swirled within me. Confusion, uncertainty, and even a hint of fear danced alongside an attraction that defied all reason.

The man had kidnapped me, and somehow, I wanted him.

The man had killed people for years — and yet I was perfectly unguarded and trusting of him.

It made no sense.

I questioned my sanity at times, wondering if this connection between us was simply Stockholm syndrome, a psychological trick.

But I knew better the longer I looked at him.

“How’d it go with your old man?” he asked, glancing over his new reading glasses as he held a tablet in his palms.

I smirked. “It was just fine, Mr. Clark Kent.”

He laughed audibly, shaking his head.

“Stop.”

I watched a blush creep up on his cheek.

I had just made Mr. Mean Mobster — Don of the Bonannos — one of the oldest and most successful mobs in New York City — blush.

There was something deeper, something inexplicable, that drew me to Luca. Something about his soul.

He wasn’t a bad man at all.

It was more than his rugged charm or the danger that surrounded him that entranced me. It was the glimpses of vulnerability, the cracks in his armor that revealed a real and tender soul beneath the hardened exterior.

I could tell the mob life wasn’t what he would have chosen.

Now, the only problem was figuring out what he wanted to do.

“How’s the job hunt going?” I asked.

The man was loaded.

He didn't have to have a job.

But he wanted one.

"I'm surprised I can't just apply to be a CEO anywhere," he joked. "It's pretty lame."

The man had years of business expertise. He had run hundreds of successful businesses; the only problem was they all dabbled in something illegal.

And unfortunately for him, his name still carried some weight. No one who wanted to run a tight ship wanted anything to do with a Bonanno. "I wonder if I can threaten my way into some of these?" He laughed.

I rolled my eyes. "Maybe we could change your name?"

"Move to Bora Bora?!" he exclaimed, jumping up from the sofa.

"I don't think I'm ready to move yet," I said. I had just been offered a job with the FBI.

Something huge.

I wasn't moving.

Not yet.

Not until I saw it through.

He groaned. "Yeah, yeah, Miss-I-have-a-great-job."

I grabbed my coffee mug and pulled it to my lips, finding myself captivated by his presence.

There was something about him that caused the lines between right and wrong to be blurred. I wondered what our reality would be from here.

"You know, whatever happens, we are in this together and I'm serious about staying out of the game," he said, reassurance all over his tongue.

I nodded.

“I’m serious.” He got up and crouched in front of me, taking my hands in his. “I don’t care if I have to bus tables. I’m done with that life.”

“We don’t even need the money,” I sighed.

“I’m not using any of the money I got while in the mob.”

I shook my head. “I’ll make plenty of money.”

“I won’t let you keep me up, either.”

So many emotions flowed and ebbed through me.

I had so much affection for him.

For his character.

For his pride.

I caressed his cheek, and he set his tablet on the floor next to my feet, looking up at me longingly.

In the quiet embrace of the moonlit room, he smiled at me and rose to his feet.

I looked up at him, the feeling of his hands in mine sending shivers of anticipation down my spine. The world around us faded away, leaving only the intensity of our connection and the depth of our emotions. He pulled me up and my body pressed firmly against him.

I cooed.

In his arms, I felt safe, cherished, and desired.

His eyes, filled with a mix of longing and adoration, gazed into mine — piercing into them, and into my soul. Like he was unveiling every secret I had. His fingers brushed against my cheek, and a delicate fire ignited within me, spreading warmth throughout my body. It was a touch that spoke volumes, whispering promises of love and tenderness.

Forever.

I leaned into him, my heart beating in sync with his.

“If I’m with you, I can do anything,” he whispered.

I could feel the magnetic pull drawing us closer. The air crackled with energy, and the world seemed to hold its breath in anticipation of our next move. Or maybe that was just me.

With a gentle tilt of his head, his lips met mine, and time stood still. As cheesy as it sounds, he had entrapped me. Body, heart, and soul.

The feeling of his lips on mine was nothing short of miraculous.

It was a kiss that spoke of yearning.

It was a kiss that spoke of a love that defied all logic.

And that's exactly what this was.

Love.

I loved Luca Esposito.

For better or worse.

And hopefully, we'd seen the worst

At that moment, the weight of his past was completely lifted.

Our kiss, the example of tenderness, deepened, and his hands cradled my face.

He was gentle at first, and then all of a sudden, when his tongue sparked against mine, it became a little more passionate, a little more possessive.

I groaned, fueled all of a sudden, as I absentmindedly placed my mug on the table next to me, for fear of spilling it.

I felt my entire being melt into his.

I felt a sense of completeness as if I had found my place.

It was here.

With him.

In his arms.

Every brush of his lips against mine sent waves of heat coursing through my veins. It was a passion and a love that

transcended anything I thought to know. And as we broke apart, I felt empty.

Left longing for him all over again.

Our breaths mingled in the unfortunate space between us.

My eyes fell to his, my reflection dancing in the beauty of his irises.

“I love you,” he said.

I closed my eyes, realizing that love had the power to transform and heal.

A tear fell from my eye, and I spoke softly but surely. “I love you.”

# EPILOGUE

## LUCA

The room was bathed in the gentle glow of moonlight. I loved this room after dark.

Almost every night — for two years now — I fell in love all over again with Annabelle. It had nothing to do with the time of day, but there was something particularly beautiful about her under the soft lunar lights.

It cast an aura around the room that illuminated her precious skin beautifully.

I held her tightly in my arms, her presence enough to soothe my soul forever.

Her delicate frame pressed against me, our bodies molded together as if they just — fit.

Like we were made for one another.

As I gazed into her eyes, our legs intertwining within the sheets, I felt like the rest of the world had fallen away. It sort of did, if I was being honest. I had left the family business behind.

Annabelle and I had moved into the apartment above The Flask.

We felt it was the best place to have minimal mob contact since Tony was okay with it anyway.

Dimitri had taken the family over and he was doing a great job.



I was proud.

It was his turn.

The weight of everything in my past was going to haunt me for the rest of my life, but maybe being with her was going to soften the blow of it all.

Every time she touched me, there was a whole new revelation. Something undiscovered

Something special. Something that could ignite a fire within me that burned with desire and tenderness.

No one had ever done that to me.

It was all lust before.

All passion.

With Annabelle, I felt passion — but also something deeper.

I traced the contours of her face, memorizing the softness of her skin beneath my fingertips. With each gentle caress, I hoped to convey just how far my love reached.

Words could never capture the intensity.

I could only hope my actions might — at least a glimpse.

In silence, we communicated in a language that transcended words. It was one of complete, unadulterated love; and one of undisclosed vulnerability.

It was the solace and the understanding of our promises to one another — spoken and unspoken.

Every breath we shared seemed to draw us closer, merging our souls in a dance of profound intimacy. The room I had once captured her in — and now our bedroom — seemed to fade away, leaving only the echo of our heartbeats mingling.

My tongue found hers and together we groaned in pleasure.

Annabelle pulled away and bit her lip in arousal before closing her eyes and nodding her head softly as if giving me permission to continue.

I sure as hell wasn't going to waste any time.

I lifted her shirt over her head and tossed the fabric somewhere on the floor. It was gone. Forgotten.

She seemed to hold her breath as I looked at her like it was the first time all over again.

My breath brushed against her ear as I cupped her bare breasts. "You're so beautiful," I breathed, my voice deep and thick with longing. She blushed beneath me.

I massaged the mounds of her perfect breasts and shaky breaths escaped from the depths of her lungs. My head dipped back down to pull one of her perked nipples into my mouth. I rolled my tongue expertly over the hardened nub, causing her to squirm. I bit and nipped and sucked. And smirked as I looked up at her and watched as she bit her lips, her body quivering.

She arched into my mouth.

She arched into my every touch.

She was mine.

And she made sure to show I always knew.

When my hands journeyed downward to her center, I felt heat pooling between her thighs.

I could tell she loved this.

I could tell she was aroused.

I could tell she wanted more.

I pulled away from her breasts and kissed back up to her neck. Her hands found my head, and her fingers threaded through my locks of hair, gripping hold of it tightly. Her whimpers fueled me as I rolled the flesh of her neck between my teeth.

One of my hands snaked its way into her hair as well, gently caressing her as the other trailed a path downward. I let my fingers play at the edge of her pajama pants, teasing her.

I pulled away from her neck and took her lips into mine once more as my fingers toyed with the waistband of her pants. I wanted her to be agonizingly aware of where I was headed.

She lifted her hips, allowing me to slide them downward. I felt her smile against me as her body continued to move and her legs kicked them the rest of the way off.

My mouth never left her neck.

I dipped my finger into her panties, but only slightly.

My tongue found her pulse and sucked harder, making sure to nip a bit of a love bite into her flesh.

She was mine.

All mine.

She screamed, her fingers fisting my hair now, tugging strands roughly, erotically.

Annabelle bucked her hips, curving her knees as she brushed against my pants where my throbbing erection continued to grow and strain. I hissed into her flesh at the contact, painfully aware that my pants needed to be off, too.

Immediately.

“Find something you want?” I purred.

“Maybe,” she breathed. “Take off your shirt first, though.”

I smirked at her.

“Oh, but of course,” I laughed as I pulled away from her and reached down to grab the bottom hem of my shirt before giving it a tug.

The material lifted over my head, and I watched as she bit her lip, her eyes glued to my torso.

It wasn't the first time.

She had seen me shirtless a lot now.

But her eyes scanned my body as though it was the very first time.

She brought her hands up and brushed them tenderly against my stomach. My breath caught in my throat, and I closed my eyes in anticipation.

Who knew something so simple could feel so good?

She took the moment, with my eyes closed, my head slightly tilted back with a grin on my face, to look at me.

I only knew that because when my eyes fluttered open, I caught her.

Her eyes glistened as they scanned over me in my entirety.

I smiled genuinely at her.

She was so perfect.

I planted another kiss on her mouth; reveling in the way it felt. My mouth on hers was something indescribable. It pulled me out of reality and took me to a faraway place. A place I loved more than anything.

She moaned into my mouth, her hands clutching at my naked chest until they made their way back up to my hair.

I kissed her jaw, my hands exploring.

Annabelle's breath hitched as she felt my fingertips pass the hem of her panties and touch the sensitive nub buried within her dampened slit.

She moaned, squeezing her eyes shut as she tugged harder at my hair.

Her legs wrapped around my arm, clenching me tightly, as I began to rub her clitoris. She tossed her head back, eyes shut as I planted more kisses along her jawline. She mewed and moaned a sweet little song for me, encouraging me to go further

To her center.

To her heated entrance.

I reveled in the reaction.

Her mouth hung open as her head pulled back even farther. Her breath was ragged. Her hips moved fluidly against my

fingers.

I looked at her fully, her lips pursed and her eyes closed.

She was gorgeous.

But so much more than that.

She was mine, and the feelings I had swirling within me were more intense than I'd ever felt.

Her chest rose and fell as little beads of sweat started to pepper her flesh. I smirked at how worked up she was getting, how worked up she'd been.

Her lips were swollen from how passionately I had just taken them into my own. I reveled in it and how flushed her cheeks were.

I could tell, as my fingers guided within her soft, tightened core, that it was only a matter of time before she lost control and fell into oblivion. My fingers quickened their pace, driving her nearer and nearer to her climax.

But not yet.

I didn't want her to fall just yet.

My rod stiffened.

Just looking at her and the state she was in made me even more aroused.

I wanted to play her body like an instrument, with expertise, and with methodical movements.

I wanted to create music.

A symphony of love and passion.

I picked up the pace and brought my thumb up to her clit, massaging it as I nipped and bit at her jawline.

Her breathing increased as I continued my circular ministrations. Her groans intensified as she grew closer to her climax.

But then, I pulled my hand away from her womanhood.

A breathless groan escaped her, disappointed musings nearing the point of release.

But before she could argue, I slammed my lips against hers, fueled. I could kiss her forever.

The heat of her body was almost enough to drive me over the edge. Her naked flesh against mine was the most sensational thing I had ever experienced.

We were together now.

It wasn't complicated.

It was love.

She whimpered as I stood up.

I had to get my pants off. Now.

My erection strained heavily against them.

I buried my nose in the crook of her neck, the soft, sweet scent of her hair intoxicating. I tugged at my zipper, needing to be free.

I had been ready for her all day.

"I love you," I breathed in a whisper. "So much." I kissed and grazed my teeth along the flesh of her shoulder.

"Yes," she whimpered. "I love you, too."

I immediately flushed as I positioned myself at her warm, wet center. My eyes tightened as I pushed into her. She felt amazing.

I grabbed hold of her waist, moving quickly.

I was rough. Probably rougher than I should have been. "Sorry," I murmured heatedly, my ragged breath and pulsating rod proving just how aroused I was.

She smirked devilishly.

"Don't be," she growled, pulling me closer.

"I love you," I said breathily between rushed kisses.

"You said that already."

Her fingernails clawed at my back, and I groaned as I positioned myself between her legs, feeling the heat engulf the throbbing head of my member.

She cried out from pleasure as I slipped into her, and I let out a groan of relief as soon as I felt her walls welcome me with a massaging squeeze.

I twitched and ached inside of her. She was so damn beautiful and felt so damn good.

I leaned down and kissed her neck and whispered in her ear. "You're so sexy."

The groan she elicited from the depths of her throat was enough to make me lose control. I was getting close to the point of no return already. She had that effect on me.

Her tight walls surrounded my shaft perfectly, squeezing as I pumped relentlessly within her.

Her fingernails gripped at my back as she took a deep breath, biting her lips.

Her eyes were closed, and I felt nothing but desire and love well up within me.

My eyes glazed over with passion as I pinned her down to the mattress, my hips slamming against her flesh.

She growled in pleasure and that did nothing but fuel me even more.

I knew after this was over, something even better lay in our wake.

The claws she had out now on my back would transform into soft, tender fingertips rolling across my back, lulling me to sleep.

Her soft and supple breasts, bouncing against my chest, would transform into her head nuzzling deeply there.

I laid kiss after kiss along her neck and shoulder, nipping as I went, knowing that in just moments, I would be softly kissing her forehead.

She tightened her legs around me, and I reveled in the moment.

My hands gripped her hips, steadying her as I continued to roll my hips, my entire length welcomed by the incredibly soft trespasses of her womanhood.

She rolled her pelvis to meet my every thrust. I groaned in pleasure, biting my lip. I filled her to the brim, my thrusts becoming relentless. She squealed in pleasure, her body rocking against me as sweat beads formed between us.

Her eyes were burning coals, and it turned me on to look at them as she continued to roll into each thrust.

I was getting closer and closer to oblivion.

She seemed to hit every single nerve in my body; emotional and physical.

I was hooked on her.

I groaned, my eyes closed, face scrunched in ecstasy.

The silky thrusts — the friction our bodies made— it was all drawing me nearer the point of no return.

I could feel my release nearing, the ball of fire swelling in the pit of my groin.

Waves of sensation radiated into my core and the louder she got, the more I knew the same could be said for her.

“Yes!” she screamed.

“God,” I gasped. “I want you so bad.”

“You have me,” she reminded me, just as I felt my body convulse against her heated, throbbing walls.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head as an intense wave washed over me, so powerful that I felt like I’d lost consciousness.

My legs quivered as I spilled inside of her.

I knew if I tried to stand now, my knees would buckle, and I would fall to the ground.

She made me weak.



All of me.

She pulled me back to her, kissing me softly, my girth still throbbing inside of her.

“More,” she whispered seductively.

I groaned in arousal and snaked my hand between our flushed bodies, my fingers finding her swollen nub.

She wailed in pleasure, and I smiled against her lips.

This was a connection.

Deep and intense.

Loving and passionate.

The perfect mix.

Just like her.

I placed my arms beside her, thrusting with renewed vigor.

I could tell she was close. Her breath was shallow and ragged, her legs digging deeper into the mattress.

My movements were focused on one thing: giving her exactly what she wanted.

She writhed beneath me and clutched the bedsheets in her fists roughly as she bit my lips.

Then, with one final thrust, I felt her walls clamp down on me, and her body began to convulse as she screamed out in an exasperated and breathy moan.

I groaned, spent, my body unable to take any more as my member lurched and bit out in sensitivity.

“Wow,” she breathed as I collapsed next to her.

I chuckled. “Yeah.”

“Luca,” she half-whispered, half-moaned, bringing her head to my neck and kissing it before nuzzling into my chest.

I smiled. “Annabelle,” I sighed, her fingers dancing across my head in small tender circles.

“I love you,” she said sweetly.

I closed my eyes and placed a tender kiss on her forehead.

“I love you, too.”

# EPILOGUE

## ANNABELLE

I stood before the mirror, the soft morning light casting its warm glow upon my pregnant belly. My hand instinctively moved to caress it, as if to say, “Good morning,” to my future son. I smiled as I felt the flutter of life stir inside of me.

I glanced back over my shoulder and sleeping in bed was my husband, Luca.

I felt a whirlwind of emotions well within me as I silently prayed every night our son could look and be like him. He was loyal. Compassionate. Brave.

Luca was everything.

And the love that I had for him was indescribable.

He lay nestled within our white sheets, his bare body revealed to my appreciative gaze. I smirked. The soft glow of the light from the window, the same one that cast on my son within my belly, danced across his sculpted form, accentuating every single one of his beautiful contours.

Every line spoke of the perfection of his physical being

But the way my stomach still whirled two years later showed the perfection of the rest of him; his internal being.

Luca was the greatest man I had ever known.

His chest rose and fell rhythmically with each breath, and with each breath, I felt myself taking a step closer to him to get back into bed. His broad shoulders tapered down to a

defined waist, and my gaze always seemed to lock onto them any time they were on display. His arms, strong and chiseled.

It was drawing me back to bed.

As my gaze trailed upward, I couldn't help but be captivated by the contours of his neck and jawline as well. The stubble he started growing scattered along his angular jaw added a touch of ruggedness. Or so he said.

He was so handsome.

I wasn't sure anyone sleeping, wrapped in sheets, could exude such a raw sensuality that I couldn't ignore. I bit my lip as my knee hit the mattress and I moved to lay next to him. The deep love that I had for this man was out of this world.

I snuggled against his perfectly muscled chest, sighing contentedly. My hand gently rubbed my belly again as I situated myself next to him.

Our wedding day flooded my mind, and I knew that until my baby boy was born, it would be the happiest day of my life.

The day was perfect.

Warm, but not too warm, and it was infused with even more than any weather could bring.

It was infused with enchantment, that sort of fairytale feeling you read about in books but never experience.

I had, though.

The venue was large. Grand.

And it was adorned with beautiful magnolias and soft candlelight that created a romantic ambiance in the evening air. Walking down the aisle, my gaze locked onto the most beautiful man I had ever seen — it was heart-thumping and life-altering.

I brimmed with joy and heated anticipation that only grew with every step I took toward him. When his hands found mine, I felt a leap within my soul. Our vows echoed in a way that I knew our destinies were entangled forever.

A new beginning was upon us.

It was there.

Right then. Right there.

And it was beautiful.

*This* was beautiful.

Rubbing my pregnant belly, cuddling next to my husband, I knew that everything was perfect. Everything was beautiful.

Well, almost everything

Thoughts of my father crossed my mind. He had also left the mob life behind, embracing a path a lot like Luca's.

Or so he said.

I was a cop — well, a federal agent now. Thanks to the captain's shenanigans, I had been given all the credit for taking him down. Thanks to taking him down and Davis' testimony, I was untouchable in the law enforcement world. I was committed to serving and protecting, but I wasn't about to dig too much into it. I just had to trust.

And do what was right for our country, by any means necessary. The Bonannos would have to steer clear for the most part. Dimitri said he would. I couldn't see wrongdoing — I was invested in protecting my honor.

I didn't ask questions as to how Luca got out of everything unscathed, how he managed to defy every odd and get out of the game without repercussion. I looked the other way, and all I could do was pray that I wasn't put in such a compromising situation again.

Despite everything, no matter how great it all was, I knew there was something else I had to do. I had to do what was right for my family and vie for my happiness.

Excitement surged through me as I recalled tracking down my mother last week.

There were a lot of mixed emotions. I wasn't sure what we would do or what we would say.

But I knew it was the right thing to do. For me. For my son. For our life.

And although I was nervous, I was happy. Happy to hear what she had been up to since escaping my father's clutches. And she seemed to be excited to hear that I was pregnant with a child of my own. I wasn't naive to think it was going to all be rainbows and puppies. I knew it would take time.

But I was willing to put in the work if she was, and by her agreeing to meet me for lunch, I was willing to bet she was as well.

I sighed contentedly, snuggling even deeper against Luca as he continued to slumber peacefully.

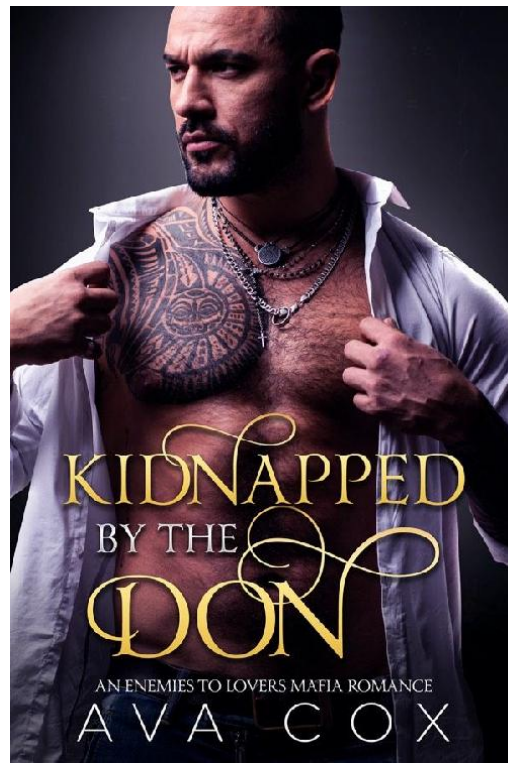
Life was beautiful.

Living was wonderful.

And with Luca, I knew it would be even better.

## ALSO BY AVA COX

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*Capturing her for marriage was supposed to be for revenge, not love.*

We may have lost that battle but we won't lose the war.

The Colombos killed my father *now* they must pay.

I'll take Michael's prize possession: Charlotte Colombo.

His one and only child.

His princess with thick mahogany hair, baby blue eyes, and a body to die for.

I'll make her my own.

And make Michael feel my pain.

She'll be my captive for power. I won't give her my heart.

Despite how much she tries and I feel, we can never be a real thing.

For power to be restored to the Bonannos, the one true family, this must strictly be business.

I must get revenge.

No matter how much my heart tries to overcome my head...

*It won't!*

I won't let Charlotte Colombo take me out.

**Start reading [Kidnapped By The Don](#) NOW!**