

A photograph of a courtroom. In the background, a wooden door is partially visible with the word 'JURY' on it. To the right, there are windows with horizontal blinds. In the foreground, several rows of empty, light-colored chairs are arranged. The overall lighting is dim, creating a somber atmosphere.

The
WOMAN

on the

JURY

a mafia romance

JESSICA GADZIALA

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The Woman on the Jury

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Jessica Gadziala

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“None of this book was written using AI tools. Each word was crafted with human hands.”

CHAPTER ONE

Halle

I didn't have time for this.

Though, as I sat in a seat in the jury box with eleven other people with equally disgruntled faces, I guess we all felt that way.

We didn't have time for this.

We all had work and families and pets and lives to get back to. No one sitting here could afford to be forced into this box, day in and day out, for weeks, possibly months, all to get paid, what, pennies a day?

Get freaking real.

Besides, after having to sit through the damn questioning process with all these people, I had decided that the general populace was entirely too stupid to be trusted to make judgments on crimes that would result in people going to prison for years, or the rest of their life.

When one of the attorneys asked an unexpectedly unusual question during voir dire—*Who, living or dead, would you like*

to have dinner with?—the guy who was currently sitting several seats down from me had answered—with a straight face—*John McClane*. And he was accepted. Despite the fact that John McClane was neither living nor dead since he was a fictional character who did not exist at all.

This was a job meant for law students.

Or people who had common sense at least.

I remember reading once that lawyers and prosecutors alike didn't like jurors who are too educated. They almost always preferred those without college degrees. And especially those who didn't have advanced degrees.

I guess they figured that lesser-educated people were easier to sway toward their side.

They didn't count on people like me.

Chronic students.

Forever changing their major, never actually graduating, instead ferreting away deep knowledge about a dozen or more subjects.

When they asked what I did for a living, I had to give them the technical truth.

I worked at an antique store owned by my grandfather.

They didn't care that I'd majored in fine arts, English, history, and, finally, business.

I'd settled on business and likely would have finished that degree with the sole purpose of keeping my family business *in* the family. A job that was supposed to go to my ne'er-do-well older brother. Who, last time I'd checked in, was buried under some rich lady's skirt in Colorado, enjoying that she was a partial owner of a ski lodge, so he got to spend his long, responsibility-free days on the slopes. For free.

I refused to let the family's legacy, as crumbling as it might be, fall away. We had three generations in the antiques business. But my grandparents only had one child. And my mother only had two.

So this fell on me.

I couldn't afford to be away from the store for a day, let alone the length of a murder trial.

But here I was.

Here we all were.

Just thanking our lucky stars that we hadn't been sequestered.

I'd actually been surprised by that decision. I didn't know a lot about the mafia, but I knew that during other high-profile mafia cases, there had been bribes and threats to the jury, prompting them to do a fully anonymous and sequestered jury.

That said, that was in the past. Back when the mafia was big news, big business. While I was sure the mafia was still alive and well, I didn't believe that they were as powerful as they used to be.

Clearly, the judge agreed.

Or he simply knew that by locking all of us in a hotel together, unable to talk to anyone but each other, and eating from the same five restaurants in an infinite rotation, we were going to get antsy and angry, and rush through a verdict just to get back to our lives.

I mean, I wasn't exactly planning on dragging out my decision even without being sequestered, but at least I could go home each day. I could check on my grandfather. I could visit the store to make sure things weren't falling apart.

It would just be a couple months, I reminded myself.

The store had been failing for years. A few weeks wouldn't be what brought it down. I'd already been working on fixing things. Those patches would hold it over. Then I could fully commit to it, never having to think about jury duty for a long while.

So I sat back in the ridiculously uncomfortable jury box chairs and watched the prosecution and defense team flounce around the courtroom voices raised, over-enunciating each word.

Unfortunately, for both sides, the news had hit and circulated too quickly for them to get a jury that hadn't heard about what had happened before the trial. And because I was who I was, and because I'd been desperate for a break from the relentless cataloging of what was inside of the cramped, dusty, stuffy antique store, I'd been quick to hop on news and socials, looking into the case.

Murders were common in the city, regardless of how much the crime rate had dropped in the past few decades.

But mafia murders that resulted in a trial?

Not so common.

The victim was Nicholas Myers.

The prosecution had spent days trying to paint him as an upstanding citizen who had never been arrested before. They leaned into the fact that he was the youngest of five brothers, and their family was grieving and yada yada yada.

Before his socials had been locked down like they always did in cases like this, though, I got to see a different image of Nicholas Myers and his brothers.

And let's just say that I had some theories about why Nicholas ended up dead.

Still, I was objective.

I was willing to hear both sides.

Even if the prosecutor's voice was like nails on a chalkboard, and I'd been sporting a migraine for days just from listening to him.

The defense team was something out of a movie or TV show. A man and woman, both of them almost disarmingly attractive, and so sleekly dressed that I couldn't help but wonder how many months of my salary they were wearing each day. The male lawyer's voice was all smooth and deep, and the woman had just the hint of a rasp that had the men on the jury leaning forward when she spoke.

As for the defendant, a Mr. Cosimo Costa—and can we all agree that his name was meant for TV or movies—well, he

was an enigma.

I hadn't heard him speak. Or smile. Or show any emotion whatsoever during the course of the trial.

All he did was sit there in his handsomeness and disassociate.

He was tall: he had to be a good six-two or six-three with a fit but not bulky frame under his all-black suit. He had black hair, black eyes, a sharp jaw, and those cheekbone hollows that kind of gave him a villainous air. Which was probably working in the prosecution's favor. But it wasn't like there was anything he could do about his looks.

It wouldn't kill the guy to emote, though.

Sitting there, day in and day out, like he was, well, you could definitely see how he was capable of murder.

Almost as if sensing that thought, his gaze slid in the direction of the jury box.

It had to be my imagination, but it seemed like he zeroed right in on me.

A strange shiver worked down my spine, and the weirdest part was that it didn't feel exactly like a *bad* shiver.

But that was ridiculous.

It had to be the day-in, day-out of the courtroom grind that was getting to me.

I rolled my neck, trying to pay attention to what the expert on the witness stand was saying.

It wasn't until we were breaking for lunch that something interesting happened, though.

A woman walked into the courtroom.

A vague sense of recognition tugged at the corners of my memory, but I couldn't quite place it as she walked down the row of seats between the crowds for the prosecution and defense.

Both sets of attorneys turned to look.

As did all of the victim's brothers.

She was pretty, but in a shrunken sort of way. Long, wispy blonde hair, big blue eyes, and a petite body that she had wrapped in an oversized sweater. Her arms hugged her body, like she was trying to hold herself together.

I guess I expected her to go toward the prosecution, toward the brothers who were looking at her with familiarity.

But at the last possible second, she veered toward the defense.

And it was the first time I saw any sort of emotion from Cosimo Costa.

A softening.

"Miss," the bailiff called, making me turn my head to notice the rest of the jury had filed out. Likely to go get pizza. Again. I never thought I could get sick of pizza. Alas, it was possible.

"Sorry," I said, moving toward him, but my head swiveled back as I stepped out of the box.

And I saw the unmasked fury on the brothers' faces as Cosimo Costa talked to the young girl.

It wasn't until I was already out of the courtroom that it occurred to me where I'd seen her before.

In a picture on Nicholas Myers's profile.

With his arm draped possessively over her shoulders.

As she shrank away from him.

And there was something else that was niggling at me as I walked into the deliberation room, something in that picture that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

I picked at my pizza, barely eating any of it.

It wasn't until we were passing a janitor on the way back to the courtroom, and I noticed a nasty bruise on his jaw, that I remembered.

In that picture of the girl.

Nicholas Myers's girlfriend.

Something I'd written off as a shadow under her neck.

But, no.

It wasn't a shadow.

It was a bruise.

Across her *throat*.

As we filed back into the box, my gaze slipped to Cosimo Costa.

And I understood with perfect clarity what had truly happened.

Cosimo Costa wasn't innocent.

He was guilty of murder.

He had killed Nicholas Myers.

Even if the prosecution's case was circumstantial at best.

He'd done it.

But not because of organized crime.

Not because of some beef.

No.

He'd killed him because of what Nicholas was doing to his girlfriend, a girl who couldn't be much older than eighteen. Someone who couldn't stand up for herself.

So Cosimo had done it for her.

And maybe it wasn't how most people felt, but as a daughter who had watched her mother get relentlessly abused by a man for years, and no one stepped in to help her, yeah, I had to say that Cosimo Costa was innocent in my book.

I didn't give a fuck what anyone else had to say about it.

Even if the jury deadlocked because of it...

CHAPTER TWO

Cosimo

I was free.

Free.

No ankle monitor.

No rules about not leaving my apartment.

I could just... go back to my life.

My defense team was split on what they thought would happen next.

A hopelessly deadlocked jury meant that the prosecution could take me back to trial again at any time. The question was whether or not they would.

One of my attorneys thought it was likely.

But the newer member of the defense team, someone who was related to the Family through marriage, Vega, thought it

was unlikely, given that the evidence stacked against me was flimsy and circumstantial at best.

That said, the D.A's office was unpredictable.

And they were always out to lock up wise guys.

A feather in their cap or some shit like that.

Even if, objectively, this didn't have shit to do with organized crime.

That said, everything I did had to do with the Family. Which was why I knew what my first stop had to be once I left the courthouse.

To Lorenzo's Brownstone.

To deal with the fallout of my actions.

Contrary to what you might see in film or on TV, you couldn't just go around killing people when you were in the mafia. You had to run that shit past the *Capo dei capi* before you did it.

The thing was, I hadn't.

I couldn't have.

Because I knew what the answer was going to be.

Fuck no.

It wasn't that they wouldn't empathize with the situation, that they wouldn't want to do the same thing, but they wouldn't be able to condone it. To risk it.

So, well, I just... did it.

I didn't *plan* on getting caught. But... shit happens. What can I say? It was getting harder and harder in this world to do anything without some trail leading back to you.

In the Family, we usually had ways to cover our tracks.

Namely, Silvano.

My step-brother.

The bane of my fucking existence most of the time.

But it wasn't brotherly bullshit that had me not calling him.

It was the whole 'not involving the Family' thing.

"I will be in touch," my lawyer said, giving me a firm handshake.

"Yes?" I asked, catching the eye of my other attorney, the woman named Vega with flame-red hair, and a ton of tattoos under her professional suit, who was sitting in because... I dunno... she was the cousin to someone in the family or some shit like that.

"You know, if you weren't a complete and utter dick, I would climb you like a tree," she said, looking up at me with a nod.

Despite myself, I felt my lips curve up a bit at that.

"Good to know," I agreed, nodding.

"Yeah, I mean, it's got to be good to know that it isn't your looks that are holding you back from massive amounts of pussy."

"Just my personality," I said.

"Exactly," she said, smiling. "Well, catch you around, Big Guy. Try not to murder anyone else, okay?" she asked, then turned and walked down the courthouse steps, making a beeline for the closest hot dog vendor.

How she kept a body like that, eating like she ate, was beyond me.

"Fuck," I hissed, rolling my neck, as I looked up at the sky.

Fall was in full swing but leaning colder, like winter was right around the corner.

I knew I was supposed to be happy that the holidays were coming soon, and that I would be free for them. All I could seem to muster, though, was an almost overwhelming sense of dread.

I'd turned everyone away after my arrest and during my house arrest. Refusing to see anyone. Not even accepting

meals when they'd been dropped off.

I thought I was going away.

Twenty-five years, at least.

I figured it would be better to cut everyone off before that happened, to make the transition easier.

But here I was.

Somehow... free.

Even though the jury consultant my legal team hired told us that there was, essentially, no chance at freedom from what they could gather through their analytics.

I couldn't say I'd paid them enough attention to come to my own decisions about them.

I just figured my team was right.

But here I was.

Free.

Fuck-knew how.

Now... now I guess I had to repair all the shit I'd damaged since I went away.

Starting with my ma.

Step-mom, technically, but she'd been my only mom for most of my life. She'd been the soft spot in a hard-as-fuck childhood.

As if I'd somehow manifested her with the direction of my thoughts, I could see a taxi door flinging open, and my mom rushing outward, her gaze on the steps, searching, then finding me.

With a gasp I couldn't hear from so far away, just seeing her lips part, she ran forward, flying up the stairs, then throwing herself into my arms.

I barely got a chance to put mine around her before a loud sob escaped her.

"Oh, my sweet boy," she cried into my chest.

No one would ever call me sweet, save for her. I hadn't even given her much reason to call me that recently. But that was the thing with moms, I guess. Even when you didn't give them a single reason to do so, they still loved you.

"I'm sorry, Ma," I told her, meaning it, even if it was hard to admit.

What can I say? My old man had done a lot of damage to my emotional development before she'd come into our lives. Some of it seemed permanent, regardless of how hard she worked to fix me.

"No, you have nothing to be sorry for," she said, squeezing me with everything in her. She was a petite and thin woman, but she had a lot of strength in her right then. "I understand why you did it. But you won't ever do that to me again, understand?" she asked, sniffing.

Ma, she was a cryer.

Cried over everything.

Mother's Day cards, Christmas commercials, the news. You name it, she was crying.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped back.

"Oh, let me look at you," she said, as if she hadn't seen me on the news for the past few weeks. "You're thin," she decided.

I was pretty sure she would say that even if I'd packed on twenty pounds since the last time I'd seen her. Italian moms. It seemed like they had something encoded in their DNA to make them think their loved ones were all too skinny, and in desperate need fattening up with their cooking.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Dunno," I admitted, shaking my head. "Got a lot of shit to do," I added.

She was good enough not to remind me that the only reason I had all this shit to do was because I'd completely shirked all my responsibilities both to the business and to the family since I was first arrested.

“Of course,” she agreed, patting my chest. “But I would like to see you at my table soon,” she said, hope clear in her blue eyes.

She’d been too pretty for my father. Both inside and out. Short, thin, with wrists that broke really easily. I knew that because my old man had broken each of them at least once. The memory of coming home to that, even all these years later, set my teeth on edge.

She had a rounded face with dominant blue eyes that seemed out of place with her olive skin and black hair. Even all these years later, she was pretty as ever.

I figured the only reason she didn’t date wasn’t because of a lack of suitors, but because my old man fucked with her idea of all men.

“I’ll be there. Just can’t say when yet,” I assured her.

“Good. Good. I’ll make all your favorites. Your brother would love to see you too,” she said. I couldn’t catch the snort before it escaped me.

Hearing it, she sighed.

“You two,” she said, shaking her head sadly.

“Want me to catch you another cab?” I asked, nodding toward the street.

“What? Oh, no. I actually have a lunch date with Primo and Isabella and Emilio and Avery.”

“Who’s Avery?” I asked, brows pinching.

“Emilio’s girl.”

“Emilio’s girl,” I repeated. Emilio? I didn’t see him settling down.

“Yeah, you know, Frank Lombardi’s step-daughter.”

Lombardi?

The fuck had I missed?

Emilio was shackled up with the daughter of an enemy Family? How the fuck had that happened?

“Right. Yeah,” I said, nodding, not wanting to get into it right then.

I had to go get my ass chewed out by Lorenzo.

I could deal with Family gossip some other time.

“Have a good lunch, Ma. I will check in with you later,” I said.

She reached upward, pressing her cold hand to my cheek.

“Go eat your crow,” she said, giving me a pat, then turning to walk away.

The sound that escaped me as I watched her go was more of a growl than a sigh, but I finally started moving. Not toward a cab directed at Lorenzo’s place. But just down the street. Enjoying the ability to walk like everyone else for the first time in months.

I grabbed a coffee. With a few shots. Because I knew I was going to need it. Then set off in the direction of Lorenzo’s house.

“The fuck happened now?” I asked as I rounded the wrought iron gate on the side of Lorenzo’s front stoop, and finding Anthony standing there, a bandage on his throat.

This fucking kid.

Always getting hurt somehow.

It seemed like he had been a fucking genocidal dictator in a past life to come back with the kind of luck he had in this one.

“The fucking barber cut the shit out of me,” he said in a ‘Can you believe this shit?’ tone as he waved at his neck. “Was watching the game when he was shaving my neck, and they were in overtime...”

“Christ,” I said, shaking my head. “The big man in?” I asked.

“Been waiting for you to show up,” Ant confirmed.

“Great,” I said as I started up the steps.

Ant grabbed the knob, turning it, and started to open the door when he landed another blow.

“Your brother’s here too.”

“Fantastic,” I muttered, moving into the foyer.

I took a deep breath, trying to prepare myself.

“About time,” Silvano’s voice called from the side, making a little growl escape me.

The only thing worse than having to have this talk with the Boss was to have it in front of my goddamn step-brother. Who was likely enjoying the fuck out of the fact that I was going to get my ass handed to me. That I was suddenly less in favor than he was.

Silvano had come into the Costa family angry. And then grew bitter as fuck that he wasn’t in the family by blood, but marriage, thinking that everyone viewed him as less-than because of it.

To be fair, I was sure my old man added to that inferiority complex. But the rest of the family had welcomed him with open arms.

Then, as he got older and proved to the Family that he had a special set of skills—namely making dead bodies and all forensic evidence disappear—he became a really vital part of the crew.

Objectively, he had a more important *role* than I did.

The only difference was, I was an earner. I had a whole crew under me, kicking up their dues, busting their asses to make all of us some cash.

Granted, I hadn’t been keeping an eye on those responsibilities for months, figuring that if I was going to be put away, Lorenzo was going to be handing my crew over to someone else who’d gotten Made.

Hell, for all I knew, I had no men left under me.

“The fuck are you doing here?” I asked Silvano.

We didn't look alike, obviously. Having different parents. But we were both tall, but Silvano was a bit thinner. I had sharp features; his were more rugged. We both had black hair. But where my eyes were black like my old man's, his were blue like his mom's. But a stormier shade that seemed to fit his fucking moody-ass personality.

"Can we just... not?" Lorenzo's tired voice called, making me turn to find him sitting at the head of his dining table, looking like he hadn't slept in days.

Did he have another baby?

The guys were breeding like fucking bunnies lately. It was hard to keep track.

"Lorenzo," I said, nodding at him.

"Cosimo," he said, waving toward the table. "Glad to see you free," he said.

"For now," Silvano said under his breath, and we both just pretended not to hear that.

"No one is more surprised than me," I admitted. "Got lucky somehow."

"If you're gonna be stupid, you better fucking be lucky," Lorenzo said, and there was a hard edge in his voice.

"I had my reasons," I told him.

"You better have," he said. "But I don't have time for this shit today. Renzo is up my ass about this... arrangement shit..."

"Arrangement shit?" I asked.

This was twice hearing Renzo's name since I'd walked out of the courthouse. Something big was going on. I didn't usually hear his name for weeks or even months at a time.

"Renzo decided the Lombardis want to get an arrangement like we have with the Espositos."

"The Espos... you've gotta be fucking with me," I said.

The only *arrangement* we had with the Espositos was a clusterfuck of a situation that started as a forced marriage of one of our women to their boss. Thank fuck, that eventually became a love match. But this was not the age of fucking forced or arranged marriages.

“From what I understand, isn’t Emilio dating a Lombardi?” I asked.

“For some reason, that doesn’t count. I think because he expects it to be his marriage, that somehow it will be more binding,” Lorenzo explained.

“We’re not going to fucking do it,” I said. Then, at their silence, I barked, “Right?”

“We don’t know what we’re doing right now. What we do know is Renzo is capable of making shit really difficult if we don’t come to some sort of agreement. Which is why, amongst a thousand other fucking things, I don’t have time for your explanation for what you did. What I need is for you to get your shit together. Get your house in order. Get your people kicking up like they used to. I don’t give a fuck if you have to be the bagman your goddamn self. Fix this shit.”

“I got it,” I agreed. “Anything else?”

“Talk to your ma,” he demanded.

“Already saw her,” I said.

“Then no,” he said, waving me away.

I didn’t expect a warm welcome.

And in the grand scheme of things, I’d gotten off easy.

I guess I could thank a busy schedule and Lorenzo’s overfilled plate for that.

“That was quick,” Ant said as I moved outside again.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “You get your ass Made yet?” I asked.

“Working on it,” he said, but there was a muscle ticking in his jaw that suggested there was some sort of roadblock in his way.

It didn't take much thought to figure out that the roadblock was his older brother, Emilio. Who probably thought he was protecting his brother. Or that he was too young for this shit. Forgetting that we'd all been Made when we were younger than Ant was now.

"You'll get there," I said, giving him a nod then starting to walk.

It was a lot of fucking blocks to my apartment, but after being inside for so long with nothing but a goddamn walking pad to get some steps in my day, the movement was welcome.

I needed to uncover the guns I'd been smart enough to stash outside of my place before the cops came with warrants and gleeful eyes, thinking they were going to find the murder weapon.

Then I needed to do exactly what Lorenzo said.

Get my house in order.

I didn't like the idea that shit had fallen apart without me.

I'd thought I had run a tight ship, that it would stay on course even without me there to direct them.

Clearly, that faith had been misplaced.

And I would have to show everyone what I thought of that.

It was time to get my life back.

CHAPTER THREE

Halle

“Ugh,” I grumbled as I walked around the corner where all the antique, ornate, gold-framed mirrors were located, catching a look at myself for the first time since I’d rushed through brushing my teeth this morning before getting to the shop.

It was not pretty.

Apparently, working sixteen hours in a dark, dusty shop, hauling boxes and items all over the place, so there was actually walking space, didn’t do wonders for your appearance.

My brown hair was barely staying inside its jaw clip that I’d twisted it into that morning. My bangs were looking sweaty and lifeless, falling to the sides of my face.

Smudges of dirt and grime, the origins of such were best not thought about, given that damn near everything in this shop was seventy-plus years old, were on my cheeks, and one was obscuring the cleft in my chin.

I didn't put on makeup, but the mascara from the day before that I hadn't taken off before bed was smudged all under my eyes, making the light blue bluer, sure, but also highlighting my paleness and bags from little-to-no sleep.

From a hidden corner, perched on an ancient rose-colored Captain's chair, I could hear my grandfather's loud snores reverberating through the store.

I'd tried to send him home at five.

He'd insisted that the store was open until seven, and he'd only closed early five times in all his years working here, so he would not be going home until after closing time.

I hated that I thought it, but I couldn't help but wonder how many customers possibly came in before I started working here and found him sleeping.

Did they take their money and leave?

Did they take items with them?

That was why this damn inventory was so necessary.

Every single picture frame, every ring, every old book, I wanted to make sure I knew it existed, where it was, and what it was worth.

I was getting better at being able to recognize something's worth and things like that, but I was still leagues behind my grandfather on it.

What he lacked in organization and the ability to sell items, he made up for in knowledge about them.

I prayed that someday, I could be as informed as he was.

I had a coffee table full of books about antiques that I'd purchased secondhand or borrowed from the library, in the hopes of expanding my knowledge base. But I simply hadn't had any free time to read.

A jingle signaled a potential shopper.

I quickly tried to scrub at the smudges as I emerged from one of the cramped rows.

“Welcome to... oh,” I said, my customer service smile falling from my face.

“I’ll try not to be offended by that,” Lauren, my best friend—my only friend—said, holding up a cardboard drink tray with two extra large coffees nestled in it. “I brought coffee, and it looks like you need it,” she said, grimacing at my face.

“It’s not that bad,” I insisted, taking the coffee.

“Oh, honey, it is,” she said, laughing a bit as she reached out toward my ponytail, and pulling a whole damn cobweb out of it, flicking it into the garbage. “How do things in the world’s stuffiest store known to mankind? What *is* that smell anyway?” she asked. “The hands of a million people touching everything in here?”

Lauren had a strong distaste for all things antique or even secondhand. She could be a bit, well, let’s say... *particular* about cleanliness. Even when she bought brand new items for her house, she had to run a disinfectant wipe over them.

Lauren was the kind of girl who had an immaculately clean house no matter what time of day or day of the week you dropped by. I’d once caught her sneaking out to the kitchen when she was sleeping over at my last apartment, and she claimed she couldn’t sleep because she knew there were dishes in my sink.

So, yeah, this store was her own personal version of hell.

It was a testament to how much this store had been taking over my life that she was venturing in just to spend a little time with me.

Lauren was the light to my dark features, all honey-blond hair that was all hers. I’d doubted that when we’d dormed together in our first year of college, until I saw a family picture and found that *all* of her family had blonde hair. Her eyes were a dark blue in a rounded, pretty face.

Our bodies were different too.

Where I was short and pretty average-sized, she was tall and leggy with thick thighs, hips, and big boobs she swore gave her a wicked neck ache daily. She would frequently claim

she was going to chop them off someday—much to the outrage of any men in earshot.

She was dressed in jeans that I swear looked painted on, and a winter white sweater that cropped a bit toward the center, showing off just a hint of a belly roll.

“God, I forgot what clean looks and feels like,” I admitted as I looked at her. “I feel like this place has embedded itself in my skin.”

“Not to rub more metaphorical dirt in your wound, but you *look* like it has embedded itself into your skin,” she said, taking a long sip of her coffee.

It didn’t escape me that she was standing far enough away from the counter and the row to her side that she didn’t accidentally brush either of them.

“I love Pop-Pop, but I don’t think he even knows what a duster is. Let alone a vacuum or mop,” I admitted.

“Well, he did lose your grandma so young,” Lauren said.

That was true. Childhood sweethearts, they’d been each other’s everything. Until my gram died unexpectedly when my mom was just seven.

I remember her telling stories about literally growing up in the antique store and surviving off of bologna sandwiches. Which was still what my grandfather insisted on eating every single day.

I was trying to be frugal, but I couldn’t quite bring myself to be *that* frugal.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I should have put in an effort on this place sooner.”

“Hey, you were allowed to live your life too,” Lauren said. And, coming from her, that meant a lot. Because I knew how hard it had been for her to walk away from her family’s farm when they’d been counting on her to pitch in once she finished high school. But Lauren had big city dreams. And she’d needed to be strong enough to follow them.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “But think of how many days I sat around the dorm, doing nothing. I could have been here. Fixing this...” I added, waving around.

Objectively, any outsider would tell me I was crazy to commit so much work to this. The logical thing was to keep it afloat until my grandfather passed, then just sell it. The antique store had an almost obscene amount of square footage for a shop in the city. And my grandfather *owned* it. As well as the three floors of apartments over it.

It would sell for millions.

I would be set.

If not for *life*—this was the city, after all, and millions disappeared faster here than most places—then at least it would make it so I would never struggle while I found a job that I loved.

Though after years and years of college, and still no closer to finding what my true passion was, I was all but ready to give up on the idea of a job that I loved.

“Hey, you’re here now. That’s what counts. Where’s that brother of yours?” she added, annoyed with Henry on principle. Everything about his mooching lifestyle rubbed her, a representation of the whole ‘boss babe’ lifestyle, regardless of how out of vogue it was to use that phrase anymore, the wrong way.

“Skiing and snowboarding,” I said, sighing as I leaned against the desk.

My gaze slid to her hand wrapped around her coffee cup, her perfectly manicured nails making me look toward my own hand, finding my nails short, jagged, and dirty underneath.

“How much did that manicure cost?” I asked, wondering if I could squeeze one in, maybe if I cut back on eating out for a week.

“Two-fifty,” she said with a little wince, knowing how expensive that was to, well, anyone. But she earned her money. She deserved to spend it however she saw fit.

“And if I didn’t get the designs?” I asked.

“Next time I go, I’m bringing you. We’ll get your toes done too. And, ah, when’s the last time you got waxed?” she asked with a knowing little smirk.

“It hasn’t been... oh God,” I said, eyes going round, realizing it had, in fact, been that long.

“A full spa day then,” Lauren decided. “Nails, toes, de-furrifying, and a facial. ‘Cause, yeah, your poor skin...” she said, shaking her head. “How old is that eye makeup?” she asked.

“Two days. I think,” I added. “I lost a lot of time on that stupid trial!” I reminded her. “I’m playing catch up now.”

“I don’t think spending a few weeks staring at that delicious piece of man meat was a waste,” Lauren said with a sly turn to her lips before taking another sip of her coffee.

She had, in no way, let me forget for even a moment just how attractive Cosimo Costa was.

“He’s a mafia capo,” I reminded her.

“And, somehow, that’s even hotter.”

“How is that hotter?” I asked, rolling my eyes.

“Hey, that kind of man has to have a good work ethic, and wouldn’t be on my ass about how much I work.”

“He’s a *killer*,” I reminded her.

“He was acquitted.”

“No, he wasn’t. It was a hung jury.”

“Still. The murder thing isn’t an immediate red flag.”

“You’re insane.”

“That’s why you love me,” she said. “Want to go grab dinner with me?” she asked.

“Yes, she does,” my grandfather said, shuffling down the aisle toward us. I swear he was slower with each passing day. I know he ached. Whenever he showed up in the morning, he

had the strong scent of pain cream still clinging to him from the night before.

“No, I’m finishing up here tonight,” I said.

“No, you’re going to dinner with your pretty friend,” he insisted, moving behind the counter, a little more energized from his hour-long nap in the chair. “I can close up here tonight. No,” he said, cutting off my objection. “Go,” he demanded, reaching under the counter for his little cooler that I swear he had my entire life, and pulling out his sandwich, soda, and little store-bought brownie for dessert.

“You heard the man,” Lauren said, giving him one of her big, disarming smiles. Pop-Pop was not unaffected.

I had to admit, even if a part of me felt guilty for it, I was glad to be getting out for a bit. To get a good meal. To get lost in Lauren’s world for a night instead of the rows of antiques of unknown origins at the shop.

“Let me walk back with you,” she demanded.

“It’s the complete opposite direction you need to go in. Besides, those shoes...” I said, shaking my head at her ice-pick heels.

“They are pretty though,” she said, kicking them back and striking a pose. “Okay. Be safe. Love you,” she said, giving me a quick hug, then heading off in her direction.

I figured she had two to five years before she would never walk anywhere again, save for fun. She was going to be one of those people being driven around in a town car by her own personal driver.

And I’d never met anyone who would deserve it more.

Each block back toward the shop, I felt the exhaustion digging deeper into my bones. Until every step felt weighted, and my eyelids were only at half-mast.

I'd given up my old apartment when I'd decided to devote myself to the shop. Which meant I was staying in one of the ones above the shop, right next to my grandfather's little shoebox where he'd spent his whole life. And his father before him.

I was living, breathing, eating, and sleeping this building.

One without an elevator.

My thighs were crying at the idea of climbing the stairs upward again.

I stopped short, though, as I came to the shop.

The shop that should have been closed.

With the lights off.

And the security gate down.

But it was still bright inside, and not only was the security gate not down, but the door was slightly open.

Worried my grandfather had taken another of his many naps and simply lost track of time, I moved inside.

"Pop-Pop?" I called to the silence in the shop.

He always snored.

Always.

My heart seized, mind immediately worried he wasn't asleep, but that he'd maybe had a heart attack or something when I wasn't around to keep an eye on him.

"Pop-Pop?" I called, rushing back toward his chair that he frequented.

Nothing.

"Pop?" I called louder, tears starting to fill my eyes, unable to stop imagining him on the ground somewhere, holding his heart. "Poppy?" I called, voice catching as I stared at the massive front counter with its antique cash register.

Sucking in a breath that burned, I moved around the counter.

It was worse than my fears manifested.

Yes, he was on the ground.

And, yes, he was unconscious.

But not from his heart.

From someone beating the ever-loving shit out of him.

“Pop-Pop,” I cried, dropping down next to him, staring at his chest to make sure it was still rising and falling as I fumbled for my cell phone, calling the police as I reached out, wanting to touch him, to comfort him, but not wanting to touch him anywhere that might hurt.

The bruises and blood had my heart flipping over in my chest as I sat there, listening for the sirens.

“Miss... miss, you have to get out of the way,” one of the paramedics urged a few moments later when they showed up.

I moved out from behind the desk on numb legs, my body shaking as I begged whatever higher power there might be in the universe to make my grandfather pull through.

“Could this have been a robbery?” the officer at my side asked, making me look over at him, slow blinking for a second before his words sank in.

“Oh, ah, I don’t... I wasn’t...” I said, shaking my head.

“Does anything seem missing?” he pressed, likely accustomed to people in crisis situations, so he seemed unbothered by my brain fog.

Taking a deep breath, I turned, glancing around at everything close to the register.

“Nothing here,” I said, noticing the arranged table of figurines, and the shelf full of fine China.

“Everything in here is worth something, though, right?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, nodding. Some much more than others. But nothing looked disturbed from where I was standing.

“Is there a security system?” he asked.

“What? Oh, yeah. Yes,” I said with a nod, waving toward the cameras at the front of the store.

Were they those old-school ones that stuck out like a sore thumb? Sure. Would the images likely be grainy? Yes. Had I been begging my grandfather to let me replace them for months? Also yes. But, so far, no luck.

I had been wondering if he would even notice if I stuck up some of the newer, dome-like ones. His vision wasn't what it used to be anyway.

“Can you give me access to them?” he asked.

I agreed, leading him to the back storage room where the computer was set up. No password, because my grandfather could never remember one.

“No,” I said, staring at the screen. “No,” I whimpered, seeing nothing but static on the camera feed.

“Think they were tampered with?” he asked.

“I think he just... didn't set them up right,” I said. They could have been like this for years, forever, and he wouldn't have been any the wiser.

“Don't lose hope. Plenty of the shops 'round here got cameras. I'm sure we'll find something,” the officer said as we walked back out toward the front, single-file, since we wouldn't fit otherwise.

The paramedics had my grandfather strapped to the gurney, looking older and frailer, and more swollen in the face than he had been moments before.

“I'll be right there, Pop-Pop,” I promised him, touching his leg over the blanket draped there.

Tears, useless but uncontrollable, slid down my cheeks as I watched him get loaded into the ambulance and driven away as I stood there answering more questions with the police. They made me check the register and do a walkthrough of the store to make sure the expensive items weren't missing.

But as far as I could tell, nothing was.

Which only made this whole thing make less sense.

Eventually, the police let me close the shop, so I could go see my grandfather, promising to be in touch if or when they got any leads, and I made my way to the hospital.

I sat there in the waiting room for what felt like years, my stomach flip-flopping, my mind racing, wondering if I should call my brother, if he would even care.

It had been so long since I'd seen him that I wasn't even sure there was any real bond left. If he even considered us his family anymore.

Ultimately, I didn't call.

Just sat there in my own misery.

I could have called Lauren.

She would have come in a heartbeat to sit with me, would have pressed the nurses for updates on my grandfather, would have gotten me cup after cup of coffee, and then forced me to eat as night became morning.

But I knew from our dinner conversation that she had a really important meeting in the morning, one that could mean the corner office she'd been coveting since she'd joined her company.

I couldn't risk that for her.

So I just sat and waited.

And waited.

"Miss Whitlock?" a voice called, snapping me out of my endless cycle of ugly thoughts to find the doctor standing there, waving me over. "Your grandfather is going to be okay," he assured me before the words burst out of me. "He has a pretty severe concussion and a broken eye socket," he added. "As well as some bruised ribs. Unfortunate circumstances as these are, it was actually a good thing your grandfather came in tonight, though," he said before launching into a long list of issues my grandfather was dealing with that ranged from dehydration to reduced kidney function.

All said and done, it sounded like my grandfather was going to be spending some time in the hospital. Not so much because of the attack, but the underlying issues I didn't even know he was suffering with.

"Pop-Pop, you didn't know you were sick?" I asked, holding his hand gently between both of mine, finding his fingers too cold.

"You get to be my age, everything starts not working like it used to," he said, shrugging. "Didn't think much else of it," he added.

"Well, we need to get you tuned up again," I told him, giving his hand a squeeze. "But Pop-Pop, what happened?" I asked. "Did you see who did this to you?"

"I didn't see anything," he said, shaking his head. "Came at me from behind," he added, trying to touch the back of his head, but all his tubes prevented him. "What did they take?" he asked, always worried about the shop first and foremost.

"Nothing that I can tell," I told him, watching his brows furrow. "I am going to do a closer check now that I know you're okay. But nothing really looks disturbed."

"Excuse me, I just wanted to bring Mr. Whitlock his menu," an aide said, popping in to bring him the paper.

"You know what they don't serve here? Bologna sandwiches," he said, shaking his head. "I asked."

"Of course you did," I said, smiling. But the smile only made the tears that were brimming in my eyes pour out.

"Oh, none of that. I'm just fine. Better than fine. I got the ladies fussing all over me. And one of the men too," he said, eyes warm. "You look tired, Halle girl," he said. "You need to get some sleep, so you can open the shop for me in the morning."

And that was Pop-Pop for you.

The business above everything else.

I left him half an hour later when the meds and the long night finally caught up with him, making him pass out and

rest.

The last thing I wanted was to go back to the shop. But I did need to check around, make sure the most expensive items weren't missing. Those, I'd been sure to catalog first when I started working there.

I was just about to reach down to pull up the security gate when I saw them.

Four men.

Standing across the street.

And something about them had goosebumps rising all over my body.

I chanced a second look.

And recognition hit.

Then I was turning and running.

Toward the subway.

Where I would find people.

And in them, at least the illusion of safety.

Though I knew New Yorkers too well to assume anyone would step in to save me if it came to that. I'd seen too many awful things over the years.

The perk of the subway was also getting the fuck out of my neighborhood, so I could sit somewhere and think.

My first instinct was to go to the police, of course.

The problem was, I had no proof that they were doing anything wrong. I couldn't explain the chilling look on their faces to the cops. Even if they believed me, there was nothing they could do.

There was, as far as I could tell, no video footage of them.

They'd caught my grandfather from behind, so that he couldn't even fight back. There'd been nothing under his nails or anything like that.

Yet, I knew it, damnit.

It had been them.

Somehow, they'd found out that I'd been the one to deadlock the jury.

I was the reason their brother's killer was a free man.

Which really just left me with one choice, didn't it?

To go to their brother's murderer for help...

CHAPTER FOUR

Cosimo

“Leon, I don’t want your fucking excuses. I want results,” I said, staring down the man who was standing at the side of my table.

Leon was one of my most seasoned soldiers, one with a couple dozen associates under him. And I was starting to wonder if his seniority had given him a false fucking sense of security when it came to what was expected of him.

That, or he’d simply been slacking when I hadn’t been around to breathe down his neck.

The money he was kicking up was laughable. Especially when you considered that I had to take my cut, then kick the rest up the chain to Lorenzo.

“Times are hard, man,” he said, shrugging.

“And when times are hard, crimes increase. This means we have to work more to make good on our promises of

protection. They want protection without paying? Get fucking real. Lean on them.”

“I’ve been—“

“Then lean harder,” I cut him off. “You don’t want me having to go out there and do your job for you, Leon,” I warned, watching as redness spread up his neck and into his face.

You didn’t have to give guys in this world explicit threats.

He knew exactly what I meant.

And the fact that I’d recently gotten off on a murder charge made the threat even more believable.

“I got this, Cos, I got it,” he assured me, nodding so quickly that his jowls shook a bit.

“You better,” I said, and with a flick of a wrist, excused him. “What are you looking for?” I asked when one of my cousins moved forward now that Leon was gone, looking down at the floor as he walked.

“A trail of piss,” he admitted with a smirk.

Gavino was one of Cesare’s many brothers, and the one with the surliest personality. Which was probably why I got on with him so well.

Like Cesare, he was tall, wide-shouldered, with black hair. Unlike Cesare, he didn’t have ink, and he’d gotten his dark blue eyes from his ma.

“Told you they were fucking up,” he said, taking the seat across from me, and nodding to the waitress who gestured toward my glass, silently requesting his own.

“Yeah, it’s worse than you said,” I admitted. “Thought my house could run without me around, cracking the fucking whip.”

“You know how it is,” he said, shaking his head. “Everyone needs motivation to do their part. I’m surprised Leon isn’t having one of his associates challenge him and his weak leadership.”

“I’d invite it at this point,” I admitted. When it came to the men under you, you wanted them all to be hungry. For the cash, sure, but also to prove themselves. When someone was in a position as long as Leon had been in his, they got lazy. “Fucking ridiculous that he thinks ‘I don’t have the money’ is an acceptable answer. Especially with the holidays coming up. All those tourists. All the crime that comes with that. And we’re supposed to track them down and show ‘em not to fuck with the local businesses for nothing? I don’t fucking think so.”

“Better not let the boss hear you talking about allowing dissent in your ranks,” Gav said, taking his glass from the waitress.

“Allowing shitty men to stay in power indefinitely is the reason Lorenzo’s father’s reign was such an unstable one.”

“Well, that and the fact that his father was a complete dickhead. Yours too, for that matter,” he added, toasting me with his glass before taking a drink.

Gav, Cesare, their brothers, and their sister, Lore, had been lucky as fuck to have one of the very few dads of that generation who wasn’t a sonofabitch. Who didn’t beat the ever-loving shit out of them just for fun.

Hell, Gav’s dad was even head-over for his ma before she died relatively young, leaving him to raise all those kids on his own.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

But wired how I was wired, I was always going to look for flaws in the work, in the organization, not in interpersonal relationships. That just wasn’t my forte. I wouldn’t pretend to try to link my father’s treatment of me to the instability of the Family at that time.

“How was Vega during the trial?” Gav asked a moment later as he stared at the TV over the bar.

I conducted close Family business at my apartment. But when I was dealing with soldiers and associates and shit like

that, I preferred hanging out at the bar I really broke my teeth on as a baby wise guy.

Back then, the owners hadn't been paying for protection. And word got out that the owner's daughter got drugged *in* her father's bar, then taken outside and raped.

I tracked him down, cut off his balls, and gave 'em to her father as a present. From that day on, he paid me for protection. It was my first racket independent of my father. And it was what I built up into a thriving business.

It also allowed me to use the place for business whenever I wanted.

It wasn't a huge place. Little brick-walled bar that mostly catered to blue-collar workers with several TVs playing all the games, and nothing even resembling a stage or dance floor.

"She's got a better feel for people, I think, than our guy. The jury consultants even said so. She also said that if I wasn't such a prick, she would climb me like a tree," I added, smirking as I took a sip of my drink.

"Ant plays her in some video game," Gav said. "Told me she says shit to her opponents that makes *him* blush."

"I can see that," I decided, nodding. "She's a real... yeah?" I asked when one of my men, Miko, came up to me, lifting his chin.

"There's a woman here to see you," he said.

"Yeah?" I asked, brows scrunching as I tried to run through the women I had in my rotation before I got locked away on house arrest. I'd pushed 'em all away after that. But I didn't think any of them would come hunting me down.

"Said it's an emergency," he added.

"Can't think of any—" I started, just when there was a commotion at the door as a woman barreled her way past another of my men, and stormed over in our direction.

I recognized her.

Of course I did.

When you sat in a courtroom day in and day out for weeks, you got to know everyone inside of it. Especially when this was the only fuckable woman in the room, aside from Vega.

Juror number twelve.

One who, during voir dire, had answered every question from both the prosecution and defense with her words dripping with disdain. Like she didn't have time for their bullshit.

Our team had been shocked when the prosecution didn't move to dismiss her, since she clearly didn't want to be there, and would want to rush through deliberations. If we hadn't been out of strikes, we'd have dismissed her for it too.

She was a stupidly pretty thing. Not in a 'didn't know she was pretty' way, because I didn't think a single gorgeous woman didn't know exactly how beautiful she was. But more in a 'it doesn't matter how pretty I am' sort of way.

Her long black hair was always pulled back in one of those claw clips, leaving her long, parted bangs to tease her eyebrows and temples, drawing even more attention to her disarmingly light blue eyes.

There were rules about what you wore to jury duty, so I had no idea if the slacks and sweaters were her personal style, or just what she thought she had to wear. All I could say was they were too shapeless, and it made me want to know what was underneath.

Today, she had on tight jeans and what looked like a t-shirt under an oversized wine-colored cardigan.

Her hair was still up.

Her eye makeup was smudged.

And it looked like she hadn't slept in a week.

"Juror Number Twelve," I greeted her, one brow quirked up in curiosity, some part of me wondering if maybe she had just been eye-fucking me through the trial, and wanted to take me for a ride.

I clearly wasn't good at reading people.

Because as soon as she was in front of us, yanking her arm away from my man who tried to pull her away again, she blurted out, “I need your help.”

Again, it wasn't my strength at picking up on tone and shit, but I was pretty sure there was a desperate edge to her words. The only reason I think I even picked up on that was because I'd heard it in the voices of men who didn't pay me, and had me darkening their door, ready to break some bones and beat some compliance into them.

“And why the hell do you think I would want to help you?” I asked, tone bored, even if I was anything but right then. Intrigued was a better word.

“Because I am the only reason you are a free man right now,” she said with a defiant lift to her chin.

It was her?

Just her?

I knew my team was planning on looking into how many jurors had been for or against me. But I'd been too busy to check back in with them since the trial.

I guess I figured it would be evenly split. Or at least that I had a few people on my side.

Not just one woman.

One who my team had been sure would be eager to convict just to get herself out of that jury box and back to her life.

I jerked my head at my man, who immediately turned and left.

“Gav,” I said, giving him a look because he looked ready to order some popcorn and sit back for the show.

“Fine. Fine,” he grumbled, getting up, taking his drink with him, and walking away.

I waved toward his abandoned chair, and she looked at it, then me, unsure.

“We could go somewhere more private,” I said.

“No!” she said. Quickly. Too quickly. “This is fine,” she said, taking Gav’s seat.

She crossed her legs, but the bottom one was tapping restlessly.

“You were the only holdout?” I asked.

“Yes,” she told me, gaze holding mine, and I didn’t see a single lie on her face.

“You don’t think I did it?” I asked.

“I know you did it,” she said, head tipping to the side slightly. “But I agree with why you did it.”

My lips curved up a bit at that. Since there was no way she could have known why I’d done it.

“You do remember that when you were sworn in that you had to base your verdict on the evidence, not your personal opinion, correct?”

To that, her eyes rolled.

“Please, every lawyer and judge knows it’s impossible for jurors to be unbiased. Hell, most judges are biased. Nothing about justice in this country is blind. And some justice needs to be meted out by people who aren’t scared of the consequences,” she said, shrugging. “But that’s all beside the point.”

“Right. Yes. You’re here because you need my help. And you think I owe you.”

“You do owe me,” she said, daring me to disagree. I knew a threat when I was hearing one.

Even if I had no idea what the threat *was*.

Going to the media?

To her socials?

Telling them all the reasons I *was* guilty?

Any of that would be bad for the Family.

Objectively, I knew what the Boss would say about this.

Handle it.

“Would you like a drink?” I asked when the waitress hovered again.

“Coffee,” she said, sounding desperate for a cup. She didn’t look like she needed coffee. She looked like she needed sleep. But who the fuck was I to say that?

“What do you need help with?” I asked.

“They’re after me,” she said. “And my grandfather,” she added. Did her voice catch on that word?

“Who is after you?” I asked.

“The brothers,” she said, voice a whisper, like said brothers might be eavesdropping.

“Which brothers?”

“Nicholas Myers’s brothers,” she whispered, before jerking upright as the waitress returned. Aware of the tension at the table, she was quick to set down the cup, carafe, and little bowl of creamers before rushing away.

“Nicholas Myers’s brothers are after you?” I asked, brows furrowed. “Why would you think that?”

“Because they beat the shit out of my grandfather!” she exploded, slamming her arm down hard enough on the table that everything jumped.

“Calm down,” I demanded, aware of the eyes suddenly on us. The place wasn’t busy in the mornings, but there were a few of the guys who worked overnight shifts who stopped in for a drink before heading home to sleep. “Start from the beginning.”

“I was at the shop,” she started.

“The antique shop,” I said, recalling her saying it during *voir dire*.

“Yes. And my friend came to take me to dinner. When I got back, the shop should have been closed for the night, but the gate was up and the lights were on. I figured maybe my grandfather fell asleep inside. He... does that sometimes. But

when I went in, he was on the ground behind the counter, unconscious and beaten to high hell.”

“It sounds like a robbery,” I said, shrugging.

“Nothing was taken!” she snapped, eyes burning. “I went to the hospital with him. When I got back to go open the shop again, I saw them.”

“The Myers brothers,” I said.

“Yes. Across the street. Staring at me.”

“You’re sure it was them?” he asked.

“They were in the courtroom every day. Yes, I’m sure.”

“Why would you assume that they were there because of you?”

“Because they found out that I was the holdout,” she concluded.

“That’s a bit far-fetched,” I said, shaking my head.

“It was them, damnit,” she said, eyes suddenly looking glassy.

And, yeah, I wasn’t good with tears.

“Pull yourself together,” I said, watching flames chase away the tears. Her eyes narrowed at me as her jaw clenched. “If you genuinely believe it was them, why are you bringing this to me instead of the police?”

“Because they aren’t going to believe me.”

“Baby, I don’t believe you,” I said, shrugging.

“Fine,” she snapped, slamming her hand on the table as she started to rise from her seat.

“Stop,” I said, tone low and calm as my hand closed over the top of hers, stopping her movement.

As crazy as this shit was, I swear there was a fucking spark at the contact. Like a static shock, but times ten.

“Sit your ass back down,” I demanded in the same voice.

I saw that defiant jut to her chin again, but she lowered back into the chair.

“Good girl,” I said, sighing. “Alright. Say I believe you. Say it was the Myers brothers—“

“It *was*,” she cut me off.

“Say it was,” I agreed. “What do you expect from me?”

“I expect you to do something. Look what they did,” she demanded, reaching into her pocket, and I saw two of my men reach into their jackets. They dropped their hands when I raised mine. “Look,” she said, thrusting her phone across the table at me.

And, yeah, the old man got beat to fucking hell, there was no denying that.

But I was finding it hard to believe it was the Myers brothers.

“That sucks, but I’m still not seeing a good reason for them to do this.”

“Payback,” she said.

“Payback for what? For you not being able to make up your mind? ‘Cause that’s how this would look to an outsider.”

“Payback because they think I’m in your pocket,” she said.

That... was a fair point, actually.

It wasn’t exactly unusual for jurors in mafia cases to be bribed or threatened. It was why they would often sequester them. I think the only reason they hadn’t in this case was because I wasn’t one of the Big Five bosses. Capos had reach, sure, but not as far a reach as a Boss.

“Alright,” I said, taking a breath, then letting it out. “I’ll see what I can do,” I said, all too aware that I needed to run everything by the boss right now. I was on thin enough ice already.

“You’ll... see what you can do?” she asked. She was shaking now, and I couldn’t tell if it was anger, fear, or cold. It was anyone’s guess.

“Yes, I’ll see what I can do,” I said, getting to my feet, and buttoning my jacket.

My suit had been a major bone of contention in my trial. Both my lawyers and my jury consultants wanted me in blue. Guilty men, apparently, wore black. Innocent, blue.

They hadn’t liked it when I’d reminded them that I was guilty.

“That’s not... what am I supposed to do until then?” she asked.

“Go stay with your friend,” I said.

“I... can’t,” she told me.

I probably should have asked why. That was what people did. But I didn’t give a shit why.

“Then stay at a hotel until you hear from me.”

“I can’t afford a hotel,” she said, spitting out the words like they were bitter.

I understood that feeling, though. My old man had been rolling in cash. But he made damn sure that we never got to spend any of it.

A hungry dog will bring home his own dinner, he’d told me more than a few times.

So, yeah, I’d been hustling since fucking grade school to have some extra cash.

I understood the humiliation of not having money like everyone else did to spend how they saw fit.

I reached into my pocket, pulling the clip off my money, and tossing a grand on the table.

“Get a hotel. Get some sleep. Leave your number with one of my men,” I said, waving toward them. “And I’ll be in touch.”

With that, I turned and walked away.

And absolutely did not think about how thankful this woman would be when I handled this problem for her.

Thankful enough to let me strip her out of those baggy clothes, and finally see what was underneath, perhaps?

CHAPTER FIVE

Halle

Okay.

So... he was a complete and utter dickhead.

I mean, I guess I'd gotten hints of that at the trial. But talking to him up close and personal was a whole other thing. And, yeah, holy crap, was he a dick.

I mean he looked at me with those cold, disinterested eyes. And he spoke to me in that detached tone.

Which was why it was extra ridiculous that I swore a spark coursed up my arm when his hand came down on mine.

I know I probably should have taken his cash and tossed it in his face just to make a point. But, honestly, I needed that money.

I couldn't, wouldn't, involve Lauren in this. The last thing she needed in her life was to be the target of some old-man-beating psychopaths.

If they were willing to do what they'd done to a senior citizen, I didn't have any illusions about the kind of torture a woman in their path would have to endure.

Which was why I'd gathered up that money, and slipped it into my pocket, only taking out some to pay for my coffee, only to be told that it was covered. Even though I hadn't seen Cosimo pay her.

"A tip then," I urged, holding out the twenty. What did I care that it was an exorbitant tip for a cup of coffee? It wasn't my money anyway. And, I mean, judging by how the mob worked, Cosimo hadn't exactly worked for it, either.

"They tip well too," she told me. Then, voice lower, so no one else could hear. "Trust me," she said. "Keep that all for yourself."

With that, she was gone. I did sit and drink my coffee. I was dead on my feet. And while I drank it, I looked up hotel rooms on my phone.

With this kind of money, I could stay anywhere I wanted. But I decided to go for somewhere as cheap as possible, which might allow me to stay for several days. It wasn't like Cosimo had told me *when* he might be in touch. And I couldn't imagine my situation was high on his priority list. So, just to be safe, I booked a room that seemed like it would have a view of the alley full of rotting garbage. But at least breakfast was included. That would save me more money.

I mean, I couldn't even go back to the shop until this was handled, right? It was far too empty most of the time. No one to see anything happen.

It was high on my priority list to get a good security system in the shop. Both inside and out. So nothing like this could ever happen again without us at least having evidence of what had transpired.

I couldn't help but wonder how the finances were at the shop as I tucked my phone away, ready to head out, even though I couldn't check in at my hotel until four. I figured I could grab something quick and cheap to eat, then maybe hit

the library for a while, get some books to study while I was locked up in the hotel.

Were the bills all paid up?

Did my grandfather have any savings?

Ones that would hold the place over if we had to close for a few days?

I mean, if I had my laptop, I could continue to work on the website. A lot of antique aficionados were online, not coming into the store. We could be missing out on a huge market by not having an online presence. But I was no expert, and I couldn't afford to pay for one, so it was taking me a long time to figure it all out.

I guess I could spend some time at the library on their computers researching that more too.

That in mind, I headed out, losing a few hours at the library before heading back to the hospital.

I was paranoid at best as I slipped into the hospital, my head on a swivel, sure one of the brothers might be hiding behind any corner, waiting for me in the elevator, that kind of thing.

But there was no one.

Save for my grandfather who looked even smaller than before in the big hospital bed.

“Shouldn't you be at work?” he asked, trying to squint at the clock.

He had bad eyes, but he never wanted to wear his glasses. He didn't have them when he'd come in, so he was seeing everything all blurry.

I was lucky that it was late fall because the sun had set a while ago, and he was none the wiser.

“It was closing time,” I told him, having decided that my best course of action was just to pretend that everything was status quo, so he would allow himself to stay and get better, not be stubborn and sign himself out against doctor's orders,

only to go back and, what? Get hurt again? No, I wouldn't allow that. "How are you feeling?"

"Oh, they gave me the good stuff," he said, giving me a bleary-eyed smile.

"Did you eat lunch?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. They had tapioca!" he said, thrilled at the delicacy. He was a man of simple tastes, and he didn't allow dessert, save for fruit, most nights.

"Food for the soul," I told him, patting his hand. "I did some studying in my, uhm, free time today," I told him.

Then we launched into industry talk. I liked the books, but I learned so much more from hearing my grandfather talk about it. Facts came alive in his words. I figured maybe that had something to do with having grown up listening to him tell me bedtime stories. This during the time when my mom, brother, and I were staying with him to get away from my father.

Those stories were rich with history but told in fantastical ways, with thrills and intrigue. And very detailed accounts of the art, swords, and statues. Even the rugs. As an adult, I realized that it was him weaving his own love into the stories.

So as he told me about Hellenistic sculptures, I could suddenly see the finer details in the fabrics, in the bodies, compared to that of the classical style. I would no longer see the image of *The Boxer at Rest* as curly-haired and freakishly black-eyed. I could see the cords of his muscles, the shadows of the wraps on his hands, the little cuts in his face, even the way his, well, cock and balls sat on the stone.

My grandfather never shied away from talking about genitals. I guess since classic art was so full of it, he had learned to be able to see and speak of it without the embarrassment that many of us felt.

By the time we were done discussing the Hellenistic era, he was already starting to drift off, so I excused myself, ready to make my way across town to the hotel.

At first, I'd wanted to stay in one close to the hospital, but my paranoia had me choosing one further away, so I wouldn't be looking over my shoulder.

I ducked into a taxi right outside the hospital. Again, paranoid, and thinking I'd be harder to follow in a taxi, even if it killed me to spend even the few dollars on a ride when I could have easily walked.

I ducked into the bodega on the corner, grabbing a toothbrush, paste, and a bar of soap, resigning myself to wearing my clothes again tomorrow, and just... wearing my undies to sleep in, then checked into the hotel.

It wasn't much to write home about. A dark, but clean hotel meant to look more upscale than it was. And to tourists who might not know better, it likely even succeeded.

I'd been right about my room. A full-sized bed dominated the space, and the bathroom was somehow even more cramped than the one in my apartment. And, yes, my view was of the alley.

But it was clean and safe, I reminded myself.

Safe was what mattered most.

So I could finally get some rest.

I barely got a chance to brush my teeth and rush through a shower before I fell into the bed.

Despite all the fear and uncertainty, I was asleep within moments.

And if it wasn't for my phone dinging on the nightstand, I probably would have slept straight through.

I reached for it with closed eyes, having to force my heavy lids open to blink at the screen, seeing a text from an unfamiliar number.

Get rest tonight. I'll be in touch tomorrow. - CC

It didn't take a genius to know who CC was.

Cosimo Costa.

So I guess I was wrong.

I was at least somewhere at the top of his priority list if he was going to make time for me again so soon.

Hope bloomed as I said a silent prayer that I could get back to my life sooner rather than later.

But it wasn't hope that had a strange, warm feeling coursing through me as I drifted back off to sleep.

Oh, no.

It was a set of dark eyes.

And that deep, smooth voice.

And the way his simple, casual touch had created sparks.

In my dreams, those sparks became fires.

Ones that threatened to consume me completely.

CHAPTER SIX

Cosimo

“Didn’t expect you to willingly show up here again so soon,” Lorenzo said as I walked into his Brownstone, finding him walking from the kitchen with a coffee in his hand.

“No offense, but I don’t want to be here either,” I said, getting a smirk out of him. “Oh, hey, Milo,” I said when Emilio came from the direction of the kitchen too.

It didn’t escape me that he was suddenly wearing one of his oversized belt buckles again.

“Cos,” he said, brows furrowing.

“Heard you have a girl now,” I said.

“Avery,” he agreed, and there was a ghost of a smile on his lips at just the mention of her name. “And two cats,” he said, shaking his head a bit.

“A Lombardi,” I said.

“A step-daughter of a Lombardi,” he clarified. “It’s a bit of a long story,” he added.

“Which I don’t have time for,” I said.

To that, I got a snort out of Emilio. “Charming as ever, huh, Cos?” he asked as he walked into the dining room.

“Did you expect house arrest to make me *more* friendly?” I shot back.

“That’s fair,” he agreed.

“So, what’s going on? Can’t imagine you’d be here if you didn’t have to be.”

I was a little resentful at having to be, but I couldn’t exactly tell him that. I was on thin enough ice already.

“Yeah, I got a problem.”

“With your crew?” Lorenzo asked.

“Yes, but that’s being handled. I was at the bar today with Gav and a woman came rushing in. She was kinda desperate.”

“Must have been if she was coming to see your surly ass,” Emilio teased.

I couldn’t really put my finger on it, but something was different about him. He was more like the Emilio I’d grown up with. More lighthearted and easy-going.

He’d gone dark for a few years there.

Seemed like something had turned the light back on.

Or, maybe, *someone* had.

“I know, right?” I agreed, not offended. I wasn’t the kind of guy most women would come to for help. “No, this was Juror Number Twelve from my trial,” I told them.

Lorenzo, who’d only been paying me half attention, suddenly sat upright, his gaze on me, brows raised.

“What was that?”

“Yeah. The girl from my jury.”

“The fuck did she want?” he asked.

“Help,” I told him.

“From you? Why?”

“Because she claims the brothers of the guy I offed is stalking her and put her grandfather in the hospital.”

“Wait... what?” Emilio asked.

“Why would they do that?” Lorenzo asked at almost the exact same time.

“Because she claims she was the one who deadlocked the jury,” I told them. “And therefore let their brother’s killer go free.”

“They would only go that extreme if...” Lorenzo started.

“If they thought the prosecution wasn’t going to retry the case,” I finished for him.

“She was the *only* person who thought you might be innocent?” Emilio asked.

“No,” I said.

“But you just—“ he started.

“No, she didn’t think I was innocent,” I told him. “She just didn’t think I should go to jail for it.”

“What? Is she one of those people who don’t believe in prisons on principle?” he asked.

“I didn’t ask, but I don’t think that’s the case.”

“What proof does she have that these brothers are after her?” Lorenzo asked.

“That she saw them. Really, that’s it. But, in her defense, they were in court every day for weeks. She knows what they look like. If she’s so sure she saw them, I don’t know if I have a reason to doubt her.”

“And they beat up her grandfather?” Emilio asked.

“Yeah. She said she went out to dinner with a friend and left him alone in the shop. When she got back, he was beat to shit.”

“Shop?” Emilio asked.

“She works at the family antique shop,” I supplied.

“And she thinks it was the brothers and not a robbery?” Lorenzo asked. “There’s a lot of expensive shit in antique stores.”

“She claims nothing was stolen,” I said, shrugging. I didn’t have a reason to doubt her.

“And she came to you for what, exactly?” Lorenzo asked.

Good fucking questions.

“She wants me to handle it,” I said.

“Handle it how? Killing all of them?” he asked.

“She didn’t specify. She seemed freaked. Maybe not thinking clearly, just needing help.”

Emilio had sisters.

Lorenzo had a wife, a daughter.

I could see them imagining the women in their life being in that kind of situation and needing help.

“And how do you want to handle this situation?” Lorenzo asked.

“Given what I know about those fuckheads? I wouldn’t mind taking them all out,” I admitted.

“Christ,” Lorenzo hissed, rubbing his brow with his hand. “Alright. I guess we are doing this now. What did they do?”

“Think you know me well enough to know I’m not someone who kills for the thrill of it,” I said.

They couldn’t argue with that.

I wasn’t Brio.

I didn’t *enjoy* bloodshed and pain.

None of us did.

It was just part of the job sometimes, like it or not.

“Alright. Out with it then,” Lorenzo said in the voice of a man who didn’t have time for this, but was resigned to hear it.

“Nicholas Myers had an on-and-off-again girlfriend named Lily who lived in my building,” I explained, watching both of them straighten, suddenly interested.

What? Did they think it was some fucking bar slight gone wrong or something equally as ridiculous? Like I didn’t have more self-control than that?

“She was fucking seventeen when they started dating. He, if you remember, was in his early thirties.”

“Fuck,” Emilio said, shaking his head.

“And, as you’d expect from a predator who only wants young girls, he did all that predatory shit. Led her away from her friends and her family. Even got her to drop out of school. But only because he didn’t want anyone to see when he beat the ever-loving shit out of her. Used to see her rushing back sometimes, begging her parents to let her back in.”

They always did.

No one wanted their little girl to be hurt and alone with nowhere to go. Not even if she went no-contact with them for months at a time.

“One night, I was coming home from work. Late. Think it was like three in the morning or some shit. Elevator doors opened to her sprawled on the ground, covered in bruises, blood running down her thighs.”

“Oh, fuck,” Emilio said, eyes closing for a second.

“Turns out, she told Nicholas she was done with him for good. And how did he choose to punish her? By him and his brothers gang-raping her. She waited afterward until they were too drunk and high to notice, and left. But she’d passed out in the elevator.”

“You didn’t take her to the cops?”

“She didn’t want me to,” I said. “Can’t fucking force someone to report. She said she couldn’t make it through a trial, having to look at them, having to be cross-examined and

questioned about why she didn't leave, or having them suggest she'd wanted to be with them all, then just regretted it after. You know, the shit they do to all rape victims," I said, shrugging.

Sure, lock up the wise guys who were just taking out other criminals. But let all the fucking rapists walk free. We had a bang-up criminal justice system.

"Can't blame her for not wanting to go through with it," Emilio said. "It would only traumatize her again."

"Yeah. I brought her to her parents. They took care of her. Even got her in-home therapy and shit like that since she was terrified to step out of the apartment. She was... recovering. But I... I couldn't fucking stop thinking about finding her that night. Those images were burned into my brain. Couldn't even sleep at night. So... I took out the guy I considered the ringleader."

I'd have taken all of them out, given the chance.

But shit didn't work out that way.

Because I hadn't planned it out.

I hadn't been careful enough.

"Shit," Lorenzo said, shaking his head. "I can't even be mad at you any more about it then," he declared. "No matter how much I had to shovel out in attorney fees. You know Vega charged us four-hundred bucks for some kind of fucking spicy chips she had imported in weekly?" he asked, shaking his head.

"That... sounds like her," I decided. And, come to think of it, I always saw a bag of chips peeking out of her bag, the top tucked and clipped with one of the claw clips she used for her hair.

"Still," Lorenzo said, sighing.

I knew the answer then.

"We got a lot of eyes on us right now. Especially since the hung jury. There's no way more of the Myers brothers turn up

dead, and we don't get blamed for it. You, in particular. It's not something we can risk right now."

I figured that was going to be what he said.

"What do you expect me to do then?" I asked. "Just walk away? Tell her she's on her own?"

For reasons I didn't understand, and didn't exactly care to, there was a strange tension in my stomach at the idea of telling her I wasn't going to help.

To that, Lorenzo sighed.

"No, we can't exactly do that, either. Not with what we know these fucks are capable of. But we don't exactly know if it really is them, either."

"So, what do you suggest?"

"I suggest you put a protection detail on her. You've got more than enough men under you. Take a few away from their usual shit, and stick them on babysitting her in shifts. That way, they can get intel to let you know if it even is these guys, and also allow her to live her life without worrying about suffering the same fate as that girl."

It wasn't the answer I wanted.

But it had been what I expected.

Back in the day, before he was the *Capo dei capi*, Lorenzo wouldn't have even stopped to think of the news and shit like that. Now? Now, he had the responsibility of the entire organization on his back.

He was trying to bring shit back to the Golden Days of the mafia. Back when men weren't informing and turning on each other. When dons weren't getting locked up. When the neighborhoods loved and respected us because we provided protection and gave back to our communities.

To be fair, he'd come a long way in the short amount of time since he'd taken over for his old man.

And the Family had been in fucking shambles when he'd come into power, so the change was even more impressive.

That didn't mean it wasn't frustrating at times, though. Even if a part of me had to understand that he had to run this as a business. Because that was what it was. And businesses had to care about public relations.

"Alright," I said, nodding, then turning to leave.

"Hey," Emilio called, making me turn back.

"Yeah?"

"Why'd you push everyone away after the arrest?" he asked.

"Why'd you go all dark when your sister was taken by Primo?" I shot back.

To that, he nodded.

Because, sometimes, there was no good singular explanation. We made choices or we did shit for whatever reasons felt right at the time. Then we adjusted afterward in whatever way we needed to.

"Fair enough," he said, shrugging.

"Just to reiterate. No fucking killing anyone," Lorenzo said.

"Got it, Boss," I said, nodding, then making my way outside.

"What's the word?" Miko, my right-hand-guy slash security guard slash errand guy, asked, nodding his chin at me as I came down the steps toward him.

Miko was younger. Think he said he was twenty-five at his last birthday. Younger, in general, meant hungrier. More willing to prove himself. Which was what Miko was. Hungry. For more power. For more cash. And he was willing to do whatever the fuck I asked of him because of that.

Miko was six-two with brown eyes and a scar that cut through one of his brows. He kept his black hair slicked back in the old style that he claimed was 'timeless.' We all dressed nice, wore suits, cufflinks, nice watches, the works. But most of us would pass for wealthy businessmen on the street. Miko?

Everything about him screamed ‘mobster’ if you came across him. His look, his carriage, his accent that was just a bit more Long Island than Manhattan.

“We’re under strict no-kill orders right now. Boss says there’s too much heat.”

“Can see that,” he agreed as we walked. “Never seen as much mob shit on the news as I’ve been seeing lately. So what then? If we can’t kill them?”

“We protect the girl and her grandfather.”

“Halle.”

“What?” I asked.

“The girl. Her name is Halle. Whitlock. Grandpa is Melvin Whitlock. He owns Whitlock Antiques. Family business for three generations. Seems like she plans to make that four generations.”

Like I said, Miko was hungry to prove himself.

I could always count on him to be a few steps ahead.

Halle Whitlock.

Interesting name.

Halle was unique. It suited her.

“Any other family?” I asked, wondering why she’d come right to me instead of them.

“A brother. From what I can tell, he spends all his time with heiresses, letting them take care of him. Seems like he’s in Colorado now.”

“No mom? Dad?”

“Can’t find shit about a dad. Mom died in a car accident in Jersey four years ago.”

“So she has no one.”

“Not ‘cept the old man. And her best friend.”

“What do you have about her?” I asked as we closed in on my car.

Fucking city parking sucked no matter where you were. I wasn't even sure why I bothered to have a car half the time.

"The best friend?" Miko asked, moving to open my door for me, then moving around the hood to slide into the driver's seat. "Lauren Leonard. Got her boss bitch shit going. Luxury apartment. Designer everything, but in the classy, not flashy way," he said.

"How'd they meet?"

"College. Dormed together. Seems like Halle could never decide what to be, so she went for a little bit of everything. Never finished. Dropped out recently, actually."

Something probably went wrong with the shop or her grandfather to prompt her to give up on schooling.

"Know where the grandfather is?"

"What is this? Amateur hour?" Miko asked, rolling his eyes. "Not only know where he is, but how bad he was beaten."

"And?"

"And it was bad," he said, shaking his head. "More than that, though, nurse I know says they found some other shit wrong with him while they were examining him, so he's likely gonna be in there for a bit. Might even need to go to a step-down place after."

"Okay. Now, want to really fucking impress me?" I asked, watching him cast a *Try me* look in my direction as he weaved effortlessly around a car door that someone threw open without looking. "Where is Halle staying?"

"Well, see, that was a little harder," he said, but the way his lips twitched told me it wasn't impossible. "Spent the day at the library before heading to The Empress. Hasn't left since. Last I heard."

"The Empress?" I asked, lip curling.

I'd given her enough money to get a room at literally any of the luxury hotels in the city. She could be fine dining on fucking caviar. And she was staying at The Empress?

“Women,” Miko said, shaking his head. “Never can know what’s going on in their heads,” he added.

He would know. He had three sisters.

His mom and dad were some of the rare few who still got on like lovesick teenagers. The evidence of that was the fact that they had seven kids. Four sons, three daughters. So many progeny, in fact, that he’d needed to move them out to fucking Greenwich to fit them all, choosing to commute into the city each day for work shit.

“You got her number?” I asked.

Reaching in his pocket, he passed the paper toward me.

She had surprisingly neat handwriting. Nothing curvy or overly feminine.

I reached for my phone, shooting off a text. Then waited for the response.

Okay.

That was it.

No thanks.

Just okay.

“Prolly woke her up,” Miko said, as if reading my thoughts.

“When’s the last time you got a raise?” I asked, shaking my head at him.

“Dunno. Two weeks ago? Why? You wanna give me more?” he asked, smiling.

“I’m gonna need some men,” I said as we stopped at a light, watching a bunch of women clad in bubble coats rush across the street. I should have been wishing it was warm, and they were all in their barely-there club dresses. But, for some reason, I didn’t give any of them a second thought.

“How many?”

“Need someone on the old man,” I said. “Day and night.”

“Three men on a rotation would work for that,” he said.
“Three more for the girl?”

My knee-jerk response was to double that. Two sets of eyes and hands if they were needed.

But twelve of them taken full-time away from their jobs? Jobs that kicked up money to not only me, but the organization as a whole?

It could be overkill.

“Yeah,” I agreed, nodding. “Got any ideas?”

“You’re pissed at Leon, right?” he asked, shooting me a devious smile.

“He got anyone worthwhile under him to steal?”

“I got some ideas. Two for sure I think deserve more than what Leon is offering. Got more to offer than he lets ‘em.”

“Okay. I want to meet them,” I said. “Tonight,” I added.

“Got it. I’ll grab the others from other soldiers, try to keep shit even.”

“That’d be good,” I agreed. “Bring them to me to work shit out. We need to figure out a schedule by the end of the night.”

“On it,” he said as he double-parked in front of my apartment building. “Anything else?” he asked.

“Try to find some time to sleep,” I suggested.

“I can sleep when I’m a multi-millionaire,” he said, shrugging it off.

Like I said.

Young. Hungry.

I went into my building, catching sight of Lily’s parents as I went toward the elevators.

We all pretended we didn’t know each other. It was for the best that way.

But I was suddenly worrying if they were at risk too. Especially since Lily showed up in court that one day. She'd wanted to show her support. And it had been nice to see her able to actually leave the apartment for a change. But I'd made sure to remind her just how fucking dangerous it was both to my case, and to her safety, to be seen with me.

As far as I could tell, she hadn't left her apartment since.

Sure, that might have sucked for her mental health. But it was probably for the best for her physical well-being if these fuckheads were feeling vengeful.

I made it up to my apartment just twenty minutes before the first of Miko's recommended men showed up in the lobby, looking to be let up.

You had to appreciate how eager they were for possible advancement.

Venezio was younger than even Miko. Tall and a scrappy sort of fit. He carried himself the way street kids did, ones who were used to having to throw fists, all forward shoulders and arms held out slightly from his body.

He didn't dress like Made men did. 'Cause he wasn't Made. He had on jeans, Timbs, and a tee that he wore under a leather jacket. If you didn't know any better, you'd think he was a biker, not associated with the mafia.

Typical shit with his good bone structure and dark hair. But he had one and a half brown eyes. Yeah. A fucking *half*. Meaning he had one fully brown eye and the other was half brown and half green.

No way was he skating by in a lineup if he ever got caught doing illegal shit.

"Miko said you're someone worth meeting with," I said as I walked over toward the bar, pouring myself a drink, but not making him one, wanting to see how he handled the slight.

No reaction whatsoever.

"Miko is good people," Venezia said in a voice that sounded like he was gargling rocks.

“Christ, you have a ten-pack-a-day habit since grade school or something?” I asked.

“Genetics, man,” Venezia said. At my drawn together brows, he shrugged. “Deep voices, they come from people with larger and thicker vocal cords. Old man had it. Gramps too. Genetic.”

Interesting.

Not so much the vocal cord thing.

But the fact that he knew that.

Not an idiot, then.

I liked that.

Some guys in power preferred morons working between them. Just *Yes men* who needed to be told what to do and how to do it. I preferred men with their own heads on their shoulders. I didn't want to have to hold your hand. And if a situation turned serious, I wanted to know you could handle yourself without having to fucking stop to call me first.

“How'd you fall in with Leon?” I asked, making him a drink. He took it, and turned as I moved to walk away, but didn't walk with me.

“He was the big dog on my block. Was looking for work. He let me scout.”

“How old were you?”

“Fifteen. Worked my way up from there. Always got something going on,” he said. He wanted me to know he was busting his ass, but not trash Leon in the process. Leon, who I was starting to suspect wasn't kicking up what he was supposed to. Provided Venezia was making as much as he wanted me to believe.

“Got something important you can't walk away from right now?” I asked.

“Never something that important,” he said, shaking his head. “You need something from me?”

“I have a security detail,” I said.

“For you?”

“For someone else,” I explained. “A woman. She’s convinced her grandfather was attacked by this group of brothers. And after she visited him in the hospital, she saw them again, and thinks they’re after her. She needs protection. So does her grandfather,” I added. But I had a good feeling about Venezia. I wanted him on Halle.

“I can babysit,” he said, nodding.

“It’ll be long hours. Eight-hour shifts at least. Every day until the threat is gone.”

“I got time. For the record, I’m better at night, though.”

“Good to know.”

“What’s the protocol if they do make a move?” he asked.

Shit.

That was a good question.

“Don’t have permission from the top for kills,” I said, getting a nod from him. “But self-defense will always be allowed. And protecting the girl at all costs. You don’t want these fucks getting their hands on a woman they got a beef with.”

Venezia’s brows went up ever-so slightly, and he gave me a tight nod.

Then he threw back his drink, putting his glass down on the counter.

“You got my number. Tell me when and where. I’ll be there.”

With that, he walked out.

Without being dismissed.

So many other capos would want to fucking gut him for that. I had to respect it. He was someone who would do what it took to get the job done.

I finished my interviews, then gave Miko a schedule to hand out to everyone who would be working security detail.

Done with that, I finally took my ass to bed.

And fucking dreamed about that woman with her defiant chin lift and her baggy-ass sweaters.

I woke up hard and aching.

I actually had to rub one out before I headed over to The Empress, or I didn't really trust myself not to satisfy my curiosity.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Halle

The knock at the door had my heart shooting up into my throat as I stood almost naked in the bathroom, trying to finger-comb my wet hair since I hadn't brought a brush.

I had the *Do Not Disturb* sign on the door.

No one should have been knocking.

I hadn't given the locks a second thought after I'd secured them when I'd first entered the room, but I was suddenly terrified that they could be compromised.

I grabbed the robe off the back of the door—scratchy and a helluva lot less luxurious than you'd expect from a hotel robe, but at least it smelled clean—and threw it on, tying the belt.

“Open the door, Halle,” a voice called.

Calm.

Smooth.

Darkly sexy.

Could something be *darkly* sexy?

Well, I guess it could.

Because his voice totally was.

How was he... here, though?

I hadn't told him where I was staying, let alone which room I was staying in.

I suddenly understood perfectly why many mafia juries were sequestered. Because men like this, with pockets as deep as his, could get to anyone they wanted to.

"Halle," Cosimo called again, making me jump.

"Coming," I called, padding through the minuscule bedroom, wondering how the hell he was even going to fit in there with me.

I slid the locks, then reached to pull the door open.

And there he was.

In another of his expensive-looking all-black suits. At eight in the morning. I didn't exactly miss that watch of his either. It wasn't antique, but I was getting decent at estimating something's worth just by looking at it.

Five grand?

Eight?

Somewhere in that range.

My entire wardrobe didn't even equal that.

"How did—" I started to ask, peeking out just the small opening I'd created.

Which, apparently, was unacceptable to Cosimo. His hand shot out, pushing the door fully open.

I felt naked under his gaze as it moved over me. From the top of my head to the tip of my toes, then back upward. He lingered a bit at my thighs, since this robe was of the short variety, as well as the V between my breasts where the material wasn't staying together like it was supposed to before he found my face again.

“Why the fuck are you staying in this shithole?” he asked, surprising me enough to take a step back and allow him in as he moved forward.

Great.

That was great.

Alone in a hotel room with a killer who had tracked me down, despite my being sure I hadn't been followed.

Taking a steadying breath, I let the door click closed. I turned to watch him move around my room, glancing in the bathroom, then going toward the window.

He turned back, brow raised.

“What?” I asked, folding my arms over my chest.

“This shithole. Why?”

“It's not a shithole,” I said.

I mean I knew it wasn't a *nice* hotel. But there were no bugs. Everything seemed reasonably clean. The staff was nice. I hadn't gotten to the buffet yet, but the pictures of it in reviews seemed alright.

“It is,” he said, shaking his head. “I gave you more than enough to stay somewhere better. Anywhere in the city, in fact.”

“I didn't know how long I would have to stay somewhere, so I wanted to... conserve the money,” I said, annoyed at how heated my face felt at that admission. No one liked admitting they didn't have their own money to take care of themselves. But that was the crux of the problem. I needed his money, or I was going to have to go home.

“If I didn't figure something out, I would have given you more,” he said in this ‘you're an idiot for not realizing this’ kind of tone that had my hackles rising.

I really wanted to call this guy an asshole. He certainly spoke like one a lot of the time. But could you call someone that when they were giving you an insane amount of money to

stay in a hotel room while he tried to figure out how to fix your problem?

I guess two things could be true at once.

He was an ass.

And he was financially generous.

“How was I supposed to know that?” I asked, rolling my eyes. “How did you find me?”

“I have ways,” he said, dragging a snorting laugh out of me.

“What a movie villain thing to say.”

“Never claimed to be a good man,” he said, shrugging.

“So, I’m assuming if you stalked me here that you have, ah, figured something out,” I said, hating myself for it, but taking several steps back as he rounded the bed again. In fact, I didn’t stop backing up until my back met the wall that butted up against the bathroom.

“You will have an around-the-clock protection detail,” he told me.

“A... protection detail?” I asked, brows raising.

“Can’t go around annihilating an entire family when I’m not even sure they’re after you,” he said, but there was something false in his voice.

“My... grandfather—“

“Will also have around-the-clock protection,” he cut me off. “So you can go back to your shop and your apartment, and live your life normally, knowing you won’t be getting bothered by anyone.”

“I, oh, okay,” I said.

I couldn’t complain, could I?

I mean, he was giving me men to, essentially, babysit me and my grandfather. Day in and day out.

“But... ah...”

“What?” he asked.

“For how long?” I asked.

“As long as it takes,” he said. “Your first guard is waiting for you in the lobby. Don’t worry. You can’t miss him. So go get dressed,” he said, walking past me.

Then he stopped short, and turned back toward me.

“But first...” he said, his hand reaching out, fingers teasing the edge of the robe where it slipped down between my breasts.

I would love to pretend that I didn’t brush him away because of fear. But I would be lying through my teeth about that.

I think I froze at first from surprise.

Then, as I felt his knuckles tease my skin as his fingers drifted down, yeah, it wasn’t fear or surprise that was coursing through me.

It was a pulsating, aching need.

I didn’t even have time to analyze *why* it was that sort of white-hot desire.

Because the next thing I knew, his fingers were in the tuck of my belt, yanking it free.

And just like that, the robe split, exposing me completely.

Cosimo towered over me, smelling way too damn good, his dark gaze looking down at my body, naked save for my panties that I’d washed in the sink and blown dry before my shower.

And was that... heat in his gaze?

His breath escaped with a kind of muted growling sound.

Then his head was shaking.

“Even better than I imagined,” he murmured.

Then he was out of the door.

I hadn't even covered myself up when he'd pulled the door open wide.

I couldn't seem to do anything but lean on the wall for support because my legs felt a little shaky.

I always thought that was an exaggeration of fiction. Shaky legs. I'd never felt it before.

Until now.

The need that was coursing through me was bordering on painful, and I pressed my thighs more tightly together to ease the ache between. I tried like hell to come up with a single rational explanation for why I was reacting to what should have felt like a violation like I was.

I couldn't seem to come up with anything.

So I just forced myself to move back into the bathroom, ignoring that pressure deep in my core, and getting myself dressed.

Finished, and somehow not even the tiniest bit less turned on, I made my way downstairs, stopping in at the buffet to grab something to toss into my bag for later.

I'd checked out on my phone while I waited in line at the buffet, so I walked right past the desk, and looked around the lobby.

Cosimo was right.

There was no mistaking him.

The expensive dark gray suit. The shined shoes. The watch. Even the posture. And, of course, the slicked back black hair that kind of reminded me of greasers in the 50s.

"Ah, hey," I said, feeling weird addressing him. Which was funny because he was clearly, rank-wise, beneath Cosimo, and I'd had no problem first approaching him.

Though, objectively, that might have been because I was so upset and scared when I'd barged into that bar after finding a news article that talked about Cosimo Costa frequenting a

little dive bar a few blocks from his luxury penthouse apartment.

“There you are,” the man said, his accent just a little stronger than I’d expected. “Halle, right?” he asked, though he clearly already knew.

“Right,” I agreed.

He was attractive, and he had the kind of carriage that suggested he knew that about himself.

He was younger than Cosimo, though. Maybe in his mid-twenties instead of thirties.

“Miko,” he said, giving me a nod. “You ready to head out?”

“Ah, yes,” I said, falling into step with him as he held out a hand like he might touch my lower back, but not actually doing it.

“Where you going?” he called when, outside the doors, I turned in the direction of the subway. “Here,” he said, gesturing toward a sleek black car parked at the curb.

“Oh,” I said, shaking my head at the absurdity of having a car in the city. I mean parking was a bitch. It seemed like a complete headache to me. “Right,” I added, sliding in as he held the door open for me.

The inside was somehow even nicer than the outside, with a control panel that belonged in a spaceship, not a car.

“Don’t freak out if your ass starts to feel warm,” Miko said after getting into his seat, and hitting some buttons on the screen of the control panel. “Got butt warmers in the seat,” he added as he craned his neck to check the traffic. I wasn’t sure why he bothered, though, because he pulled out into it recklessly, getting a chorus of honks from everyone already on the street. “Don’t gotta grab the *Oh, Shit* bar,” he said, smirking as I gripped the handle above my window with white fingers. “Never been in an accident in my life.”

“Just caused them then,” I said before I could think better of it, but Miko just shot me a smirk at that.

“Think we’re gonna get on just fine,” he said.

I didn’t bother asking how he knew to head in the exact direction of my shop. These were guys who’d managed to track me down at a hotel. Of course they knew where I worked.

“This your place, huh?” he asked after insisting on lifting the security gate himself, then following me inside.

“It’s my grandfather’s place,” I clarified.

“Yeah, but it’s gonna be yours. That’s why you’re here, no?” he asked.

I couldn’t stop my lips from twitching, deciding I liked the way he talked. Like a mobster on TV or something. It was charming for reasons I couldn’t quite put a finger on.

“I want our family’s legacy to live on,” I said, thinking I’d answered well enough, but Miko turned from running his finger over the head of a bronze dog statue.

“Nah, sugar, that ain’t the full truth of it, is it?” he asked.

He was almost unnervingly perceptive.

“I expected my brother to take over,” I admitted, walking out to flick on some of the lamps to light the darkened corners.

“And he don’t wanna.”

“He’d rather be the lapdog to a bunch of rich ladies,” I said, shrugging.

“But you ain’t bitter about it, huh?” he asked, a devilish little smirk toying with his lips.

“I think I’m more upset that it was kinda sprung on me when I realized how much my grandfather was slipping, and how poorly the store has been run. If I’d always known this was my fate, I would have made sure I kept it in order all along. Even if just in my free time,” I told him as I came around the front of the shop to plug my phone into the cord I had hidden under the front desk.

To that, he nodded.

“This place got a back room? Back entrance?” he asked.

“Ah, yes,” I said, nodding. “There’s an alley out back shared by all the buildings around here,” I told him.

“Show me,” he called out, checking to make sure the front door was locked, then following me through the store.

I stood back, watching him unlock the door, then move out into the alley, looking around, then up, and not looking happy about whatever it was he saw.

“Aight,” he said, coming back in, and locking the door. “You don’t go out back,” he said. “Not to take out trash. Not to get a moment to yourself. Nothing.”

“Ah, okay,” I agreed, then watched as he walked over to a metal storage cabinet, giving it a shimmy. “What are you doing?” I asked. “I said I wouldn’t,” I said as he started to haul the damn thing over in front of the door. I’d tried to empty it and move it once. I couldn’t make it budge. It was currently full of crap. I had no idea how he was sliding it across the floor like it weighed nothing.

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t believe you,” he said, giving me another of those smirks as he rubbed his hands together, likely coming away with dust. This place was full of it. I felt like I could never stay on top of it. “Now you can’t go.”

“And if I have trash?” I asked.

“Bring it out front to me. When someone comes to take over for me, I’ll take it to the dumpster.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “Any other rules?”

“The bathroom.”

“What about it?” I asked.

“It got a window?”

“Yes.”

“Show me,” he said, all business, and I found myself leading him into the cramped little space that was hardly big enough to throw your arms out in. “You know that’s a fire hazard,” he said, turning back to me after trying to jam it open.

“This whole place is a fire hazard,” I reasoned.

“Fair enough. I don’t think anyone is getting in that, so I think that’s it,” he said, leading me back through the store like he owned the place. “I’ll be out front,” he said, waving toward the front door. “If you suddenly don’t see me, you lock your ass in that bathroom and call Cosimo, yeah?” he asked, giving me a hard look when I didn’t immediately answer.

“But...”

“No buts. If you don’t see me, something is wrong.”

“But what about when you change shifts?”

“I will bring the next guy in to introduce to you. And he will introduce the third shift guy. If at any point one of us is missing, bathroom, lock, call Cosimo. Got it?”

“I got it,” I confirmed, nodding.

I guess I had to appreciate how seriously they were taking this thing.

“Oh, Miko?” I called as he unlocked the door.

“Yeah, sugar?”

“Do you know what the guys look like?” I asked.

“Sure do. They won’t be getting past me.”

With that, he was moving outside.

And I was alone in the store.

Then there was a strange mix of emotions in my body then, an anxiousness and restlessness that seemed only to amplify the unmet desire that Cosimo had sparked inside me that morning.

To try to think past it, I put on one of my grandfather’s records, and got right to work.

A few hours in, I found I’d managed to do more work than I accomplished all day when my grandfather was around, questioning my every move.

He meant well, but was just set in his ways, and didn’t think things needed to change. But considering it was almost

impossible to walk around the store without bumping into a table or display case, it did. He especially didn't factor in that women had bags, and when we turned, we sometimes didn't realize they stuck out beyond our bodies, and therefore easily knocked things over. No big deal in a department store. A big, big deal in a store full of priceless and one-of-a-kind antiques.

It wasn't until my stomach felt like it was gnawing at me that I remembered I'd never eaten that bagel that I had stored in my purse from the hotel buffet.

I'd just washed my hands, and was about to grab it when the door opened.

And in walked another suit-clad guy with the same carriage as Miko and Cosimo.

My gaze shot to Miko out the window and he gave me a distracted nod.

"Lunch," the guy said, dropping a bag down.

"Oh, ah. I didn't order lunch, though," I said.

"Miko did," he said. "For you," he said, pushing the bag across the desk toward me. "And for him," he said, lifting another bag. "You need anything else?" he asked, then genuinely waited like he was my personal assistant or something.

"Oh, ah, no. Thank you, though," I said, giving him a smile that must have looked odd mixed with the bewilderment in my eyes.

He seemed unfazed, and walked back out to hand a bag to Miko.

I reached into the bag, pulling out a sub, chips, and a soda.

I moved out from behind the desk, peeking my head out of the door. "Do you want to come eat in here?" I asked.

"Nah. My job is out here."

"Are you sure?" I pressed, knowing it would be hard to eat with nowhere to put anything.

"Yep," he said.

“Okay,” I agreed, but I had an idea.

Turning, I went into the shop, finding a small wrought iron table my grandfather used as a display that I’d just moved into the back because it had been in the way, and bringing it out to Miko.

“There,” I said, nodding. “That’s better,” I told him, enjoying his amused smile. “Thanks for lunch, by the way.”

“Nah, don’t mention it.”

With that, I went back inside to eat.

Sometime around four, Miko brought another guy in, introducing him.

He wasn’t as memorable as Miko. He was average in looks and build and didn’t have all the charm that Miko did.

I tried not to feel disappointed by that.

They were here to protect me, not entertain me.

I busted my ass the rest of the day, and even managed to make a couple of pretty big sales in the process.

I hadn’t felt so accomplished in weeks.

After closing up for the day, my new guard and I headed to the hospital, so I could visit my grandfather, giving him the good news about the sales.

He seemed even more tired and out of it than he had been the day before, though. Enough so that I’d walked out to talk to the nurses, then the doctor. All of whom assured me he was stable. The doctor said that sometimes we are so used to working ourselves to the bone, that when we are finally forced to rest, we really crash.

I could see that.

My grandfather never took days off.

And, sure, he might have managed to nap on and off at the store, he was still an old man. He deserved to spend his day puttering around his apartment or in Central Park feeding the pigeons. He was doing too much.

It felt wrong, given the circumstances, but I found myself glad that he was in the hospital, being forced to rest and recover. Clearly, he needed it.

I didn't stay long, wanting him to get as much sleep as possible, and wanting to get home to my apartment finally.

It wasn't much, my apartment. None of them were. But mine was a studio, unlike my grandfather's, where at least he had a separate bedroom.

The walls were an off-white that I'd been meaning to paint. But given all the holes and the cracks where the wall met all of the baseboards, to paint, I would also need to spackle and grout. And I just never had the time.

The little L-shaped kitchen had the most hideous yellow laminate countertops, and white appliances that weren't quite white anymore, no matter how much I scrubbed them.

Because the living and bedroom space was so cramped, I'd foregone having any sort of dining table. As it was, the corner of my bed was butting up to the end of my couch. And I couldn't move around my coffee table without slamming my leg into it.

You'd think after living for years in a dorm that I would be used to small living. But I was pretty sure all my former dorm rooms were larger than this apartment.

Still, it was mine. And I was thankful for it. I didn't have to share a bathroom, or label my food in the fridge. I could rip off my bra and not feel weird about anyone seeing me without it.

I followed my stomach to the fridge, realizing that my dinner would consist of Greek yogurt, some cheese, and some questionably overripe strawberries.

After I ate, I showered, and changed, before settling down with my antique books and my notebook full of colorful tabs and an index.

What can I say? You weren't a perpetual student without getting really good at taking intricately detailed notes.

Sometime around midnight, my middle shift guard knocked at my door, and informed me that Venezia was downstairs, but he refused to come up because then ‘eyes wouldn’t be on the door.’

“You’ll know him when you see him,” the guard said. “He’s got one brown eye. The other eye is half brown and half green. He’s wearing a leather jacket and Timbs,” he added.

“Okay. Thank you,” I said, giving him a smile.

“Yep,” he said, then turned and walked away.

Like I said, nothing like Miko.

Or even Cosimo, for that matter.

I ended up not actually meeting Venezia, my night guard, for three full days of having round-the-clock security, though I saw him out front, sometimes pacing a bit, body likely restless from standing in one spot for so long.

Occasionally, I would see guys dropping by to bring him food or coffee. They never stayed to talk, though.

As the weather grew colder and colder, I couldn’t help but feel guilt tug at me as he stood out there, keeping his post, while I was upstairs in the heat.

It wasn’t until the fourth night that I finally got to meet my mysterious nighttime guard.

Unfortunately for both of us, it was in the middle of an attack.

And he was bleeding all over the place.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Halle

I felt awful even *thinking* it, but the shop was in so much better shape within a few days of my grandfather being away.

Suddenly, you could walk around without making tables wobble, or knocking things off of shelves.

Items that were too expensive to risk jostling, I had secured with museum putty. My grandfather had balked at that, wanting to know what a customer was supposed to do if they wanted to pick the item up.

I argued that no random person should be picking up an item worth thousands and thousands of dollars just because they wanted to. Only interested customers could be allowed to pick them up, and I'd done enough experimenting with the putty to know it could relatively easily be dislodged to pick up the item.

Everything had been thoroughly dusted, cleaned, and polished.

The whole place even smelled better.

Without much else to do, I took my time that fourth day just arranging and rearranging the displays in the windows, getting some input from Miko who, apparently, had a lot of opinions about such things. Which only endeared me to him more.

Cosimo hadn't made another appearance.

And I went ahead and tried to convince myself that the sinking feeling inside each time I thought of that had everything to do with the fact that it likely meant that I'd been right about the brothers stalking me, and not because of the way the desire was still pinging off every last nerve ending each time I thought about him. Which, I hated to admit, was really, really freaking often.

Why? I don't know.

He was an ass.

But, I guess, there was no real reasoning with desire.

It was a chemical reaction.

Just that primal part of me recognizing that he would make a good mate. You know, in the whole 'could beat off predators' kind of way.

"Ugh," I grumbled, tossing some more ancient paperwork from a drawer into the shredding pile. I'd burned out a shredder already, trying to tackle too much paperwork in a row, so I had to do it little by little since I couldn't afford a new one.

Over my coffee this morning, I'd actually caught myself staring at an article about Cosimo's trial on phone for an embarrassingly long time, remembering the way his gaze had moved over my naked body, his eyes heated, then the way his voice shivered over me when he'd said my body was even better than he'd imagined.

Which meant he'd previously spent some time wondering about me.

When?

At the trial?

I looked at him a lot. I was reasonably sure I'd never caught him looking at me. Clearly, though, he must have. There was no reason that made a little gooey sensation move through me. But it did.

"Hey," a voice said, making me jerk, realizing I'd been zoning out long enough for my guard to move in front of me.

"Oh, hey. What's up?" I asked.

"Nothing. Usually go to see your grandfather about now," he said.

"Oh, right. Yeah. Okay," I said, gathering my things, walking through the shop to turn lights off, then following him out.

After the hospital, I hit a few stores to get some more food and essentials in my house, grab some more books from the library, before I finally went home for the night.

"I'm sorry if you're missing out on Friday night stuff," I said, taking the bags from him as we stood out front of my building.

"Won't be here all night," he said, shrugging it off.

"Right. Of course. Well, thanks for being here," I said, giving him a smile.

"I'll knock when it's shift change," he said. "No need to answer, though," he added.

With that, I was shut up in my apartment for the night, listening to the neighbors have some sort of party, their music thumping, their laughter still somehow rising above it.

It was the first time in a long time that I felt incredibly... alone.

Normally, if I was feeling lonely, I would drop in with my grandfather. Or, if she didn't have something else going on, go hang out at Lauren's for the night.

My grandfather had enough of me during my visit, his eyes getting droopy by the time I was saying goodbye. And I didn't want to reach out to Lauren. Because hanging out with her

would mean having to lie to her. I just didn't want to get caught up in that ugly cycle.

So I just made my tea and flipped through my books. Tried to get lost in a show.

Sometime later, the knock came. And I could hear his feet shuffling away before I could even think to get up to check.

I got up anyway, walking toward the window that looked down on the street, seeing my guard emerge, and share a few words with Venezia, then head off down the street, disappearing into the shadows.

Venezia was in his usual uniform of jeans, Timbs, and a leather jacket. But he'd added a black beanie tonight, likely having heard that it was going to dip below freezing.

I climbed into bed, staring out the window, but lost in my mind, in thoughts of someone I had no business thinking about.

Eventually, sleep won out.

But I wasn't dreamless.

Oh, no.

I was twisted and tangled in bedsheets, feverish from my fantasies as I rolled around in bed with Cosimo Costa, hearing that deep, smooth voice of his saying all sorts of wicked things in my ear.

It was a crash that shocked me awake, feeling sweaty and disoriented, unsure where the sound came from, if maybe a neighbor had fallen, thrown something, punched a wall, or was just having really good, wall-banging sex like I'd been dreaming about.

It wasn't until I heard the footsteps moving across my room that I realized what it was.

My door.

My door being broken open.

A scream caught in my throat, wanting to alert Venezia to the threat.

But before a sound could escape me, a hand was slapping down over my mouth, and a body was coming over mine in the bed.

Panic shot through my body, little electric shocks that moved through each limb until I felt like I was buzzing with it, like I was shaking.

No, wait.

I was shaking.

The adrenaline was coursing through my veins as my heart hammered in my chest, my breath felt caught in my chest as my hands rose, nails scraping at the hand pressing down on my face.

The bed whined as the man shifted over me.

My room was dark, but I could make out the whites of his eyes as his knees pinned my thighs to the bed.

The pressure bruised into my skin as his other hand pressed into my throat.

“You stupid bitch. You thought you’d get away with this?” he snarled.

How was this happening?

Where was Venezia?

Was he hurt?

If not, how had this guy gotten past him?

If he was hurt, was he so hurt that he couldn’t call for help?

Was I completely on my own?

I wasn’t alone.

I had neighbors.

And the building was relatively quiet right now, save for the droning of TVs left on to drown out the sounds of the city.

If I could get his hand off of my mouth, I could scream. If I screamed, I had to believe that someone would come for me.

Or at the very least call the police.

Would that save me, though?

Would there be enough time?

The hand slid from my neck, slipping lower instead.

“You’re gonna wish you didn’t fuck up that trial,” he said, hand grabbing the top of my tank top, and yanking down.

Something unfroze in me right then.

I still could only see shadows.

But those eyes.

I could see those eyes.

I pulled my hands from his wrist, curled my fingers, and threw my hands forward, thumbs going for those whites.

The howl that escaped him let me know I’d struck true.

Using his shock and pain to my advantage, I yanked my legs out from under his knees, sending his body toppling to the floor.

I rushed off the bed, yanking my tank top back up as I started to move across my apartment, hopes on the fire escape.

I made it three steps before my ankles were grabbed and pulled hard enough to send me falling forward. There was barely enough time to throw out my arms to catch my fall.

The wind knocked out of me, leaving me gasping as panic rose in my system when I couldn’t catch my breath.

A hand reached out, grabbing my ankle again, this time pulling until he threw me over onto my back.

My knees pulled up automatically, creating a barrier as I tried to crawl backward.

“Fucking bitch,” he hissed again, bending forward toward me.

It was pure instinct that had me throwing out my legs, my feet catching him in the midsection, sending him stumbling back into the table under the windows.

I didn't waste even a second, scrambling up, and rushing toward the window, then yanking it open.

When I saw shadows in the alley below.

It could have been anyone. Employees from another business. Addicts looking for a place to get high. Even homeless seeking shelter from the wind the backs of all the buildings provided.

But something inside of me told me it was none of those possibilities.

It was the other brothers.

Waiting to come up and take their turns with me.

Just as I was about to turn to run toward the door instead, a hand grabbed the back of my neck, fingers digging in, pulling my head backward, then violently slamming it forward.

My forehead slammed into the window with enough intensity to crack the single pane of glass.

The pain was a jackhammer through my skull, making my eyes tear and my vision go in and out for a moment.

It was sheer force of will that had me twisting under his arm, wrenching away from him, and stumbling into my kitchen, reaching—half-blinded with my pain—toward one of my drawers.

I'd been seeking a knife.

But I came back with a damn meat tenderizer.

Not a knife.

But solid, heavy, capable of doing damage.

A hand shot out toward me, and I just... swung.

The crack of it hitting bone had my stomach twisting and sloshing.

The roar that escaped him told me I was winning though. Even if his hand wasn't broken, it would be weaker from the strike.

When the other hand reached out, and I swung again, though, he'd been prepared, snatching it from me, and swinging it toward my head.

“Help!” I started to yell, but the sound barely escaped before a hand was crushing over my face again, muffling the sound against his palm.

No, damnit.

I was too close.

Just a few feet from the door.

From help.

This couldn't end here.

My hands reached out, grabbing the man's waist, trying to use him as leverage and to gauge where to bring up my knee.

Which I did.

Hard.

With freaking everything in me.

Right into his crotch.

Another roar escaped him as he fell backward, one hand cupping his junk.

Knowing he would only be more pissed, I didn't try to run. Not yet. I turned, pushing myself further into the kitchen, yanking open a cabinet, and reaching inside until I felt the weight of it.

A cast iron skillet.

“You're gonna pay for that, you fuckin—“

He didn't get a chance to call me a bitch again.

I grabbed that skillet with both hands, and swung it with every goddamn bit of strength in my body. Enough so that when it collided with his head, the impact made my shoulders scream.

Heart pounding, I watched as he stumbled, then fell backward with a loud thud.

I leapt over his body as I rushed toward the door, the skillet still in one hand while the other fumbled for the knob, throwing open the door, and looking both ways into the hall before rushing down the front stairs.

How long would it be before the brothers came looking for the one who'd come for me?

I was in the lobby when I damn near screamed my head off, seeing a man there, half slumped forward, his leg kind of dragging behind him as he shuffled forward.

I must have made a sound without realizing it, because his head rose.

I didn't know him.

Not really.

But I knew those Timbs and that leather jacket.

And I remembered what the other guard had said about him.

He had one brown eye and one brown and green eye.

This was Venezia.

If it weren't for the eyes, I could never have known.

Because his entire face was a bloody mess.

As was his t-shirt.

"Venezia," I gasped, rushing forward, reaching for him, sensing he was having trouble just staying upright.

It was as I was slinging his arm over my shoulder that I realized there was something shiny in his other hand.

A gun.

There was a second where my stomach dropped before I realized that a gun in the hands of a guy who was on my side was a good thing.

"You gonna fucking make me dinner? Drop the skillet," Venezia said in a voice that sounded like gravel.

The skillet fell from my hand as I half-carried him with me toward the front.

“Details,” he demanded, voice rough, his breath catching, like me moving him along with me was causing a lot of pain.

“They’re in the alley. I think,” I said. “There was just one in my apartment,” I told him.

“Knocked him out,” Venezia said.

It wasn’t a question, but I answered anyway.

“Yes. Come on,” I said, pushing the door open with my shoulder, and pulling him through with me. “We need to get a cab, or—“

“Car is on the street,” he said, face twisting in pain as I pulled him out onto the sidewalk.

“Where?” I asked, trying to look around. Cars were everywhere. They always were.

“Corner,” Venezia ground out. “Black one,” he added.

It wasn’t the same one as Miko drove, but there was something similar to it. Black, tinted, expensive, looking.

“Okay. Alright. Let’s go,” I said, pulling him with me, finding myself a lot stronger with the hope of escape just a few yards away.

My muscles screamed and my breath grew labored as I pulled a man easily twice my size, and only partially holding up his own weight, to the car.

“Can’t drive,” he said, shaking his head. “Leg’s fucked up,” he added.

“Okay. Alright,” I said, reaching for the passenger door handle as I got there, and yanking it open.

And it was right about as I shifted him toward the opening that there were shouts.

Followed by footsteps.

“Get the fuck in,” Venezia barked at me.

I didn't stop to give it any thought as I watched the three other brothers running out from the alley, faces twisted in identical masks of anger.

I flew around the hood of the car, yanked open the door, and dropped inside.

Just as there was a muted *pop pop pop* sound.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched the brothers scatter even as Venezia dropped into the seat with a grumble.

"Turn it on," he hissed as there was another *pop pop pop*.

He didn't hand me a key, so my hand found the button, pushing it, but nothing happened. "Step on the brake as you do it," he said, voice rough. I tried the right one first, then the left, finally feeling the car come alive as Venezia slammed his door, and hit the locks.

"Drive!" he demanded.

"I don't know how," I admitted, voice catching.

"Christ," he hissed. "Step on the gas. The right pedal," he explained as he reached for the gear shift, and put it in drive.

I pressed my foot tentatively into the gas, feeling the car lurch forward, just as one of the brothers jumped in front of the car.

Venezio reached over, grabbing the wheel, and yanking it to the side.

"Gas," he hissed.

So I slammed my foot into it again, and the car flew forward.

There was a sickening thud as the side of the car rammied into whichever brother it was there, but the wheels didn't drive over him, so I figured he probably lived.

"Hands on the wheel," Venezia demanded. "Ten and two," he added. "And ease up on the gas."

I did as I was told, seeing him moving out of the corner of my eye, dropping his gun into his lap, and reaching for his

phone.

“Brake!” he yelled, making me slam my foot into the other pedal just in time not to run the red a few blocks away.

“You’re gonna be fine. Just fucking relax,” he said. “You tap the gas with your toe, not your whole foot. Press the brake with all your toes, but don’t put it to the floor all at once, ease it down,” he said. “Boss,” he said, making me look over to find him with his phone to his ear. “Shit went down. Yeah. No. I’m... I’ll live. She’s... a little busted up,” he said, looking over at me. “What do you want me to do?” he asked.

I felt like I was leaning closer, wanting to hear Cosimo’s response.

I wasn’t disappointed.

“Bring her here,” he said.

With that, the call was over, and Venezia was back to giving me surprisingly calm instructions while I tried not to kill us as I drove across town.

Occasionally, his arm shot out, grabbing the wheel, correcting our course when I was sliding too far one way or the other.

“Slow down,” he demanded a while ahead of the turn he wanted me to take. “There,” he said, turning the wheel for me. “Now accelerate. Good. You’re getting it,” he said, his face twisting when he tried to adjust in his seat.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about me,” he said. “Left up here,” he said, nodding out the windshield. “You okay?” he asked, reaching toward the wheel again to help me turn as I slowed down, then accelerated into the turn.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I think I’m bleeding,” I added, feeling wetness on my face.

“You are,” he said. “What happened?”

“He hit my head into the window,” I admitted.

“Right at the next block, then pull halfway down and we’re there,” he said.

With the promise of safety close, I could feel the adrenaline slowly seeping out of me, leaving just the fear and pain and shock in its wake. By the time Venezia had me parking at the curb, my entire body was shaking.

He reached to unlock the door just a second before my door flew open.

And there was Cosimo.

Looking like a dark avenging angel, the sharp hollows of his cheek catching the shadows as he looked over me.

“Fuck,” he hissed, reaching inward.

“No, help Venezia,” I said, my voice sounding shaky from the way my body was jolting. “He can barely walk,” I added.

As if to prove my point, Venezia had his door open, and was using it to pull himself up, hissing as he went.

When Cosimo didn’t immediately go to help, I turned in my seat, trying to move past him to help Venezia myself.

It was right about then that a car came peeling out of nowhere, slamming to a stop a few feet from us, the door throwing open.

A gasp escaped me, seeing it.

“It’s Miko,” Cosimo said, voice calm, as he looked down at my hand grabbing him. “Come on,” he said. “We gotta get inside,” he said, reaching past me to hit the ignition, turning it off as I saw Miko rushing toward the passenger side of the car, reaching for Venezia.

“Baby, let’s go,” Cosimo said, more firmly.

I still couldn’t seem to force myself to move, because he was reaching for me, pulling me out onto the street.

When my shaky legs refused to carry me, though, he suddenly swooped down, grabbed me, and lifted me up into his arms.

My belly felt like it fell out for a second before I was nestled against his strong chest, his arms holding around me, the scent and feel of him filling my senses.

“You got him?” Cosimo called, making me turn to look and see Miko throwing Venezia’s arm over his shoulders, being a lot rougher about it than I had been.

“Yeah,” Miko said, brows drawn down as he looked at the blood covering Venezia’s shirt. “This all yours?”

“Feels like it,” Venezia confirmed.

“What’s up with your leg?” Cosimo called, sounding completely in control of himself, not strained at all by the weight of me nestled in his arms.

“One of ‘em stomped on it before the other knocked me out cold.”

“They out their fucking minds, fucking with us?” Miko asked, but seeming like he was speaking mostly to himself.

Cosimo turned then, facing the building he’d come out of, letting me see it for the first time.

I’d probably passed it a thousand times in my life. But apartment buildings were a dime a dozen in the city. You kind of just didn’t pay them much attention when you were a local.

His was one of the newer ones, though.

All concrete shear walls and gleaming glass. This glass took on an almost black shade, though, likely from a tint that gave privacy, and also kept the sun from baking the apartments in the warmer months.

There was a doorman standing there, all dressed in his black uniform with slight gold piping around the sleeves and up the lapels.

Somehow, he seemed completely unbothered by the commotion, and the bloodstained, limping man being half-carried inside ahead of Cosimo carrying me in.

I wondered what kind of money Cosimo handed him to make him mind his own business, and not ask questions. It had

to be a lot.

He just gave Cosimo a nod as he walked me through the doors.

The lobby was a lot like the outside. Everything shiny. From the tile on the floors and walls, to the golden elevator doors that didn't seem to have a single fingerprint smudge on them.

Miko reached out to stab a finger into the button, then we all stood there in silence, save for Venezia's pain-labored breathing, until the elevator car gave a little chime before the doors slid open.

We waited as Miko led Venezia inside, then Cosimo carried me in, making no move to set me back down on my feet. It wasn't until his arms pulled me a little more tightly toward him as he faced out of the car that I realized it was because I was still shaking. Not as violently as before, but enough that he felt he shouldn't set me back on my feet.

Safe, finally, and figuring no one was paying me much mind, since Venezia was so injured, I went ahead and let myself rest my head against Cosimo's shoulder, taking a deep breath, breathing in that spicy scent of his that I'd been thinking about nonstop for days.

I let my eyes slide close even as the elevator doors did.

And for a few, short seconds as we rode upward, there was nothing in the world save for Cosimo's arms around me, his chest against me, the steady, calm beat of his heart in my ear.

But then the doors were chiming again.

And I had to open my eyes and lose the fantasy.

CHAPTER NINE

Cosimo

I'd been getting bad news and reports of attacks and injuries since I was a fucking kid. I'd seen my first man shot to mincemeat when I was all of ten. My first knife wound not long after that.

It wasn't uncommon to walk out at night to grab a drink, and find my father fishing a bullet out of someone's shoulder at the dining room table, or stitching up a wound with a glorified sewing kit.

I had a pretty good tolerance for stress.

I could walk away from a shootout without a single frazzled nerve.

But, hearing Venezia on the other end of the phone, voice tight from pain, telling me that shit had gone sideways, and not only he, but they were hurt?

Fuck, the adrenaline shot through my system like an electric current.

My fucking hand was shaking as I dialed up Miko's number. He answered on the last ring, sounding a little distracted.

"Venezio was ambushed."

"What?" he swore, and I had his full attention in a blink. "How?"

"Don't have details yet, but both he and Halle are hurt. They're on their way here now."

"I'm on my way," Miko said. "Want me to call anyone in?" he asked.

"Not yet," I told him. "I'm hoping we won't need Salvatore."

Salvatore Costa had a nickname in the Family.

The Surgeon.

He was the closest thing to a doctor the Family had. Someone who was capable of fishing out bullets, sewing up wounds, or doing shit a lot more complicated than that. He even had his own office full of equipment for times when we needed it, but most of the time, he came out to us.

He was an asset the Family was missing for many years when he did a bid and took his time instead of spilling his guts for the government.

"Shit," Miko said. "I'm ten out," he said.

I hung up, taking a deep breath, then tucking a gun into a holster before making my way downstairs to wait for Venezio and Halle.

"Mr. Costa," Yuri, the nighttime doorman greeted me as he held open the door. "Do you need anything?" he asked.

In general, I wasn't in the business of making my doorman do anything for me, but with the absurd amounts of money I paid day and nighttime guys to keep their noses out of my business, they often felt the need to do little shit for me. Bring my packages up to my door, wash my car windows, ask if I need errands run, little shit like that.

“Waiting for someone,” I said, moving past him and toward the curb, watching down the street.

And then I saw it.

A black sedan taking the corner at a glacial pace, making me wonder how badly Venezia was injured, if he wasn't driving at least at the speed limit in such a dangerous situation.

It wasn't until the car drew closer, and the streetlights shone in the windshield, that I saw it wasn't Venezia driving at all, but Halle.

With huge, wide eyes, and a white-knuckle grip on the wheel.

When she pulled up to the curb, leaving a solid ten inches between it and the car, I came to the conclusion that she likely didn't know how to drive. Though everyone in the Family eventually learned to drive, I knew a lot of other city natives who never did.

Most people didn't want the headache of having a car in the city, so it made sense that they didn't bother to go through the additional headache of getting a license they might never need.

But, yeah, it was clearly proof that shit had gone really fucking south if someone who didn't know how to drive was driving away from an ambush.

I yanked open the door, finding her looking a little shellshocked, but with a nasty gash across her forehead, and a decent amount of blood streaking down her face.

Head wounds.

They bled like a bitch.

But they usually weren't as bad as they first appeared.

Save for the headaches and possible concussions that came along with them.

Seeing her hurt, though, made a weird fucking feeling move through me, one that was so foreign that I couldn't even place it. But it felt like a clutching sensation in my chest.

Venezio, though, Venezia was fucked up.

His face was busted to shit. I wouldn't be shocked if his eye socket was broken, along with his nose. Who knew the state of his teeth. But his lip was split. He had cuts on his cheeks. His eye was swollen half shut. And he had an egg on his temple.

That wasn't even factoring in whatever the fuck had happened under his shirt to make him bleed so much. And when Miko started to pull him out, and he could barely move, and he definitely couldn't put weight on his leg?

Yeah, not good.

It seemed like three of the brothers jumped Venezia, while one went up to attack Halle.

Rage burned in my stomach as I tried to pull her out of the car, her whole body shaking like a fucking leaf. So bad that she couldn't even stand.

I'd never picked up a woman like I scooped her up right then, holding her against my chest.

It didn't escape me that she calmed in my arms almost immediately.

Yuri, as predicted, as he was paid to do, said nothing. He didn't even look shocked about the whole ordeal.

We rode the elevator up, and into the hall that led to my penthouse.

I said nothing as I walked Halle through the apartment, dropping her into the guest room, then making my way back out to find Miko dropping Venezia onto a kitchen stool.

"Go handle the cars," I said. "Then get up here. I'm probably going to need some help," I said, gaze moving over Venezia, who was trying not to show how much pain he was in.

"Got it," Miko agreed, taking the key fob from Venezia, then rushing to go re-park his car, and move his own.

“They came up from the alley behind me,” Venezia said, jaw tight. “Had me down before I could even reach for my gun.”

“We’ll have time for explanations later,” I said, turning to go into the hall closet to grab a medical kit.

This wasn’t a kit with a couple bandages and antiseptic that fit in a shoe box.

Nah.

I kept a fucking rolling plastic tote full of everything I might need to keep my ass out of the hospital. None of us wanted to end up in an emergency room with all their questions.

“Alright,” I said, rolling up my sleeves, and removing my watch, before washing my hands, then making my way over toward Venezia.

I helped him out of his jacket, placing it over the backs of one of my chairs then reaching for his shirt.

“Just cut it off,” he said, shaking his head.

His ribs were probably fucking screaming. No one wanted to raise their arms over their head with busted ribs.

I grabbed scissors and was slicing the shirt when Miko was at the door again.

I left the shirt split to let him in, then came back to peel it away.

“You were stabbed?” I said, brows raised, as I looked at the wounds in his midsection.

“It was a baby knife,” he said as Miko moved past me to go grab a bottle of vodka, and bringing it over to hand it to Venezia. He uncapped it, and took a long swig. “And he was shit with it. Barely went in each time,” he said.

“It went in enough,” I said, leaning down to get a look. “See if Salvatore can get us some antibiotics,” I told Miko as I opened up the medical kit, and started to lay out packs of gauze, antiseptic, triple antibiotic, and bandages.

“On it,” Miko said.

“Your ribs,” I said, seeing the bruise starting to cover them. “Think broken or just bruised?”

“Dunno. But breathing is fine, so I’m not too worried about it,” he said.

“Okay,” I said. “Have another drink,” I suggested. “This is gonna be rough,” I added, grabbing the bottle of antiseptic, and uncapping it as he took a long swig.

Then, as soon as he lowered the bottle, I poured.

His eyes burned and his jaw tightened, but he said nothing.

“Christ, you’re a mess,” Miko said, moving to stand beside me, checking out Venezia’s wounds.

“Feels like it,” Venezia said. “Someone’s gotta check on the girl,” he said. “She was bleeding too.”

“I will,” I assured him. “But I don’t think she wants to see this right now.”

“See what?” a female voice asked, making all of us turn and look to find Halle standing in the opening of the hallway. “Oh, God,” she said, face falling as she looked at Venezia.

I’m not proud of where my thoughts went right then as I looked at her standing there in her sleep shorts and tank top. No bra. Not leaving much to the imagination. Not that I needed to imagine anymore.

I knew exactly what she looked like under those clothes.

The curve of her hips.

The swells of her breasts.

Even a little trio of birthmarks on the skin over her ribs.

Knowing that didn’t make a difference, though. I still wanted to walk over there, back her into the guest room, strip those clothes off, and see all of her again.

“I’m fine,” Venezia said.

“You’re not fine,” she shot back, taking a few tentative barefoot steps forward. “You need to be in the hospital. Why

isn't he in the hospital?" she asked, directing her question at Miko, not me.

There was no accounting for the surge of jealousy that moved through my system right then.

I never got fucking jealous.

Least of all about a woman.

It made sense that she felt more comfortable talking to Miko than me. She'd spent every day with him. And, sure, he was supposed to just be standing outside, but judging by the way she was looking to him, it was clear they'd interacted at least a few times.

And, well, Miko was just more personable.

It could be annoying to go places with him, because he always knew everyone and had a word or two for them. It was impossible to just walk through a bar without stopping a few times.

Frustrating for me, but I had to admit that he was playing the long game. He was creating a reputation, gaining favor among the neighborhood. So when he got to become a capo, he'd have the support of the community.

"He don't wanna be, sugar. Gotta respect his wishes, no?" Miko asked, and I felt my eyes narrowing at that pet name.

"Ah, no," Halle said, face scrunched up. "Not when he could, you know, die," she said.

"Says the woman with the head wound," Miko shot back.

"Not to interrupt or anything, but we gonna finish this shit, or not?" Venezia asked, making us all turn back to him.

"You need to go to the hospital," Halle insisted, this time addressing Venezia. "You can't even walk. Have you even looked at his leg?" she asked, moving forward.

"Don't think you wanna see—" Miko started to warn her.

But then she was close enough to see.

I had to give her credit.

Her face blanched.

But she took a breath and kept moving forward.

“You didn’t say you were stabbed,” she told him, tone accusatory.

“Was a little busy keeping you from side-swiping every fucking car on the street,” Venezia said, lips twitched up ever so slightly. Like he’d found the whole thing charming. Despite the whole life-and-death shit that was going on.

“I wasn’t that bad,” she insisted as she lowered down beside him, reaching outward to start rolling up his pant leg.

“I might have a mild case of whiplash, but it coulda been worse,” Venezia said, then damn near jumped out of his skin when she continued to roll up his pant leg.

“Here,” I said, moving over there to grab the scissors to start to cut the thick material.

“I was half expecting to see a bone sticking out,” Halle admitted, letting out a deep breath.

“You gotta get a scan,” I told him, seeing him about to object. “You’ll do me no fucking good dead from sepsis because you wouldn’t get a fucking picture taken of your leg,” I said.

“Fine,” he ground out, but didn’t look happy about it.

“We’ll clean you up first, so you don’t have to tell them about all this other shit,” I said, waving to his abdomen. “You can just say you were jumped.”

“What is the big deal about getting treatment?” Halle asked, still kneeling beside Venezia’s leg, and I had the almost over-fucking-whelming urge to tell her to move. That urge was the exact reason I didn’t let myself do it as I reached for the triple antibiotic to finish working on his stab wounds.

I was on the second one, and Venezia was taking another long swig of the vodka, making Halle’s brows scrunch in concern, when the buzzer went off.

“Gotta be Salvatore,” Miko said, walking over toward the door to look at the screen there, then letting him up.

“Who’s Salvatore?” Halle asked, moving to stand, suddenly seeming to remember her state of relative undress, and crossing her arms over her chest.

It was no use.

All it did was make her tits pop upward, ready to spill out the top of her tank top.

“He’s like a doctor for the Family,” Miko said as he moved back, his voice making my gaze finally lift from her tits.

“What the fuck?” I snapped, making Halle jerk backward at the ferocity in my tone.

Venezio all but forgotten, I reached out, snagging her chin, and drawing her head up, so I could see her neck better.

She was getting a fucking necklace of bruises.

And were those scratches down the upper part of her chest?

A growl moved through my chest, as my jaw tightened hard enough for my fucking teeth to hurt.

“I’m fine,” she insisted, yanking her chin out of my grasp just as the door pushed fully open, and Salvatore moved in.

He was older than the rest of us, more of a member of our fathers’ crew, timeline-wise, than ours. But since he’d spent most of that time on the inside, he’d been more aligned with us and the new vision for the Family.

His hair was streaked with a lot of silver now, but he was a good-looking guy, someone who turned heads whenever we went to bars. Though he was happily married these days.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Salvatore said, his gaze moving from Venezia to Halle, his eyes going soft. “Come over here,” he said as he walked right toward the medical kit like it was his.

“Thanks for coming,” I said, nodding at him as Halle, surprisingly, moved toward the stranger.

Salvatore reached to hop her up on the island, then fished in his pocket for a tiny flashlight, turning it on, and flashing it in her eyes.

“Follow the light for me,” he demanded. “How are you feeling? Nauseated? Headache?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding. “But I’m fine. Venezia...” she said.

“I’ll get to him,” Salvatore said, brushing off her concerns as he reached for a package of gauze.

“No, really. Please. He’s been stabbed,” she said, looking a little glassy-eyed. “And his leg...”

“I got it,” I said to Salvatore, taking the gauze from his hand.

“Alright,” he said, brow lifting a bit, but he said nothing as he went over toward Venezia instead.

“I’m okay,” she insisted yet again.

“Shush,” I said, voice softer than I realized I was capable of as I broke open the gauze, then poured some antiseptic on it. “This might burn,” I warned her, noting how she grabbed the edge of the counter until her knuckles went white.

“I’m ready,” she assured me, but she let out a whimper as soon as the gauze moved across the cuts on her forehead. The blood washed away, I could see several gashes that unexpectedly had my stomach twisting.

“What happened?” I asked, voice low enough for only her to hear, despite being just a few feet away from the others. Miko was acting like a nurse’s aide to Salvatore as he made quick work of cleaning up Venezia.

“The door crashed open and woke me up,” she said. “I was sleeping, so I was too disoriented to realize anything was wrong until he was on top of me,” she said.

I swear my spit turned to fucking battery acid at that image.

Stuck in the memory, her hands moved off the edge of the counter, and rested on her thighs.

I backed up just enough to be able to look down.

And right there on the insides of her thighs were two big bruises setting in.

The image of him on top of her in the bed, his knees pinning her thighs to the mattress, and his hand moving up to close around her throat, then—judging by the scratches—dragging down the front of her tank top to expose her, made fire burn through my veins.

“And, ah, we fought. I almost got away, but he slammed my head into the window,” she said, wanting to rush past the whole bed part.

“She beat the shit out of him with a frying pan,” Venezia said, sounding proud despite them barely knowing each other. That said, it had to be pride I felt swelling my chest too.

“Good for you, honey,” Salvatore said.

I went back to her head, finishing up with the blood, then sliding some triple antibiotic across the gashes.

But I wasn't done.

In a completely unnecessary move, I grabbed a Q-tip, globbed on some more triple, and started to slide it down the scratches on her chest.

Was it my imagination, or did her breathing get quicker and more shallow at the touch? Did her heart start hammering? Did a little shiver move through her?

“Got anything for him to wear?” Salvatore asked, spoiling the moment. “He's gotta get this leg scanned,” he added as I forced myself to take a step away from Halle.

“Grab him a shirt,” I said to Miko, waving toward the loft where the primary bedroom was located.

Halle stayed perched on the island as Miko and Salvatore helped Venezia into one of my button-ups, so he didn't have to lift his arms.

He looked like shit.

Face all cut and busted, barely able to move even with Salvatore and Miko to support him.

But he still stopped to look at Halle.

“Sorry I failed you tonight,” he said, and it was the first time I’d heard anything resembling emotion from him.

“Right. Because you totally stood a chance against four guys,” Halle said, rolling her eyes at him. “I’m Halle, by the way,” she said, giving him a small smile.

“Venezio,” he said, nodding.

“I’ll help get him in the car, and come back, so we can work out a plan,” Miko said, nodding his chin toward Halle.

Then I said something that I think shocked me more than anyone else in the room.

“She’s staying here from now on.”

CHAPTER TEN

Halle

He'd carried me in through the apartment so fast that I could barely even see it. It was just a blur of gray and black before I was taken into a bedroom, placed onto the bed with more delicacy than I would have thought possible, then left me there.

He'd even shut the door.

And it felt very much like a 'you keep your ass right where I put you' kind of thing.

I mean, I wasn't complaining.

If nothing else, I was safe.

Also, I mean, it was the nicest room I'd ever been in in my entire life.

My entire apartment and half the neighbor across the hall's apartment could fit in this one bedroom.

The walls were a dove gray.

The bedding was a thick linen in an off-white shade.

The bed and all the furnishings were a deep stain that was almost black.

There was a door half opened at the side of the room, and I could make out the corner of a shower.

Apparently, crime was an incredibly profitable business.

Because this was a penthouse apartment.

It had to be in the millions.

A multi-million-dollar apartment, thousands of dollars for each suit he wore, the watches, the shoes, the damn cufflinks.

Cosimo Costa was the kind of wealthy that almost felt fictional to someone who'd never personally even had a taste of it.

I wouldn't say I'd been poor, per se, but I'd struggled a lot in my life. I'd been a full-time student and busted my ass at jobs to try to pay for all that schooling without having too many loans to weigh me down until freaking retirement.

But I was forever trying to turn off lights to save on the bill, to thrift things when I could, to use something until it fell apart.

This kind of luxury was foreign to me.

Left alone, I went ahead and let my eyes drift closed, and tried to take several deep breaths to try to bring some order back to my overwrought system.

I kind of felt like I should be a hell of a lot more hysterical than I was right then. Maybe it was just the shock of it all.

I mean, the initial attack was bad enough.

But then having to drag a severely wounded Venezia into the car while being chased?

Then needing to *drive* when I only had a cursory understanding of how a car worked.

It was all just a lot.

I had to give myself some time to decompress.

I imagined it would all come flooding back eventually.

At some point, I couldn't take the uncertainty anymore, and made my way out into the common area.

And, yeah, holy shit.

The entire apartment seemed like it was out of a magazine.

I'd been right about thinking it was all gray and black.

It was.

The walls were a deep gray. The fireplace was massive and black. The furniture in the living room was all light gray.

Even the kitchen was set into the same tones with dark gray cabinets above and below, and a massive black island with a slate countertop. Each of the cabinets was lit with some hidden lighting, giving the space a warmer feel. In fact, there were a lot of accent lights in that yellowy-white that made it feel a lot more homey.

Over the top of the apartment where the guest room I'd been in was located was a loft with glass railings to make the spaces melt into each other.

I imagined the primary suite would be found up there. And it must have been massive to take up all that space.

Beyond the actual bones and decor of the place, the massive floor-to-ceiling windows brought the city in, and somehow also made the space feel even larger.

If I wasn't mistaken, to the side of the kitchen was also a private balcony.

God, if I lived here, I would never want to leave.

I couldn't spend any more time looking around, though, with Venezia injured far worse than I could have anticipated.

I didn't even know the man, but my heart ached for him.

And not to mention the guilt that flooded my system. There was no denying that there was only one reason he was injured right now.

It was me.

He'd been trying to protect me.

Had he been off doing... whatever else he did, he would likely be completely fine.

I couldn't help but wonder if he was in shock to have so little reaction to being stabbed, beaten, and likely dealing with a broken leg. Without proper pain management, just a bottle of vodka he was taking swigs of.

The new, older guy, Salvatore, seemed to know what he was doing, though. Even if I didn't think he was actually a medical professional, he clearly had some sort of experience as he looked me over, then started to take care of Venezia.

Up on that counter with Cosimo's intense gaze on me, though, it was like everything and everyone else fell away.

Then, God, he was touching me.

Not even with his bare fingertips or anything. With gauze and Q-tips. But, still, the desire singed across my skin, creating this heat inside that made me sure I was about to combust.

It didn't help that when I'd been recounting my attack, I could have sworn he looked as furious as if it had happened to his wife or something like that.

Or maybe that was just wishful thinking.

I was still trying to wrap my head around that, though, when he said something that made me feel like he'd pulled the rug out from under me.

"She's staying here from now on."

"Got it, Boss," Miko said as he and Salvatore lead Venezia out of the penthouse.

"Ah, no," I said, shaking my head as I watched the door slide closed.

"No, what?" Cosimo asked, turning back to me.

"No, I'm not staying here."

"Yes, you are."

“Ah, no, I’m not,” I said, voice firmer.

I couldn’t stay here.

That was ridiculous.

“We’re not debating this,” Cosimo said in a tone I assume he thought brooked no argument.

But seeing as we were talking about *me*, I was going to argue.

“Yes, we are,” I countered.

He surprised me then.

Not by raising his voice.

Or saying anything at all.

Instead, his hands moved out, fingertips tracing over the bruises forming on my thighs.

It was meant to remind me of what had almost happened back in my apartment.

But all it seemed to manage to do was make me ache with need once again.

Without even meaning to do it, I pressed my thighs tightly together, hoping to ease the ache between.

The way Cosimo’s lowered gaze cut up to mine, though, told me he wasn’t oblivious to what was happening right then.

His fingers whispered across my skin again, making my breath catch as a little shiver moved through me.

There was no reasoning with a body.

So as much as my brain told me to shut it down, to keep this desire to myself, I felt my breathing and pulse quicken. And my nipples tightened into buds, pressing against the barely-there material of my tank top.

That hard gaze of his, unreadable in that moment, still on mine, his fingers slipped further upward, teasing the seam of my thighs until they fell shamelessly apart for him, allowing him to touch the ultra-sensitive skin of my inner thighs.

I knew he could feel the heat of me.

If his fingers slipped even slightly upward, there was no way he wouldn't feel how wet I already was.

As if sensing the direction of my thoughts, Cosimo's fingers teased further upward still, tracing that spot where my thigh met my sex.

Seemingly spurred on by my gasp, his fingers pressed the space between my thighs.

I couldn't keep in my moan. I didn't even try, to be fair.

I was too caught up in the moment, in the intensity of my feelings toward this practical stranger.

Cosimo's eyes blazed as his hand left me.

There was a crushing sort of disappointment, but only for a moment.

Because the next thing I knew, his hand was inside my shorts and panties, his fingers tracing up my slick cleft.

My hand shot out, grabbing his arm, holding on as his finger found my clit, and started to circle.

Any logical thoughts about why this was a terrible idea fled my mind as need filled my system.

Cosimo's eye contact was unyielding, and the potency of that was only driving me up faster as he worked me with expert fingers, keeping the perfect pace and pressure, never giving my orgasm a moment to ebb.

As my breathing got quicker, as my nails bit into his arm and my hips writhed against his touch, his touch shifted. His thumb took over my clit and his other fingers traced back downward, then thrust inside me, dragging a ragged moan out of me.

His eyes flashed as his fingers slid all the way in, and my walls tightened around them.

Cosimo wasted no time.

His fingers found the perfect rhythm, teasing me, driving me up.

My whimpers and moans grew at the need for release.

Cosimo's free hand reached suddenly out, closing over my breast, just holding the weight of it for a moment before squeezing.

Then, with this rumbling sound that might have been the sexiest thing I'd ever heard, his hand grabbed the material of my tank, drawing it down, exposing me to his hungry gaze.

"Fuck," he hissed, eyes closing for a second as he took a deep breath.

His fingers were more insistent inside me as his hand grazed my breast. His fingers found my nipple, rolling, twisting, driving me up further.

His thumb slid over my clit finally, giving me what I'd been aching for even as his fingers shifted inside me, teasing over my G-spot.

My walls got tighter, dragging another of those rumbling sounds from Cosimo.

And, somehow, that just sent me right over the edge, leaving me crying out as the orgasm gripped my system almost violently, taking me under, wave after wave, until my entire body felt drained and boneless, leaving me trying to catch my breath and slow my heart.

Cosimo's fingers slid out of me, out of my panties, and I watched in shock as he slipped his fingers into his mouth, tasting me.

But then, suddenly, the spell was broken as he stepped back.

"Go get some rest in the guest room. We'll talk in the morning."

Then, before I could think of something to say to that, he was striding past me.

I heard the whoosh of the sliding door. Once. Then twice.

Despite myself, I swiveled my head around to see him out on the balcony, his back to me.

“Oh, God,” I whimpered as I felt the cool air wash through the room from outside, prickling over my bare skin, making me reach down, yanking my boobs back into my shirt as my heart hammered.

What the hell had I just allowed to happen?

Somehow, I'd been able to pretend like I'd had no hand in the whole robe thing in the hotel room.

But this?

There was no way I could act like I hadn't been a willing participant. And eager one, even.

Heat flushed my face as I slid off of the island.

I couldn't leave.

Even if I thought there was a safe way to do so, somewhere to go that I wouldn't be found.

I had no purse. No money. No ID.

I didn't even have my phone.

My only choice was to walk on wobbly legs toward the guest room I'd left a while before, close the door, and try to pull myself together, to find a way to be able to face Cosimo again without it seeming like the whole fingering thing hadn't gotten to me.

It had.

God, it had.

I couldn't think of a time I'd come that hard or fast.

A lot of the time, I kind of got in my head about things, and psyched myself out of a good orgasm. Or any orgasm at all. I usually had to concentrate to make it happen.

But in the kitchen... there'd been no concentration.

I'd simply been completely overwhelmed by him.

And I was just going to have to live with that.

Because it was never going to happen again.

“Get it together,” I mumbled to myself as I walked through to the bathroom, flicking on the light, and wincing at the too-brightness of it, making the headache that had been nagging at me get stronger until it was a steady drum beat behind my eyes.

I dimmed the light before looking around.

The colors were muted shades of gray in here, nothing as dark as the rest of the penthouse.

I made my way toward the shower, turning it on, and working on scrubbing the bottoms of my feet, suddenly acutely aware of having walked my bare feet across the filthy sidewalk. I would never be able to sleep until I knew I’d thoroughly cleaned them.

Finished with that, I went through the drawers in the sink vanity, finding paste and packaged brushes, and working on my teeth before flicking off the light, and going back into the bedroom.

Where I found that Cosimo had come in while I’d been in the bathroom.

I would have felt like it was an invasion, if I didn’t see that he’d brought me a black t-shirt, a bottle of water, and some acetaminophen.

Which, damnit, was thoughtful of him.

I uncapped the water, tossing a few pills back, then drinking greedily before locking the bedroom door, so I could slip out of my tank top, and into the t-shirt.

Finished with that, I turned down the bed, and climbed in, finding myself almost annoyed at how comfortable the mattress was, and how warm the bedding was, lulling me half to sleep within minutes.

I figured I would stay awake, overthinking things until dawn. The attack. The escape with Venezia. Driving. Battlefield medicine in the kitchen. The fingering.

Especially the fingering.

But, somehow, I was asleep in minutes.

And, safe as I could possibly be since I was staying in the penthouse of a mafia capo, I slept like the dead.

I woke up alone.

In the bedroom, sure, but also the entire apartment.

After stopping in the bathroom, where I noticed that not only were there angry red gashes across my forehead, but big purple and blue bruises all around those as well. And a slight one under one eye.

That didn't include the ones on my throat. There was a shadow cast by my chin that made them less noticeable. I'd never been much of a turtleneck fan, but it was looking like I might need to invest in a few until the bruises faded.

I crept out of the bedroom, peeking my head into the living area.

But there was no one.

Though there was the scent of coffee still lingering in the air, drawing me into the kitchen, where I found a pot still on the heater.

After rummaging for a mug, I made myself a cup, grabbing some sugar, then finding unopened cream in the fridge.

A fridge that was otherwise empty.

I wondered as I sipped the coffee if he'd bought the cream for me. But, no. That was too thoughtful for a man like Cosimo.

A man who had stripped me naked one day.

Then fingered me in the kitchen.

After each, acting like nothing had happened.

Seemingly alone, I moved across the living space noting the utter lack of details in the apartment. No throw pillows. Art. Knick-knacks.

Still, it somehow felt really put together.

Masculine, sure, but in that way that a man could sometimes be comforting too.

I found a remote, thinking it was for a hidden TV somewhere, and ended up making the fireplace burst to light, bringing with it the kind of inviting warmth that begged me to sit down and enjoy it while I finished my coffee.

Done with that, though, curiosity had me moving across the apartment, and toward the door.

I pulled it open, and a little gasp escaped me as I saw two men flanking the door. In their mafia dude suits.

Neither of them were familiar to me.

“You need to stay inside,” one of them told me, barely sparing me a glance.

I jumped back inside, heartbeat kicking up.

Suddenly, I was wondering if I was even free to leave at all.

If I decided to say ‘Eff this’ and go out there, would they let me? Would they force me back into the penthouse? Was I a prisoner here?

What about my grandfather?

And the shop?

Half an hour later, there was a knock at the door, dragging me out of my storm of thoughts.

I made my way over there, stomach doing flip-flops until I reminded myself that none of these men had ever hurt me. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Pulling the door open, an arm was holding up a white bag.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Breakfast,” he said, pushing it into my hands, then turning to face away from the door again.

Like he didn’t have permission to look at me or something like that.

I was too hungry to give that much thought as I went into the kitchen, pulling items out to find an omelet with cheese and veg, a side of hash browns, and a parfait. Oh, and an orange juice.

Had Cosimo ordered this for me?

And why did the idea of that give me the warm and fuzzies?

I rolled my eyes at myself.

That was ridiculous.

If someone had ordered me breakfast, it was likely Miko.

That realization kind of made disappointment burrow through me as I ate my breakfast.

The rest of the day was full of, well, boredom.

I couldn’t figure out where the TV was.

So I just walked around, bored.

At lunch, there was another knock, another bag, and a panini with a side of sweet potato fries.

As afternoon crept toward evening, my boredom had me way overstepping my place as a guest by climbing up the staircase, and moving into Cosimo’s bedroom.

And, yeah.

This place was the sexiest bedroom I’d ever seen in my life.

Black walls, hardwood floors, a gray carpet under the California King-sized bed covered in gray and black bedding.

Like the rest of the penthouse, there was a bunch of hidden light to keep it warm.

His room was massive enough to have room for a sitting area with two chairs facing, finally, a big TV.

And under that TV was a smaller gas fireplace like the one in the living room.

Moving through the room, I found an absolutely massive walk-in closet full of more of his suits, shirts, shoes, and a small collection of workout clothes, and some black pajama bottoms.

The bathroom almost made me want to cry.

The walls were some sort of gray stone, the floors wooden, and the sink vanity some sort of floating hunk of wood with no storage in it.

There was a massive all-glass walk-in with several shower heads.

But the tub?

God, the tub.

Some sort of gray stone, and deep enough to submerge completely.

If it weren't for potentially being caught naked in there, I would have totally indulged.

As it was, I only allowed myself to overstep by curling up on one of those chairs in front of the fire with the TV on, chasing away my boredom.

Until, eventually, I just passed out.

Only to be woken up by Cosimo.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Cosimo

I'd left the apartment even earlier than usual.

Not because I needed to.

But because some part of me didn't trust myself to keep my fucking hands to myself when Halle emerged from that bedroom at some point.

It had already gotten too far.

Normally, I didn't give a shit about 'appropriate' timelines for sex and shit like that. Convention had no place in sex, in my opinion. But I also had only had very casual interactions with women.

And it always involved either the woman's apartment or a hotel room.

Call it paranoid, but strange women in and out of my apartment sounded like a really fucking bad idea. It wasn't like it was unprecedented to worry about honeytraps. Many organizations—yeah, even government ones—had been using

sexy women to seduce marks for information since the damn dawn of time. Believing, not wrongly, that men could easily be led around by their dicks.

Not wanting my place to be bugged on the off-chance that a woman was there for something other than an orgasm, I didn't allow them in my place.

I had no experience with having one around, but I had a feeling that allowing things to continue to get physical with Halle was only going to complicate shit.

So, yeah, I'd let things get out of hand the night before. But I couldn't let more than that happen.

I'd needed to go out into the fucking freezing night air just to get my head on straight afterward.

And still, I'd needed to rub one out afterward.

Which, somehow, only left me feeling unsatisfied.

Space, it seemed, was going to be the only way I kept things casual between us.

By the time I'd left, I had two men stationed at my door, no longer trusting that just one would do the trick. Even in my doorman-guarded apartment.

From there, I'd met up with Miko, who seemed to me hadn't gotten a fucking wink of sleep, but he looked showered and dressed in a fresh suit regardless.

"How'd the hospital go?"

"Trying to make Venezio do anything is like wrangling a fucking honey badger," he said. "Even without use of his fucking leg, he was a nightmare," he added. "But we got him in there for a scan. And, sure enough, he's got a hairline fracture in his tibia. They casted him. He's pissed as fuck about it."

"I bet," I agreed. I'd been laid up with a broken leg just once, back when I was a teenager. I'd been so over it just three weeks in, that I'd found someone to saw the damn thing off for me.

I'd probably be aching to high hell in my old age, but at least I'd managed to get back to my hustle sooner than the doctors thought.

"Did they happen to scan his ribs too?" I asked.

"Yeah. He's got one break. The others are just bruised. He's wrapped up with elastic bandages and under strict orders—from both the hospital and Salvatore—to keep his ass as immobile as possible."

"How much you wanna bet that shit ain't happening?" I asked.

"Figured you'd want to drop in to see for yourself," Miko said, holding the car door open for me.

"Yeah. Then we gotta go see Lorenzo again," I said.

I climbed in, taking my phone out of my pocket, and placing a breakfast order for Halle, then texting one of the guards to go pick it up when it arrived.

Venezio was just an associate in the organization. So I wasn't surprised when Miko parked on a block full of almost identical apartment buildings.

Nothing in the city was cheap.

But he wasn't paying much for his place, judging by the location and building that didn't even have a locking front door.

"Fifth floor," Miko said. "Elevator is busted."

"How the fuck did you get him upstairs?" I asked, brows raising.

"It wasn't fun. Especially since he can't really use crutches either.

"Christ," I grumbled, starting up with Miko.

The stairwell was filthy, scattered with scraps of garbage, and even a discarded fucking heroin needle.

"There's kids in this fucking building," Miko grumbled, picking up the needle carefully by the edge, and sticking it

inside a discarded soda bottle, screwing the top on tight, and bringing it up with us until we passed a garbage shoot to toss it down. “Here,” he said when we finally made it in front of an apartment door, the number askew.

“You have a key?” I asked as Miko fished one out of his pocket.

“Only because I stole his to make one,” Miko admitted, sticking the key in the lock, and pushing the door open.

Venezio’s apartment looked like he’d been robbed.

Meaning there was hardly fucking anything in it.

Nothing on the counters in the kitchen, not even a coffee maker. No end tables. No curtains or rug. And just one oversized black recliner and a TV across from it, set on top of two TV dinner tables.

Venezio himself was on said recliner, staring at the TV, but I got the impression that he wasn’t actually looking at the screen, just in that general direction.

“Steal anything else from me?” Venezio asked, glancing over in our direction.

“Yeah, ‘cause there’s anything else to steal,” Miko shot back as he set Venezio’s keychain down on the kitchen counter. “Besides, how’d you think I was supposed to move your car?” he said.

“Fair enough,” Venezio said, shrugging.

“How you holding up?” I asked.

“Fucking living the life,” he said.

“You got anyone to check in on you?” Miko asked. “A ma? Sisters? Anyone?”

“Don’t got family,” Venezio said, and Miko looked taken aback.

Coming from a big family himself, that was unfathomable to him.

“You got family,” Miko corrected him. “You got anything to eat yet today?”

“I’m fine,” Venezia insisted.

But Miko was already on his phone, ordering shit.

“How long on that leg?” I asked.

“Six weeks, give or take,” Venezia said, exhaling hard.

“Alright,” I said, reaching for my wallet.

“What’re you doing?” he asked, watching me grab a stack of cash.

“You’re outta commission for six weeks because of me. You’re losing money because of me. I owe you a salary.”

“I don’t take shit for nothing.”

“It’s not for nothing,” I said, holding out the stack until he took it. “You earned it. So shut the fuck up about it,” I suggested.

To that, Venezia’s lips twitched slightly.

“Fine,” he said, tucking it into his pocket.

I moved over toward Miko, finding him just hanging up.

“You mind doing Lorenzo’s by yourself?” he asked. “He can’t function in this place,” he said, waving around.

Leave it to Miko to rush in and take charge.

“That’d be good. If he overdoes it, it will just take him longer to heal.”

“Yeah,” he agreed.

“Fucking stubborn ass.”

“So, I’m hearing you like him,” Miko said, smirking.

“I do,” I agreed. “Alright. Let me know when you’re done here,” I said. “Venezia, I’ll be in touch within a week,” I told him as I made my way out of the door.

I was walking down the street toward the car when he came out of nowhere.

Fucking Leon.

“You poaching my men now?” he asked, with just enough friendliness not to call him on it.

“I had a job. I needed men. They’re all *my* men,” I reminded him.

“He can’t work now,” Leon said.

“And?” I asked, sensing where this was going, and not fucking liking it.

“And I’m out money if one of my biggest earners is down.”

“That sounds like a you problem,” I said, bleeping the locks on the car.

“I think I should be given an extension on—“ he started.

“Absolutely fucking not,” I cut him off. “And Venezia works directly for me now,” I told him, climbing in my car, and trying not to smirk at his flabbergasted look.

I got to Lorenzo’s place to find him out for lunch, so I sat in his dining room, and ordered lunch for Halle. While trying not to picture her in my house, wearing nothing but my shirt, her legs bare, easily spread for me to move between.

“Fuck,” I grumbled, rubbing my face with my hands.

“I know the look of a man having woman trouble,” a female voice said, making me turn to find Lorenzo’s wife, Giana, standing there, a toddler on her hip.

“What? No,” I said, shaking my head.

“Sure, sure,” she said, not even trying to hide her smile. “Oh, you know what?” she said, coming toward me. “Here,” she said, pulling the kid off of her hip, and holding him out to me.

“Oh, fuck, no. That’s not a good idea,” I said, getting out of my chair, but taking a step back.

“Oh, all you tough guys say that,” she said, holding the kid out. “You’ll be fine.”

“He looks sticky,” I said.

“He is,” she confirmed, absolutely fucking beaming at my discomfort as she finally just shoved the kid at me, forcing me to grab him so he didn’t fall. “Look at that. A natural. Okay. I’m going to go take a shower,” she told me, running off before I could object.

“Ah, so... yeah, I don’t know what to do with you,” I told the kid, holding him outward from my body. “Your mom put too much faith in me,” I added. “Do you still have, like, that soft spot and shit?” I asked as he looked at me with big eyes that I swear to fuck seemed to be judging me.

It wasn’t long before he started getting fussy, making this twisted up face that I figured meant he was about to cry.

“Do you want food or something?” I asked. “Or are you still on the tit?”

“If you could not curse in front of my kid, that’d be great,” Lorenzo said, stepping into the dining room.

“Oh, thank fuck,” I said, holding the kid out to him. “Shit, sorry. Damn it,” I added as Lorenzo let out a laugh as he settled his kid on his hip like his wife had.

“Let me guess. Giana wanted a shower?” he asked.

“Enough to leave that kid with someone who’s never even held a kid before,” I said, nodding.

“I heard some shi—things went down last night,” he said, walking out of the room, expecting me to follow.

“It was not good. Venezio, one of Leon’s men, but mine now, was stabbed multiple times, got a busted leg, a fucked up face. He’s a mess. And the girl? She was almost raped, and she was slammed against glass.”

Lorenzo set his son down in a highchair, and went to grab a box of cereal, dropping it down on the tray, then walking over toward the doorway to speak to me.

“The same guys?” he asked, voice hushed like a toddler could know anything about assault.

“Yes. The brothers. Three jumped Venezia and beat the ever-loving shit out of him. The other one went up to attack Halle.”

“Is she alright?”

“She was holding it together. Looks like he choked her, held her down on the bed because she has bruises on her thighs, pulled her shirt down because she has scratches on her chest, and slammed her head into a glass window.”

“Christ,” he murmured, jaw going tight. “Did they do any damage to the guys?”

“Sounds like Halle got some good swings with a frying pan in. Venezia thinks he might have shot one in the foot or leg as they were escaping. But that seems like it. I’m keeping her at my place,” I told him. “And I doubled up guards at my place and with her grandfather at the hospital.”

“Good. That’s good. They’re fucking relentless. I’m gonna have someone look into them.”

“I can tell you that they’re capable of violently gang-raping women, and beating the shit out of them in the process,” I reminded him.

Lorenzo’s face darkened as he watched Giana coming down the stairs, skin all pink from the shower, her wet hair pulled back in a braid.

“Uh-oh,” she said, looking at our faces.

“Everyone’s alright,” he assured her, tapping my arm, and leading me down the hall with him.

“You’re not going to let me take them out are you?” I asked.

“It’s too risky right now.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” I snapped.

“Hey, you’ll keep her safe. Now that you know how serious the threat is, you can adjust and make sure nothing like this happens again.”

“What, forever?” I asked, rolling my eyes.

“Is he telling you about his girl trouble?” Giana asked, walking toward us with a coffee cup in her hand, handing it to her husband, and pressing a kiss to his cheek.

There was a strange... I don't know... tugging sensation inside, seeing them.

I decided I was probably just hungry or something. Because nothing else would make sense.

“I don't have girl trouble,” I insisted.

“This Halle,” Lorenzo said, snaking an arm around Giana's waist, and pulling her close. “Is she pretty.”

“She's fucking gorgeous, but that has nothing to do with this.”

“You know where I've heard that before?” Giana asked, eyes bright, smile bemused. She raised a hand, counting off on her fingers. “Santi, Brio, Salvatore, Cesare, Emilio...”

“I don't even know the woman,” I insisted.

“Well, no easier way to get to know her than to have her staying at your place,” Lorenzo said, a teasing smile tugging at his lips. “Keep me updated on everything. And I will have Ant look into this family. Just so we are sure who we are dealing with. Go home to your girl,” he said.

“She's not my girl,” I insisted.

“No, of course not,” Giana said, lips twitching.

“Christ,” I hissed, turning, and walking out of the Brownstone.

And damn near plowing into my step-brother.

Silvano's head whipped up, his eyes immediately darkening when his gaze landed on me.

“Don't worry. We don't have to exchange pleasantries,” I said, continuing down the steps.

“You owe Mom an apology,” he said, making me turn back.

“Excuse me?” I snapped.

“You heard me. You owe her an apology. Spent weeks, months, crying over your selfish fucking ass. You owe her. You owe everyone, in fact,” he said, voice dripping venom, as it always did when we interacted.

Admittedly, when my father married his mother, I’d been the older one. I’d been the one who should have tried harder to set the tone between us, to refuse to rise to his continuous fucking bait.

But I had still been a kid, too.

And dealing with a shithead dad who’d already done a number on me. And continued to beat me down in any way he could. Physically and otherwise.

I didn’t have the coping skills to deal with an equally unhappy brother whose main complaint seemed to be that he didn’t have a blood relation to the Costas. Seeming not to realize that blood relations were why we got the ever-loving hell beat out of us, while he stayed relatively unscathed.

I won’t say my old man never raised a hand, or belt, to him. But Silvano had layers of protection that I’d never had. His mom. Me. As much as there was no real love between us as brothers, I did often take the heat for shit he’d fucked up. Then, as shit got worse with him and Silvano’s mom, I’d done my best to step in there, too, saving her from getting the kinds of beatings I’d been getting my whole life.

The problem was, I’d never told Silvano any of this.

And, eventually, I did start rising to his bait.

Then the fights led to resentment and distance.

It was a pattern that continued well after my old man died, and we were old enough to go off on our own.

“First, for the record, I already talked to Ma. We worked shit out. Second, how I interact with Ma—or the Family—is none of your fucking business. Third, I don’t have fucking time for your bitching today,” I said, turning and walking away.

Did I regret the way I spoke to him by the time I got to my car? Sure. Kind of. But that was just the way shit was with us. Hard. Angry. It didn't seem like there was any fixing that after all these years. Even if we wanted to, it didn't seem like either of us had the skills to figure out how to do that.

After Lorenzo's, I met up again with Miko, this time over a meal that both of us needed.

He'd taken over at Venezia's place. Not only had he ordered him some food, but he'd gotten a fucking mini fridge and microwave delivered, and set up near the recliner, so Venezia could reach and heat up food without getting out of his chair.

He'd loaded the fridge up.

Then he'd also gotten him an office chair, so he could transfer onto that, and roll it into the bathroom. Apparently, his doors were too narrow for a wheelchair.

"Besides, think he's got too much fucking pride for the chair," Miko said. "You headed home now?" he asked.

"No. I got some business to handle," I reminded him. "I'll probably head home around dinner," I said. "What?" I asked when he shot me a look.

"Boss, it ain't none of my business," he said, holding up his hands.

"What is it, Miko?" I asked.

"Just saying, that girl is all alone in that apartment all day, not allowed to leave, nothing to do, worrying about the shop and her grandfather... that's all I'm saying."

"Are you involved with her?" I asked, wishing I could suck those fucking words right back in.

"What?" he asked, looking taken aback.

"Halle. You've been with her every day for, what, four days? Have you gotten involved with her?"

"I mean, we shared a meal or two. Might have talked about her shop. But, no. I know that's not my place. I mean, she's

beautiful and all, but no. It's just... I think maybe I might know more about, you know, the inner workings of women than you do, that's all. Feel free to tell me to shut the fuck up, if you want."

"No. You know I appreciate your input," I said. "Why don't you go home and get some sleep? You've been busting your ass."

"I gotta go see my Ma. But then, yeah, sleep sounds good. Got my phone if you need me," he said, standing up, and exiting the restaurant.

I did end up spending my afternoon doing work shit.

First, because it needed to get done.

Second, because I knew distance was what I needed from Halle.

And, third, even if I wanted to try to put her mind at ease and shit like that, I wouldn't know the first fucking thing about doing that.

So I didn't make my way home until around six-thirty, the sun long set, and with no other excuse to stay out any longer.

I greeted the guards who had changed shifts, then made my way inside, finding that I was bracing myself for her getting up in my face about keeping her prisoner.

I mean, I was keeping her safe.

But the fact of the matter was that, yes, the guards were directed that she was not, under any circumstances, allowed to leave the penthouse.

I figured she would have likely tried and learned the hard way already.

I walked into a quiet apartment, though.

There were no traces of her around, save for the fireplace that was still on in the living room.

Curious, I made my way down the hall, finding her bedroom door open, and the bathroom door ajar.

But no Halle.

There was no way she could have gotten past the guards.

Circling back, I checked out on the balcony before making my way upstairs.

And then, like a kick to the fucking crotch, there she was.

In front of the fire with the TV on.

Dead asleep.

Sprawled out in one of the chairs in my bedroom, her bare legs draped over the arm. The tee I'd given her the night before had ridden up almost to her panty line, and it took every fucking ounce of my self-control not to walk over there, spread them, and bury myself between. Face, cock, I didn't care. I just wanted more of her.

Especially after getting my fingers insider her tight pussy, feeling her wetness all over my hand as I finger-fucked her, listening to her whimpers and moans as I drove her up and through an orgasm.

Even just the memory of it had my cock hardened against my pants, aching for fulfillment. To feel her hand, mouth, pussy clenched around it.

"Fuck," I groaned to myself.

And that, to someone who was staying in a strange place, and also accustomed to living alone, was enough to make Halle jerk awake, eyes wide but unseeing for a second.

I watched as she adjusted to the unfamiliar surroundings before her gaze finally fell on me.

"This was the only TV I could find," she said, voice thick and sleepy. And, fuck, if that wasn't a good sound.

My gaze slipped down her body again, and it was only then that she seemed to remember her state of relative undress, dropping her legs down from the arm, and stretching the tee as far down as it would go.

"There's a TV in every room," I said, gaze back on her face. Which was how I saw the change come over her before

she was bursting out of the chair, and taking several angry steps toward me.

“How was I supposed to know that? You left before I even got up. I was left alone in an apartment with nothing to do *all day*. I didn’t even get to see my grandfather!” she added, voice getting higher.

“I don’t want to risk you leaving today,” I said. “You can call him.”

“And how was I supposed to call him when I don’t have my phone?” she snapped.

Right.

Her phone.

I’d been tuned in enough to make sure she had something to wear, and food to eat, but the whole entertainment and access to the outside world thing had escaped me, I’ll admit.

“Use mine,” I said, reaching for it.

“I want my own phone,” she hissed.

“And I’ll get it for you. But that’s not going to happen right this moment. So use my phone to call your grandfather. Or don’t. I don’t particularly care either way.”

“He is in danger too,” she said, snatching the phone out of my hand, but carefully enough that our fingers didn’t brush.

“He’s not,” I said. At her incredulous look, I held up a hand. “I doubled his guard. And that’s on top of the hospital staff and security. He’s safe. You’re the one you need to be worrying about.”

“I’m literally locked in a fortress with security guards,” she grumbled, swiping on my phone to find the hospital’s number, then calling.

She walked past me, and down the stairs, wanting some privacy. I let her, needing a second to pull my damn self together.

I hadn’t been prepared for how much seeing her in my shirt, and only my shirt, would impact me.

The lack of control I had over my own desire around her was, frankly, fucking embarrassing. Like I was a goddamn teenager again or some shit.

Eventually, my cock calmed down, and I made my way back downstairs to find her standing in the kitchen, arms crossed over her chest, staring at my phone on the island.

“Did you get to talk to him?”

“Yes. He’s still loopy from the pain medicine,” she said. “And the doctor said he wants to run some more tests on him,” she added.

“He’s in a good place. Trust that they know what they’re doing.”

“I do,” she said, but there was a false note in her words. “I want to be there with him.”

“But I’m keeping you prisoner,” I finished for her.

“That, yes. But also...” she said, waving at her forehead and then neck. “I can’t explain this. And he’ll ask about the store. He did just now. I had to do somersaults to avoid the topic.”

“Your head will heal. And when it’s safe to go again, you can just put a bandage on, and say you tripped and hit your head. As for the shop... what the fuck does it matter that you lie if he never knows?”

“Because it’s his store. Because it’s losing money if it is sitting there closed.”

“If money is the issue—“ I started.

“I don’t want your money!” she said, frustrated, but I couldn’t understand why.

If money was the issue, and I had the answer to the problem, why was she in a bad mood about it?

“Do you want dinner?” I asked.

“I want to go *home*. I want *clothes*. I want my *books*. I want... fine,” she said when looking at me and seeing my placid face. “Fine. I want dinner.”

And she'd finally given me some problems I could easily solve.

Now, how she would respond to that, though, that was the question...

CHAPTER TWELVE

Halle

Maybe I was being a brat, complaining about being stuck in a luxurious penthouse with food delivered to me three times a day, the most comfortable bed known to mankind, and, yes, TVs in every room. They were hidden inside cabinets in some cases. They acted as art in others. Rich people stuff that I had no prior experience with.

I was just... restless.

I felt like life was slipping away from me.

Especially at the shop.

How many times would a customer come to the shop to find a closed sign on the door before they refused to come again? How much money had been lost just during the one day closed?

My grandfather would know the answer to that question. But I clearly couldn't ask him.

I woke up alone the next morning, but found a fresh pot of coffee waiting.

And within two minutes of starting to sip that, there was a knock at the door.

But there were several bags instead of one.

Two of those bags had a familiarity to them, patterns that I'd seen before, but couldn't quite place

"What's this?" I asked.

"Breakfast," the guard said. "And something to wear."

Oh, thank God.

Washing my panties and re-wearing his tee was not it.

"Oh, thanks," I said, giving him a smile because he was a guy doing his job. And it was, objectively, probably a shitty one, compared to the other stuff the mafia must do on the daily.

I brought my breakfast to the island, finding strawberry-banana crepes and some sort of fruit smoothie.

I started to eat as I placed my bags on the far end of the island, checking to make sure it was clean, then pulling items out.

The first, smaller, bag was all white with a silver word scrawled across it.

La Perla.

I didn't have any frame of reference for what that was until I reached inside, and pulled out several pairs of lacy and silky panties.

A lingerie store.

And now that I thought of it, I could have sworn that I'd heard Lauren mention it once or twice in the past. Like all things that were out of my tax bracket, though, I'd completely forgotten about it.

The next bag was one I was sure I'd seen a million times in the city. A simple brown bag that said *Medium Brown Bag* on

it. I'd always figured that it was just some sort of bag company or something that a lot of businesses used.

Nope.

As it turned out, everything inside that bag was from Bloomingdale's.

The first thing I pulled out was the softest damn thing I'd ever felt in my life.

A cashmere turtleneck in a light, ice blue color called *Grotto Blue*.

Had he picked this out for me?

No.

No way.

He probably had a mom or sister or some woman on his staff to run these sorts of errands. Still, it was perfect. The neck looked like it would cover the bruises on my throat. Which, as silly as it was, I didn't even want to look at myself.

I reached back into the bag, feeling something buttery, but finding a completely different sort of material. Pulling the fabric out, I found a pair of black slacks, high-waisted, and slightly wide in the leg.

The final bag was a lavender color with the words *Bergdorf Goodman* on it.

There was a box inside.

Shoes.

I flipped open the top, folded back the tissue paper, and found the most amazing pair of black pumps I'd ever seen in my life. They had a heel, but not too tall or too thin, with flat leather and a dainty strap.

In my size.

I had no idea how anyone could possibly know that.

But, as I slipped the shoe on my foot, finding it fit like a glove, I had to assume it had something to do with being in my apartment.

I'd never considered before that anyone would step foot in there except me. I never even let Lauren up. I always just met her in the shop or on the street.

Maybe I wouldn't have been so embarrassed by it if I put literally any effort into making it my own. But I'd been busting my ass at the shop, then on damn jury duty, then trying to catch up at the shop again after the jury duty ended. I barely had time to stuff something in my mouth and then brush my teeth before bed. There was no brain power or energy leftover to paint or decorate.

But, clearly, someone in the mafia had been in my apartment.

That was mildly horrifying.

Even if I did get some amazing clothes out of the deal.

I'd just finished my breakfast, and was about to go indulge in a long, hot shower before getting dressed when there was another knock at the door.

When I answered, I was handed yet another bag.

"I was told to tell you to be ready by eleven."

"Ready for what?" I asked, brows pinching.

"I wasn't told anything more than that," he said, sounding apologetic.

"Ah, um, okay. Thanks," I said, closing the door.

Did I kind of rush to the island to reach into the bag to see what else I might have gotten? Damn right, I did.

It wasn't as exciting as a new designer outfit.

But it was somehow even more thoughtful.

A nice blow dryer.

Heat protectant spray.

A regular brush.

And a rounded brush to do my bangs.

To hide the gashes on my forehead.

I would be presentable if I could curl my bangs and wear a turtleneck. I could go anywhere without anyone knowing something had happened to me.

Maybe he was sending someone to take me to see my grandfather.

Hope blooming, I took all my things back to my room, laying the outfit out on the bed, then turning on a music channel on the TV, since I still didn't have my phone, and went ahead and luxuriated for almost an hour before forcing myself to climb out.

I wondered if, when all this was done, if I snuck this hair dryer home with me, if Cosimo would ever know. Because, damn. I mean, I always kind of thought a blow dryer was a blow dryer. I'd been horribly wrong. Because my hair was bouncier and shinier than usual by the time I was done.

Checking the time, I went to slip into my fancy panties, realizing suddenly that there was one thing Cosimo—or whoever shopped for him—had forgotten.

A bra.

I was supposed to wear this fancy new cashmere shirt with no bra. And, let's face it, the heels were only going to make my step, you know, bouncier.

I chewed my lower lip for a moment as I watched the clock tick closer and closer to eleven.

I had no choice.

I climbed into the clothes, and tried to turn to and fro in the mirror, seeing if you could tell I was braless.

I mean, I was still young enough to have some decent natural lift. But I wasn't exactly flat-chested, and I liked to haul those babies up as much as possible.

And, well, the cold.

The cold was going to be a factor, damnit.

I sighed, fluffing my hair once more, then making my way out into the main area of the penthouse, pacing back and forth,

anxious to get out of the apartment for a while.

There was that knock again, one minute shy of eleven, prompting me to walk right over.

Kind of like a trained dog.

I mean, literally.

Each time there was a knock, there was a treat for me on the other side of the door, so I always answered.

“What’s that look for, sugar?” Miko asked, head tipped to the side, watching me with a bemused smile.

“What? Oh, nothing. Just a weird thought. You’re here,” I said.

“I am,” he said.

“I should probably thank you for all this,” I said, waving at myself. “And the fact that I’ve been fed each meal.”

“What?” he asked, brows pinching. Then, seeming to catch up, he shook his head. “No. Nah, that’s all the boss,” he said.

“You expect me to believe that asshole is remembering each morning and noon to order me food? And that I needed a rounded brush to do my bangs?” I asked, brows raised.

“Okay. Fair point on the bang thing,” he said. “But it wasn’t me. I’ve been playing nursemaid to Venezia.”

“How is he?” I asked, following Miko to the elevator.

“Moody as fuck,” he said, smirking. “But he’s keeping his ass put, so he can heal. That’s all we can hope for. You look nice,” he said, looking me over. But in an almost asexual way, if that made any sense. Just an observation of what he thought were facts, nothing more.

Normally, I would feel at least a twinge of insecurity at that. The fact that I didn’t was all the proof that I needed that I had no interest in Miko that way. Which was absurd since, of all of these mafia guys, he was the most personable and kind.

But no.

I had to have the warm and tinglies for his prick of a boss instead.

I mean, we'd ordered dinner, then shared a meal together. And he hadn't said anything to me. Who does that?

"Thanks," I said, giving him a smile. "But I think anyone would look good in these clothes," I admitted.

"Nah, take the compliment," he said as the doors slid open.

Charming as ever, Miko stepped in the doorway sideways, like he would stop the doors from closing if I took too long to exit, then walking half a step behind me through the lobby.

"Where are we going?" I asked as the doorman held the door open for me.

"I'm taking you to see your grandfather," he said. "Then..." he trailed off.

"Then what?" I asked.

"Well, we'll see later," he said, uncharacteristically close-lipped.

But he was taking me to the hospital, so I wasn't going to complain.

"I can sit up front with you," I said when he went to open the back door.

"No, you can't," he said, shaking his head, and waving inside the car.

Not having a choice, I climbed in, feeling awkward, like some rich person who refused to be caught alongside the "staff."

I noticed as we drove that another car was behind us the entire time. With two more suit-clad men.

Cosimo wasn't taking any chances.

And I found myself feeling a little swoony about that. Especially when I saw two more men hanging outside of my grandfather's room. Even if I had no idea how he'd managed to get the hospital to agree to that.

I had a short visit with my grandfather, since he was exhausted from, apparently, even more testing that morning.

He was still bruised, but I thought they were looking slightly less dramatic.

The doctor had no answer for me for how long he would be staying there, and I felt like a monster to be kind of relieved that I wouldn't have to try to find a way to protect him when he was out, and also convince him to keep the shop closed.

"Where's Miko?" I asked as one of the other guards I was getting familiar with when I walked out of the door to find him waiting there instead.

"Getting the car," he said.

Then he led me to the elevator with another guard in tow.

It wasn't until the back door was opening, and I was sliding inside that I realized I wasn't alone.

"Jesus!" I swore, hand slapping down over my heart where my heartbeat had tripped into hyperdrive.

Cosimo completely ignored me, typing away at his phone.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

Only to be ignored again as Miko pulled away from the curb. He, it seemed, knew where we were going.

I did too, as soon as we turned down the street.

Fifth Avenue.

So I wasn't exactly surprised when Miko pulled up in front of Saks. He was double-parked but didn't seem to think anything of it as he rushed out to open Cosimo's door. Then, in turn, Cosimo came around to open mine.

"Get out of the car, Halle," he said when I stared up at him.

So, yeah, those were the first words he'd spoken to me all day. Real charmer, this one.

But try telling that to the little sizzle of desire that shot through me as I placed my hand in the one he had extended toward me.

“What are we doing here?” I asked, turning to look at the building.

It was decked out in its notorious Christmas style. I knew that, at night, there would be impressive light shows. As for the inside, though, I had no idea.

It seemed I was about to find out, though.

“You need clothes,” Cosimo said, moving toward the doors, leaving me to rush to catch up.

“I have clothes. In my apartment. I could go grab those clothes,” I insisted.

“No.”

“No?” I asked, stubbornly standing in the doorway he was holding open, so he couldn’t follow me in.

“I can’t imagine that’s a difficult word to understand,” he said, placing a hand to my hip, and pushing me inside, the heat of his body at my back.

The building seemed even bigger inside than it had outside, and with Christmas displays everywhere.

Penguins with red top hats here. Giant nutcrackers there. And twinkle lights everywhere.

I hadn’t even thought about the holidays yet.

And they were approaching with an almost alarming swiftness. I swore Christmas came faster and faster with each passing year. I could barely keep up.

“Why can’t I wear my own clothes?” I asked as Cosimo seemed to completely ignore me as he started walking through the store. As if he knew where the women’s department was.

“These will be your clothes,” he said, weaving effortlessly through the crowds of people. Or, should I say, the damn crowds parted for him. Like some sort of freaking celebrity. And I was practically running behind him in my new, kind of slippery, heels.

“Well, if I have to buy new clothes, I’m not buying them here,” I insisted when I finally caught up with him. But only

because he'd stopped walking.

"You're not buying anything," he said, inclining his chin toward a woman in a very tasteful, yet sexy, white office-type dress.

"Mr. Costa," she greeted. "Glad you made it back," she told him, doing a quick, but obvious, perusal of him. "And Miss..." she said, her head turning to look at me.

"Whitlock," Cosimo supplied.

"Yes, of course. Miss Whitlock. We are ready for you," she declared, holding an arm out.

"Ready for me?" I whispered to Cosimo, who was reaching for his phone again.

"You have an appointment," he informed me.

"An appointment for what?" I pressed.

But he was back to ignoring me. And the saleswoman was leading me away.

Thankfully, the saleswoman handed me off to a man named Jeffrey, who was all too happy to fill me in on what was going on.

Cosimo had booked me a personal shopping appointment.

Which, apparently, included the flute of champagne that was pressed into my hands, and a dressing room that was practically its own apartment, and filled with racks of various items of clothing the shopper had picked out for me according to the information Cosimo had given him.

"What kind of information?" I asked, sipping the champagne I didn't need, because I already felt like my head was spinning.

"Sizes," Jeffrey told me. "And your coloring. Dark hair, light eyes, skin tone. It helps me find pieces I feel would flatter you," he told me, walking over to the racks.

"I don't know the first thing about any of this," I admitted. "All my clothes are from big box stores. Or thrifted," I

admitted. Jeffrey's gaze moved over my outfit, brow raised. "Cosimo gave me these," I said, waving toward my clothes.

"So he has good taste *and* good looks?" Jeffrey asked, giving me a devilish smirk.

"Well, he needed something to balance out his terrible personality," I said, getting a surprised choking sound out of Jeffrey.

Fifteen minutes later, after telling me all about materials and styles and things I wouldn't even pretend to understand, Jeffrey was moving to the door to give me a chance to try on clothes in private.

"Fair warning, I was told you would require a wardrobe to last at least two weeks," he said. "So, if you want to see anything in different colors, just let me know."

Two weeks?

I was still trying to work my mind around that as I reached for one of the tags on a single pair of slacks.

Six hundred.

Six hundred dollars for *pants*.

I mean, yes, being connected this man had kind of imploded my life. But that didn't mean I felt like he owed me six hundred dollars, period. Let alone per pair of pants.

I stormed back toward the door, pulling it open.

Only to find Cosimo leaning against the wall beside the door, looking down at his phone.

His brow quirked.

"What is it?" he asked.

"This is ridiculous," I said, watching him sigh and tuck his phone away.

"What is ridiculous?" he asked, finally giving me his full attention.

"Oh, I don't know. Everything here. The champagne. The personal shopper. The *price* on the pants."

Brows pinching, Cosimo pushed off the wall, and moved into the dressing room, making a beeline for the racks of clothes, picking up a tag, and checking the price himself.

“I’m not seeing the problem,” he said.

“They’re six hundred dollars. For *pants*. Pants. What? Are the stitches made out of spun gold?” I asked.

“They’re well-made pants. They will last. Why do you care?” he asked.

“It’s too much,” I insisted.

“That’s for me to decide,” he said.

I’m not proud to admit this, but some part of me was, well, feeling a little swoony. I mean, you can’t be spoon-fed fairy tales and romantic movies since you were a little girl without harboring at least a small amount of wishfulness toward the fantasy of a rich, successful man wanting to pamper the hell out of you.

But the adult, practical woman that I was, knew that there was nothing for free in this world. That people didn’t spend their well-earned money to buy you an entire wardrobe of designer clothes without something being expected in turn.

And, well, the last kind of man you wanted to be indebted to was one who was in the business of, you know, breaking kneecaps and murdering people.

“I’m not picking anything,” I said, chin jerking up.

“Then you will get everything in here, whether you like the items or not,” he said, stalking over toward me, towering over me.

I’m not proud of this fact, but I totally took a step back.

Then another.

Until the wall prevented me from going any further.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked, hearing a tightness in my chest, but comforting myself that only I would know it was from desire. He probably heard fear or something like that.

“Why are you being so stubborn?” he countered.

“I could buy clothes at literally any other store.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Do you get some sort of thrill out of acting like a petulant child?” he asked, making me jerk back.

“What? I’m not acting like a child. I’m actually the only one being reasonable here. You want to buy thousands and thousands of dollars of clothes that I don’t want, that’s on you,” I said, trying to take a step to the side, only to find his hand slamming down into the wall, trapping me.

“You’re gonna try to tell me,” he said, the fingers on his free hand pinching the hem of my shirt, “that you don’t love how this feels on your skin?” he asked, the knuckles of his hand sliding up over my belly, then my breast.

My breath caught, and an involuntary shiver coursed through me as his finger slid over my nipple.

I could feel my lips part even as my gaze slid up to his, finding his eyes heavy-lidded as they looked down at me.

“I mean, if you really don’t like it...” he said.

His hand was off my breast then.

And the other was suddenly off of the wall.

But only because both hands were grabbing the shirt, and pulling it upward.

It happened so fast that my arms went up automatically, and the material was gone in a blink, tossed carelessly to the ground.

This time, the shiver that moved through me was both hot and cold. Cold, because of the sudden nakedness. Hot, because of his brazenness.

I shouldn’t have found it sexy.

The same way I shouldn’t have found it sexy when he’d opened my robe.

Somehow, though, every single shred of hesitation had left my body. Because I was melting under his heated gaze.

“I might like this better anyway,” he said, his voice a purring thing, moving over and through me somehow at the same time.

His gaze lowered, and I watched his chest expand as he sucked in a deep breath, then slowly released it.

But he wasn't done.

His hand teased over my belly for a second before finding the buttons and zipper of my slacks, working them free, then drawing them down.

Leaving me in nothing but a pair of lacy black panties with a pink and yellow floral pattern over the hip cut outs. The entire back was lace, leaving nothing to the imagination.

“Knew these would look incredible,” he said, seeming to speak to himself, but his words warmed me regardless.

Yes, because he liked how I looked in them.

But also because I'd been wrong.

He hadn't had a sister or assistant pick out the panties.

He'd done it.

With me in mind.

This man who seemed permanently attached to his cell phone, who was all about work every minute of the day, had put it away to think about me.

About me in *panties*, nonetheless.

“But, I think,” he said, his finger tracing across my belly again, but this time hooking a finger into my panties when he reached the center, “they'd look even better off,” he said, then drawing them down.

Not only that.

Oh, no.

He started to move down as well.

A tremble of anticipation moved up my spine as he grabbed my knee, placing my leg over his shoulder, and burying his face between my thighs.

A strangled whimper escaped me as his tongue traced up my cleft before I remembered where we were.

In a very, very public place.

Sure, we had a full room to ourselves. And there were no cameras, thanks to the nature of the room. But people were just feet away. They could hear everything.

My teeth nipped into my lower lip as his tongue found my clit, circling it lazily, making my inner thighs start to shake.

My hand went down, bracing on his shoulder as the pleasure unfurled in my core, spreading outward until I felt completely consumed by it.

My breathing got fast and ragged as he drove me up relentlessly.

Not trusting myself as he got me closer and closer to that edge, my hand pressed over my mouth, muffling the sounds I seemed to have no control over as he had me teetering on that edge.

I didn't have to worry about silencing myself, though.

Because right before I could feel the release of the orgasm through my body, he was standing, and slamming his lips down on mine. His hand went between my legs and continued to tease, driving me up through an orgasm that had me crying out against his lips.

His hand went to the back of my neck, holding me to him as he started to walk, moving me backward blindly, then turning, and taking me down with him onto the couch in the dressing room.

Completely naked, with him entirely clothed.

But my mind wasn't on that.

Because his lips were still on mine, crushing, then coaxing. Hard then soft. Making it impossible for the desire to ebb.

His teeth nipped my lower lip, dragging a small whimper out of me, allowing his tongue to slip inside to tease over mine.

His hands slid down my back, sinking into my ass, and squeezing.

His cock was straining against my stomach, and there was this undeniable ache inside, this need to feel him inside of me.

Suddenly overcome with the need to touch him, I scooted back off his lap, lowering down on the floor between his spread legs.

My gaze slid to his as my hands teased up his thighs, then over to his belt, button, and zipper.

His dark gaze was molten by the time I reached inside to close my hand around his cock, pulling it out, and stroking down his thick length.

That deep rumbling sound escaped him, making me need to press my thighs together to ease the ache as I lowered down, and sucked him into my mouth.

His hand slammed down on the back of my neck, fingers digging in with his need.

As soon as I started to work him, with a sort of enthusiasm I wouldn't have thought myself capable of if I wasn't there, experiencing it, his other hand gathered my hair, moving it out of the way so he could watch.

I sucked him faster and faster as his breath became shallow huffs and his hips rocked up into my mouth.

“Fuck,” he groaned, fingers accidentally tugging my hair a bit. “I’m gonna come down that pretty throat,” he warned.

Then he was.

And I felt my sex clench hard in response.

I wasn't sure I'd ever been as needy and as shameless in my desire before as I was with Cosimo.

But, slowly but surely, as he recovered from his orgasm, and I moved away from him, yeah, my damn rational mind

came flooding back.

“Get dressed,” he demanded, reaching to tuck himself away and refasten his pants and belt.

Yep, there was that asshole I was getting to know quite well.

And I’d just sucked him off in a public dressing room.

Great. That was just fan-freaking-tastic.

I didn’t even think of modesty as I rushed away from him, yanking the panties up my legs, then pulling on my shirt, wanting as much of myself covered as possible.

When I grabbed my pants off the floor, I finally chanced a look over at him. As usual, I saw nothing. Just a locked down face with no hint of what was going on inside.

As soon as my pants were fastened, though, he was wrenching open the door, and saying in a voice that harnessed an old, married man who had no affection left for his wife, barked, “I’m not arguing about this anymore.”

I felt myself stiffen as I saw Jeffrey rushing over, eyes wide, likely worried something had gone wrong with his sale.

Did they work off of commission?

“Just have it all rung up and packaged,” he told Jeffrey as he reached again for his phone.

“All of it?” Jeffrey clarified.

“No,” I said.

“Yes,” Cosimo said at the exact same time, but he was walking away.

A few feet away, an older lady was returning some items to the sales lady that she didn’t want. She shot a red-lipsticked smile at me.

“Honey, can I give you some practical advice, woman to woman?” she asked.

“Um, sure,” I said, feeling a little whiplashed from the events of the last fifteen or so minutes.

“If a nice man wants to spoil you, you let him. That’s what all that young and pretty is for,” she said, waving a hand toward my body in general before moving off.

“She’s not wrong,” Jeffrey agreed with a light in his eyes. “How about another glass of champagne while I get this all sorted for you?” he asked, but it wasn’t a question, because he was bustling off to get it.

I felt a nice little buzz moving through me by the time the bags were waiting for me at the counter.

I didn’t see the receipt, or hear anyone tell Cosimo how much it cost. But a little mental estimation said it had to all come out to almost fifteen thousand dollars.

Fifteen thousand.

And he was acting like that was nothing at all. Spare change in his pocket.

God, maybe it was.

“What?” he asked, catching me staring at his profile as he handed the bags off to the two guards who I’d completely missed, they’d been standing so far away.

Not liking to be caught staring, I said the first thing that came to my mind.

“I need to get some bras,” I said. Then immediately regretted it when, in public, with a saleswoman just two feet away, his gaze slid down to my chest, lingering for a long second, long enough for heat to rise in my cheeks, but also into my core.

“No, you don’t.”

Was the saleswoman trying to hide a smile at that?

“Yes, I do,” I said, voice lower.

“Not happening.”

“Pajamas too,” I added.

“You won’t need them,” he said.

Then he was turning and striding away, leaving me to wonder what the hell that was supposed to mean as I tried to catch up to him once again.

The thing was, by the time I did, he was sliding into the car with Miko.

And I was being shuffled into the other one.

I never got a chance to ask.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Cosimo

I'd never had the experience of dropping money on a woman.

My interactions with the opposite sex being what they were, the most I would spend on one was a nice dinner, or some drinks. Maybe, if things got heated and clothing got ripped, I'd leave some money to replace the item.

But I'd never taken the time out of my day to spend with one.

I'd woken up early and rushed out of the house to hit the gym before making it to the stores when they opened, picking out items that I could picture on Halle. Or, more accurately, picture taking off of Halle.

It had been the sales guy, Jeffrey, who'd pretty much convinced me to set up an appointment, and allow him to do some shopping for items. I had to admit that I'd jumped at the idea. Though, at first, I figured I would sic the task on Miko, who likely had experience shopping with women, thanks to his sisters. But, in the end, I found myself clearing my fucking

schedule to do it with her instead. To no one's surprise more than my own.

Turned out to be a great fucking idea, too, I decided. My mind flashed back to the dressing room, to stripping her naked in there with a whole store just feet away, then getting down on my knees and finally getting a taste of her.

Then, fuck, she'd taken it upon herself to get on her knees too. I hadn't been expecting that, not with the way she seemed to barely tolerate being around me.

But then there she was.

With my cock buried in her mouth, letting me come down her throat.

I was half-hard just remembering it.

"... Shoes." Miko had clearly been saying something, but I hadn't been paying attention.

"What?"

"Did you get her more shoes?" he asked. "That pair she had on was nice, but she can't wear them all the time."

Right.

Shoes.

I'd been so focused on the dressing room, and then a minor fire that needed putting out with one of my soldiers, that I'd been rushing through the checkout process.

"Right," I said, shrugging. "Guess we'll put that on the schedule tomorrow," I said.

"Is the plan to keep her so busy that she doesn't freak out about not going to the shop?" Miko asked.

"That's... definitely a factor," I agreed.

I'd had some of my guys do some snooping on the bills at the place. And as far as anyone could tell, things were paid up, so there was no rush to reopen. And even if bills came due, I could toss some money at them.

It just wasn't safe for her to be back there yet.

Or, at least, that was the lie I was telling myself.

The reality was, I could make her almost as safe at her shop as she was at my penthouse.

But that *almost* felt like too much of a risk.

No matter how fucking angry she might be at me for keeping her on lockdown.

“Did you call your sister?” I asked, tucking my phone away. I wasn’t usually as glued to it as I had been recently. But shit had gone to hell while I’d been no-contact with everyone. That meant that people got stupid, lazy, or cocky. Sometimes all three. Which required me to be a goddamn helicopter with everything until everyone remembered their places, and what was expected of them.

“Yeah. She gave me the name of a place all the wives go to,” he said, referencing an all-inclusive spa. But a special type of one. One that would allow my men to tour the place, secure the exits, then stand guard wherever they needed to. I didn’t give a fuck if that meant that no other women could be getting facials and massages and shit. So long as Halle was safe while she was there.

Miko clearly thought this was just more distraction for her. More ways for me to keep her busy and distracted from the shop.

And, sure, that was part of it. Since she seemed not to like hanging out in the penthouse all day.

But, admittedly, there was another part to it.

A part that started the second I walked into that fucking apartment of hers and saw how she’d been living for God knew how long.

In a room that was probably the same size as my closet and served as her kitchen, dining, living, and bedroom. We weren’t even going to talk about the size of the bathroom. I wasn’t even sure how she could towel off in there.

It wasn’t just that it was small.

It was fucking depressing.

Old, dated, worn down.

We'd been there to repair the window and get some better security measures in place, but I found myself looking through her clothes. All of which seemed thin and threadbare. Like they'd all been worn and washed so often that they were barely holding on.

I knew she'd been a perpetual student, and likely on a budget. But still. It was fucking sad.

And for reasons I didn't understand, and wasn't letting myself think about, I wanted her to get a taste of something else.

Clothes that felt good, that fit well, that would last.

Shoes that wouldn't hurt her feet.

A day of people rubbing, scrubbing, polishing her, and whatever the fuck else happened in a spa.

With the spa shit partially squared away, I found myself starting to wonder what else I could expose her to.

A nice night out to eat?

A play? Ballet? Something else?

I'd have to research it more.

Right about now, Halle should have been back at the penthouse, getting lunch delivered. Along with some groceries. I never kept much in the place, since I wasn't home that often. But with her being there full time, I figured she might want to make herself something to eat.

I also had some books delivered.

Her own copies of the library books that had been at her apartment. Along with some other shit that went with her previous college majors that I figured she might be into.

It should keep her busy until I finished with work.

Which included yet another trip to Lorenzo's place. I swear I'd never seen his Brownstone as much in the past three years as I had in the previous few days.

We were family, sure, but not as close as he was with, say, Emilio and Brio. Even Cesare and his brothers. Then again, I had to admit that was my doing. I had dinners with my ma. That was about as familial as I got.

“No one is gonna toss a kid at me, are they?” I asked as I walked in.

“Giana and Avery took the kids to go do some sort of indoor playground thing,” Lorenzo said. “Miko,” he greeted him as he followed me in. “How’s Venezia doing?”

“Ornery,” Miko said.

“From what I hear, that tracks,” Lorenzo agreed. “So, we had some guys on these brothers...” he said.

“And?” I asked, hearing an edge in my voice, but only I could know it was dread. Like Lorenzo and his crew had suddenly fixed the problem, and Halle would be going back to her life just as quickly as she’d blown into mine.

I wouldn’t even pretend to expect that anything could continue to progress with us physically—since physical relationships were all I wanted from women—without the tension that came from close quarters.

If she went back to her life, I knew I would never get to feel her under me, to watch her above me, to bend her over my island, to fuck her up against the windows to the city, daring anyone to look out and see us.

“And they aren’t exactly just average guys,” Emilio said. “They’re low-level drug dealers with a connection to the Serbian mafia.”

“Great,” I sighed, shaking my head.

“We’re not too worried about it. We figure if the Serbians were in that hard with the brothers, that they would have come for you themselves when you took out Nicholas. It could be as simple as the Serbians are the suppliers, and the brothers are just one of many dealers. The lowest of the low in the associates kind of world.”

And, technically, no capo or mafia boss would spend their time tracking down the killer of an associate. Our protection extended to Made men only. Which was why Venezia being so severely injured didn't warrant a hit on one of the other brothers. Media and public opinion aside.

"Do you want me to find some men to put on the Serbians?" I asked. "Make sure they're not plotting anything?"

"Think your crew is extended enough," Lorenzo said, shaking his head.

"I can find the men," I assured him.

"I'm gonna put Gavino on it," Lorenzo said. "He's been needing a boot in the ass to get a real crew together. This will give him that opportunity."

And, luckily, I was close enough with Gav that he would give me intel. Possibly even before he gave it to Lorenzo. That was the best way this could go.

Because despite my insistence otherwise, it would be hard to move any more men around. I already had six men working each shift doing protection—two for me, two for Halle, and two for her grandfather. It was fine for the time being. But it would pinch to move more men around. The kick up would be cut significantly enough to make me not want to do it, but I would if I had to.

"Okay. Keep me in the loop on that. Anything else?" I asked.

"I got a visit from Leon last night."

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me," I said.

"He's got some... complaints," Lorenzo said.

"Oh, he's gonna have a lot to complain about now," I snorted.

"No more killing," Lorenzo said.

"Who we killin'?" a voice behind me asked, making me turn to see Brio walking in.

"Fucking nobody," Lorenzo groaned.

“I hope not. No one better be partying without me,” he said, throwing himself into a chair. “What’d I miss?”

“Possible problem with the Serbians. Dissent in the ranks...” Emilio said.

“So... just another Tuesday,” Brio said, shrugging.

“Pretty much,” Lorenzo agreed. “Look. I don’t want any more eyes on us right now. So you can’t take out Leon. If you want to intimidate him or shelf him, go for it. But no killing. And, keep in mind, fucking with him might create even more headaches.”

Nah.

He had to be punished for going over my head.

“Got it. Need anything else from me?” I asked, anxious to get back to the penthouse.

“Nah, that should cover it. Brio, I do need to talk to you,” he said.

“Aight. Hey, that girl you’re hiding,” Brio said, looking at me.

“What about her?”

“She like animals?” he asked.

Emilio and Lorenzo shared a chuckle, clearly in on something that I wasn’t.

“I dunno,” I admitted, and found I suddenly wanted to know.

“She’s gotta, right? Everyone likes animals,” he said, speaking to himself.

“Ah, sure,” I said, shaking my head, and turning to make my way out.

“You gonna put Leon on the shelf?” Miko asked as we got in the car.

“I haven’t decided yet.”

Shelving a Made man was not something to take lightly. It meant cutting them off from everyone else, forbidding others

to talk to them, and absorbing all their jobs and rackets into the rest of the Family, leaving them with no stream of income.

To most of us, it would be a fate worse than death.

Sure, Leon was a royal pain in my ass. And he'd overstepped. But I didn't know if I wanted the headache of putting him on the shelf.

"Well, let me know what you decide. I can put feelers out for anyone from Leon's crew we might want to move up."

He dropped me off at my building ten minutes later, and I could feel this thrumming sensation in my chest as I rode the elevator up to the penthouse.

Anticipation.

That was what it was.

Excitement.

Not to be home, per se, but to be home with Halle.

I nodded at the guards at either side of the door, then unlocked it, and let myself in.

To the sound of some sort of pop music playing from the TV.

And Halle dancing around in the kitchen.

Wearing nothing but another one of my tees that she must have snagged for herself since I hadn't gotten her any at the store. Maybe not my brightest idea. But as I watched her tits bounce around under her shirt as she danced around, I stood by my declaration that she didn't need any bras.

She didn't hear me coming in as she scooped something she'd chopped up into a pan.

I didn't stop to think.

To be rational about it.

I just walked over there, sinking my hands into her hip, turning her around to face me, then catching her gasp of surprise with my lips.

There was a second of stunned stillness before she melted into me, her hands grabbing my forearms, then sliding upward until they wrapped around the back of my neck as I pushed her back against the counter as my lips caressed again and again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Halle

It was getting late.

I wasn't anyone's gourmet cook, but I was too hungry to wait around for Cosimo to remember to order dinner. So I figured I would throw some food together for myself since he'd had groceries delivered.

Not wanting to get anything on my obnoxiously expensive new wardrobe, I opted to steal another of his shirts to cook in.

I'd been having the first kind of carefree moment, dancing around the kitchen as I prepped the food, when hands suddenly reached out, grabbing me, and turning me.

My stomach plummeted.

But not in fear.

Because locked up in Cosimo's penthouse was probably the safest I had ever been in my life.

It was anticipation that had my stomach dropping, that had my pulse quickening, that had little sparks sizzling across my skin even before Cosimo's lips crashed down on mine.

I'd be lying if I said that my mind had been completely consumed with thoughts of him since I'd been shuffled in the back of a car, and driven back to the penthouse.

There was no denying that my desire had been satiated in that dressing room, and I would normally be good without another encounter for at least a few days, even weeks when I was busy. But it seemed like I couldn't think of anything but this man's hands and lips on me, about what it would feel like to have him inside of me.

So all alone in the penthouse, my desire had been gasoline, just waiting for a spark, and the second his lips and hands were on me, I went up in flames.

His teeth nipped my lower lip, dragging a whimper out of me as his hips pinned mine to the island, his cock pressing into my belly—hard, insistent, and promising an end to that aching emptiness inside.

That rumbling sound escaped him as my leg slid up his thigh, then hooked around his waist, opening me up to him.

His hips shifted, and his cock pressed against my cleft, making a moan escape me. Loud and shameless, since this time, no one could hear.

Sure, there were men outside of the door.

But the music was still thumping.

We were in our own private little world.

Cosimo's hips ground into me as his lips went to my neck, creating more little fires.

My hands were greedy, pulling at his jacket until it fell, forgotten, to the floor. Then moving to the center of his chest, fingers clumsy on his buttons, but encouraged with each inch of skin being exposed to me.

I yanked the material out of his slacks to finish undoing his buttons, then drew the material down and off of him.

I knew he would be fit under all those fancy suits of his. I'd felt the hard lines of his body against mine. But my imagination had fallen woefully short of the reality. Clearly, during the long hours he was gone from home each day, he fit in some serious workouts. Because he had a strong chest and arms, the indents of a six-pack, and the deep cuts of an Adonis belt that disappeared into the waistband of his slacks.

My fingers moved out, tracing over his heated skin, feeling his muscles tense under my touch, something that only managed to silently spur me on.

When my gaze lifted, I found his head lowered, his molten eyes on me, full of a wicked sort of promise that had my sex clenching hard.

My fingers traced across the waistband of his pants, then slid down, hands working his belt free. Followed by his button and zipper.

Then his pants were sliding to the floor, leaving him in nothing but his black boxer briefs, the hard line of his cock pressing against the material.

With one of those sexy growls of his, he reached down, grabbing the hem of my tee, yanking it up, then whipping it off.

Finished, he sucked in a deep breath as his gaze moved over me. It didn't seem to matter that this wasn't the first or even second time he'd seen me like this. I swear he looked at me with wonder, like he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

His hand raised, fingers teasing down my side, then hooking my panties and drawing them down.

A shiver of anticipation coursed through me as they slid down my thighs and fell to the floor.

Cosimo followed them down, spreading my thighs, and sliding his tongue up my cleft, finding and relentlessly teasing my clit.

My hand slammed down on his head, holding him against me as he worked me, feeling myself driven up faster than seemed possible.

My thighs felt shaky and my back arched as my hips rocked against him.

But just as the waves were going to crash through me, he suddenly stood, dragging a pained *No* out of me.

The smirk on his lips then told me that was exactly what he wanted before his lips claimed mine again.

It was hard and hungry at first, but as I melted into him, as my arms went around him, and our bodies pressed tight, it became something else, something different, yet no less heated.

My whole body seemed to tingle at the strange new sensation that was passing back and forth between us. Something deeper than desire. Something I couldn't even wrap my head around, but I knew I wanted more of it.

Then just as suddenly as the kiss started, it stopped, Cosimo jerking almost violently away.

My eyelids fluttered open, watching him through hazy eyes, seeing his brows drawn together. Like he was confused. Like something didn't make sense.

Not, it seemed, as swept up in those warm, gooey sensations as I had been.

He reached for me again, but with a sort of violent desire that I shouldn't have found appealing, but my sex ached in response as he whipped me around, then pushed me forward over the island.

The cold countertop against my heated skin sent a shiver through me as Cosimo's hand grabbed my ass cheek and squeezed.

I heard the crinkle of the condom foil before he was moving in behind me, his hardness teasing up and down my cleft until I was writhing against him, until I was whimpering for more.

His hand grabbed my hip.

Then he was slamming inside of me.

Hard.

Deep.

Claiming each inch of me.

A ragged moan escaped me as my walls tightened around him.

There was no teasing.

No hesitation.

His hands held my hips, using them to slam me back into him as he thrust forward.

“Feel how good you’re taking me?” he said as he fucked me. Hard. Fast. *Deep*.

I tried to press up onto my forearms, but Cosimo’s hand left my hip to grab the back of my neck, keeping me pinned to the counter as he fucked me.

“That’s it,” he groaned as my walls got tighter and tighter, as my moans grew ragged with my need for release. “Come all over my cock,” he demanded.

And then I was, crying out as the waves tore through me, crashing over and over as he fucked me through it, dragging it out until there was nothing left, before slamming deep and coming with a curse.

I was still trying to slow my breathing when I felt him slide out of me.

I thought nothing of it.

Not when I heard the door to the garbage open and close, or even when I heard the shuffling sounds of his clothes.

It was only when I heard his footsteps moving purposefully away that I stiffened.

My eyes shot open just in time to see him making his way upstairs.

Not once did he look back at me.

The fire doused, goosebumps chased me as I stood, feeling a little unsteady and detached from my body as I found my tee,

and quickly pulled it back on, suddenly needing to be covered.

I grabbed my panties, but didn't waste a minute trying to put them on.

I just rushed to my room, leaving the half-prepped dinner spread all over the counter as I closed and locked my door, then slid slowly to the floor, trying to figure out what the hell had just happened.

I mean, yeah, sex.

But now that the haze of desire was gone, I had to admit that it felt really, I don't know, detached.

Things had gone from passionate and personal to purely primal in the span of moments.

Then, when the act was done, he just... stormed off. Without a word.

I'd never really felt used before, but there was no denying that was how I felt as I sat there.

It didn't matter that I'd gotten off too.

It still felt like something was off.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to push those thoughts aside.

It was probably just because I usually had sex within the confines of a relationship. No matter how hard the sex was, it was intimate because of the nature of our relationship. I never felt weird or alone or *used* if a partner walked away afterward.

But Cosimo's cold dismissal left me feeling almost emotional.

Okay, not even almost, I realized as tears pricked my eyes.

I picked myself up off of the floor, walking into the bathroom, and turning on the tap for the shower, then stood in front of the mirror, staring at myself as it warmed up.

I needed to get a grip.

I mean, really, if I was expecting warm and fuzzy anything from Cosimo Costa, it was my own fault I was feeling this way.

Nothing about that man implied he would be the kind to cuddle and kiss your forehead after sex.

He probably did this to all the women he fucked.

Finished, then got the hell out of there.

But with me, I was in his house. He couldn't just leave. So he'd gone upstairs.

This was why I'd been trying to tell myself how terrible an idea sleeping with him would be.

We were trapped together.

It would be awkward.

Well, maybe not if I just... didn't interact with him.

It felt childish to be concocting a plan to never run into Cosimo while I was staying in his house.

But it felt like the only way I could get through this without feeling really weird about not only what happened, but how I felt afterward.

I showered until my skin was bright red and the water finally ran cold before getting dressed and climbing back into bed.

I didn't sleep.

Not for a long time.

In fact, not until I heard Cosimo stirring again. When I checked the clock, it said it was half after five in the morning.

He was likely going to hit the gym before he got to work.

Which meant I would then have the whole day in the apartment before I needed to get back into my room.

I dozed on and off until the knocking at the door finally roused me from bed.

As usual, I found my breakfast waiting for me, as well as a bag of books.

I hated being grateful to him for them, but I brought the books to my room, placing them on my nightstand along with

a flashlight I found in a drawer, knowing I would be able to read them for the long hours between when Cosimo came home and when he went to bed.

I even prepared freaking *snacks* to keep in the room with me.

The logical part of my brain was cursing me for being a coward.

But even after some sleep, I felt raw about the whole thing.

It wasn't until I went back into my room, closing and locking the door, then turning out the lights, that I admitted to myself what was going on.

Some part of me, whether it made a single bit of damn sense or not, was starting to like Cosimo.

Because a man couldn't be all bad if he was remembering to send food and dropping thousands of dollars on my clothes and keeping not only me but my grandfather safe.

I shot up in the bed at that thought, realizing there would be no way for me to visit or even call my grandfather if I was avoiding Cosimo.

I tried to remind myself he was in the best place for him. But I couldn't shake the guilt even as the way my heart flew into my throat when I heard Cosimo come home reminded me that I was doing what was best for myself. At least for the time being.

Maybe in the morning, I could ask one of the guards if they could take me to see my grandfather. Or, at the very least, let me borrow their phones to call him to chat. He wouldn't mind that. He would think I was doing right by the shop by not closing it to come and visit him. His workaholic nature played out in my favor this once.

I sat there, damn near holding my breath as I heard Cosimo moving around the apartment, mostly focusing in the kitchen, but then heading upstairs, only to come right down again.

His footsteps came closer to my room, and I swear my heart seized in my chest as they stopped outside of my door,

pausing, listening.

Hearing nothing, he did eventually move away.

I heard him speaking periodically throughout the evening, talking to the guards, or more often, on his phone. Before, finally, he made his way upstairs.

I could hear the water in the pipes as he took a shower. I wasn't proud to admit this, but my traitorous imagination pictured him in there, the water running down those indents of his muscles, the soap bubbles slipping down his body. And maybe he would reach down, grabbing his cock...

No.

Nope.

I wasn't letting my mind go there.

My stupid libido was the reason I was in this mess.

All I had to do was push him away in that dressing room when he reached for me, and none of this would be happening. But no, I had to find it hot, and allowed it to happen.

Grumbling, I pulled the blankets over my head, and went ahead and didn't sleep. Not for hours.

But, eventually, boredom won out, and I drifted away.

It was the front door closing that woke me up the next morning.

I wouldn't let myself immediately go out, though, worried that he might circle back. It wasn't until half an hour passed that I went out into the kitchen, finding coffee waiting for me.

When I went into the fridge to get some cream, I saw a container that hadn't been there the night before.

Pulling it out, I found steak, mashed potatoes, and asparagus sitting there.

He'd ordered me dinner.

Then put it away when I hadn't come out.

Damn him for being thoughtful.

Though, I tried to tell myself, it was a sad state of the world when remembering to feed someone was considered ‘thoughtful.’

Coffee in hand, I made my way upstairs, planning to steal yet another shirt to wear, though I would be pairing it with the five-hundred-dollar jeans that had been included with all the other clothing. The shirts all felt too nice to just be wearing while bumming around the house.

I tried to brace myself for the smell of him all around his closet, but it still felt like a kick right to my libido as I moved inside and smelled that spicy scent that was all his own.

I stole three shirts, wondering what the hell he did about laundry, because even with his impressive clothing collection, he would run out of t-shirts for me to borrow eventually.

It wasn’t until I was on my way out of his closet that something caught my eye.

Well, not something.

A whole *stack* of somethings.

Little rectangular boxes.

Curious, I made my way over, finding not one or two, but eight smart phone boxes just sitting there.

I knew enough about criminals to know they used a lot of burner phones. But they were always depicted as those cheap ones you could buy and put minutes on and stuff like that. Not actual thousand-plus-dollar smartphones.

I fought with my conscience for all of ten seconds before I grabbed a box and took it downstairs with me.

Obviously, they weren’t hooked up to any kind of service, but after doing some fiddling, I managed to get it hooked up to a phone number via my email service, and was able to call the hospital, chatting with my grandfather for upward of an hour, finding myself glad that he was finally starting to sound a little better, more like himself. Hell, maybe even *better* than he had been before, since he was getting treatment for those issues he didn’t even know he was dealing with.

I managed to get to talk to the doctor as well, feeling my heart swell a little as I was told he would be able to move to the step-down facility in another three or so days, depending on how well he continued to do.

It wasn't until I hung up that I realized that him being moved would mean I was going to have to talk to Cosimo.

I would get there.

I *had* to get there.

I just needed another day or two to really put the whole situation in its place, to stop feeling so raw and exposed about it.

Then everything was going to be fine.

Because, Lord knew, Cosimo wasn't going to be making a big deal about us having had sex.

Or so I thought.

Until two nights later.

When my locked door flew open.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Cosimo

“Cos, you listening?” Gav asked, voice raised enough to make me think he’d already asked me something else, and I hadn’t responded.

Because, no. No, I hadn’t been listening.

I couldn’t seem to make my mind concentrate on anything, actually.

Or, more precisely, anything other than Halle.

And why she’d boarded herself up in her room every night.

Clearly, she was out during the day. The guards said they’d seen and heard her. She ate the breakfast and lunch delivered. She even ate the dinner I ordered the night before then put away when she hadn’t come out to eat it.

The urge I had to go home early was strong. And that fact was precisely why I couldn’t do it.

I didn’t know what the hell was wrong with me.

I had no frame of reference for this shit.

“No,” I admitted, exhaling hard, and pulling my cup of coffee closer across Lorenzo’s dining room table. He was out, so we’d started without him.

Gav’s brow lifted at that, but he said nothing about it. “I said that the Serbian crew, from what I can tell, doesn’t give a fuck about these brothers. The brothers, though, seem desperate to get in their good graces. Trying to do errands and shit for them. It’s embarrassing, honestly.”

“And?” I asked, sensing he had something else to say.

Gav paused as the sound of the front door opened, and footsteps moved in.

“I wonder how happy the Serbians would be if they found out these guys who want in their organization are fucking with the Family,” Gav said.

It was true we didn’t have anything to do with that particular crew. No love nor animosity. Just indifference.

But it was impossible to know what their feelings about us were. Did they fear and respect us? Did they want to take what was rightfully ours?

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

“I’m thinking there is someone who does know the Serbians,” Gav said.

“The problem being that Renzo isn’t going to help us until I agree to his terms,” Lorenzo said, moving into the dining room.

It wasn’t until I saw a stroller that I realized he’d been out with Giana.

“We aren’t going to force one of our women to marry him, for fuck’s sake,” Gav said.

“Renzo Lombardi?” another voice asked, making both Gav and I turn to find Lore standing there.

Lore was the youngest of her family and the only daughter. Her older brothers included both Cesare and Gavino himself.

“Christ,” Gav hissed. “You’re not supposed to be listening to this,” he said.

“I was just walking in,” she said, gaze skittering away. “Renzo Lombardi wants to marry one of us?” she asked.

Lore looked a lot like her late mom. Short and slight, with long, shiny black hair, and a round face with big dark blue eyes like Gav had.

I couldn’t remember shit like everyone’s age, not in a family this big, but I would say she was maybe twenty? Twenty-one, tops. A baby still. Her style was still that of a girl, too. Baggy jeans and an oversized hoodie. Almost like she was hiding herself away. Come to think of it, anytime I’d been around Lore, she’d been hiding away, trying to hold up the walls.

“It’s not going to happen,” Gav said, shaking his head.

“Why?” Lore asked.

“Because we aren’t going to force one of our women to marry a fucking Lombardi,” Gavino said, rolling his eyes at his baby sister.

“Not force, no,” she said, shaking her head.

“No one would willingly marry one of those fucks,” Gav said.

None of us knew the Lombardis well. Since Lorenzo had taken over for his father, their Family and ours hadn’t been exactly enemies, but we sure as fuck hadn’t gotten along. Even at the best of times, we’d been close to all-out war with them.

But what we did know was that they were less, I don’t know, refined than the rest of us. Closer to a street crew than an organized crime Family. Not the kind of men our women would want to be with.

“I will,” Lore said, making everyone’s head whip in her direction.

“You will what?” Giana asked, thinking she’d misheard her.

“I’ll, ah, I’ll marry Renzo,” she said, gaze on her feet as she tucked her hair behind her ear.

“The fuck you will,” Gav exploded, popping up out of his chair.

“We’re not going to let you do that, Lore,” Lorenzo said, seeming as thrown off as the rest of us were.

“I’m an adult,” she said, voice smaller, but her head had lifted, chin jerked up stubbornly.

Of all the things to dig her feet in about, marrying a fucking Lombardi was weird as fuck.

“Alright, well, this seems like... I don’t want to be a fucking part of it,” I said, getting out of my chair, and moving toward the hall. “Have fun with your dysfunction,” I added, making my way out the front door as everyone’s voices seemed to raise.

I wasn’t surprised that by the time Miko brought the car around, Cesare and his other three brothers were rushing inside the townhouse.

I almost felt bad for the kid.

But I had my own shit to deal with.

I’d decided not to fully put Leon on the shelf, but I had punished him by absorbing a third of his crew back into the rest of my crew. Which, of course, came with its own headaches.

It didn’t help that I couldn’t fucking keep my head on work as I was trying to sort out all this shit.

All I could think about was Halle rushing around my place, trying to get everything she might need to hide away with and avoid me.

“You alright, Boss?” Miko asked when we left a meeting later that evening.”

“Need some sleep,” I said, leaning my head back against the rest.

Admittedly, I hadn’t been sleeping well.

And when I did sleep, my dreams were full of having Halle under and over me, her moans in my ear as I was buried deep inside her.

“Yeah, you’ve been looking rough,” he said. “Is Halle nocturnal or something?” he asked.

“No. She... goes to bed early,” I said.

“Surprised she hasn’t been to visit her grandfather. Or bitched about getting back to work.”

“She calls about her grandfather,” I said.

I’d noticed the phone box in the trash the day she’d taken it.

And then I got to think about her in my room when I wasn’t around. Impractical as it was, I kept picturing her sneaking into my tub, the bubbles playing peekaboo with her tits, her knees lifting up out of the water, resting on each side of the tub as her hand slid down between her thighs...

“Need anything else from me tonight?” Miko asked as he idled out front of my building.

“No. Go home. Take the night off,” I said.

As I rode up, I found myself hoping that the standoff was over, that she would just be in the apartment, waiting to have dinner, maybe even pissed at me for coming home so late and making her wait to eat.

“Anything to report?” I asked the guards at the door.

“Nah, been quiet,” one of them said.

Quiet.

Not a good sign.

I stepped inside, and wasn’t surprised to find the common area empty, and that the lights had even been dimmed.

Despite myself, I walked halfway to her room before forcing myself to turn around, and go to the bar instead, pouring myself a drink.

It did nothing to cut the tension growing inside me.

I ordered dinner.

I waited for it.

I accepted it from the guards.

Then I waited.

And waited.

But I couldn't bring myself to eat alone again.

Why? That was the question, wasn't it? Because I'd eaten alone most nights my entire adult life.

The thing was... I didn't want to.

I wanted to share a meal with her.

I wanted to talk to her.

To fucking *see* her.

Tossing back another drink, I found whatever control I had snapping as I stormed down the hallway toward her room, ramming my shoulder into it, and watching it swing open and smack against the wall.

And there she was.

Standing in the bathroom with the door open. Wearing nothing but a towel, her wet hair pulled up in a claw clip.

The sight of her was like a kick to the gut.

I felt breathless with the intensity of it.

"Get out," she said, but there wasn't any force behind the words. If anything, she felt as breathless as I felt.

"Enough of this shit," I snapped as I stormed across the bedroom, crossing it in just a few strides, and standing in the bright bathroom with her.

"I don't want to see you right now," she said, but her gaze was on my chest.

"Tough shit," I shot back. "I want to see you."

"You can't have everything you want," she said, gaze still lowered.

“The hell I can’t,” I said, stepping forward, my hand grabbing the back of her neck, and hauling her against my body.

Her breath caught, but she didn’t even tense, didn’t try to pull away.

My lips claimed hers, harder than I’d intended, but the second she melted into me, the anger that had been simmering in my system just fell away. In its place was an aching sort of need that had my hands tugging at the tuck of her towel until the material fell to her feet.

A tremble moved through her as my hands traced down her spine, then sank into her ass, dragging her more tightly against me, my cock pressing against her.

My lips muffled a soft moan that escaped her as my hand slid down, slipping between her thighs.

I’d barely started kissing her.

But she was already drenched for me.

My fingers traced up her pussy, finding her clit, and working it relentlessly.

Until she was moaning.

Until her muscles were taut.

Until her hands were fumbling with my buttons and zipper, then reaching inside to free my cock.

A growl escaped me as she wrapped her hand around me, stroking me as my fingers slipped inside of her, feeling her tight, wet walls tighten around them.

My hips rocked into her hand, my balls aching with the need for more.

“Get on your knees for me,” I demanded, voice rough with my need, but tone softer than I would have thought possible.

Her gaze lifted to mine, heat undeniable there.

Then... she lowered herself down.

Her hands shifted to the base of my cock before she opened her mouth, and took me in, starting to work me.

“Fuck,” I groaned, grabbing the back of her head and guiding her faster, deeper, my hips rocking into her mouth.

On a low growl, I pulled the clip out, then grabbed hold of her hair, pulling her up by it, and sealing my lips over hers.

My fingers untangled from her hair, going down to sink into her ass, pulling her up and off her feet. I waited for her legs to hook fully around me before turning and walking back into her bedroom, pressing her down onto the mattress.

I grabbed the condom out of my wallet before stripping off the rest of my clothes, and coming over her, my lips once again on hers as her soft body met my hard lines.

And, fuck, did she feel good when her arms slipped around my shoulders, and her legs wrapped around my hips.

I shifted my hips, letting my cock press against her pussy. Her back arched and her lips broke from mine in a moan as I ground down against her.

That was all the encouragement she needed.

Her legs hooked me more tightly, and her hips writhed against me, driving herself up.

But I wasn't going to let her come.

Not until my cock was buried inside her.

I pulled away, feeling my lips twitch at her objection. It wasn't long, though, before she was whimpering and writhing again as my lips teased over her breast, then sucking her nipple into my mouth.

I worked her, lips, tongue, and teeth, until her whimpers were almost cries before moving across her chest to continue the torment.

It wasn't until her hands were grabbing my head, and pushing downward that I kissed down her stomach, then teasing my tongue up her pussy to work her clit relentlessly as

her thighs crushed into the sides of my head, her hands gripped my head, and her hips writhed up into me.

I slipped my fingers inside her, thrusting as I worked her, feeling her walls start to tighten, and pulling roughly away.

“No,” she whimpered, her breath coming hard and fast.

“If you want to come, you have to come around my cock,” I told her, teeth nipping her earlobe.

“Yes,” she said, reaching for my hips.

“Yes, what, baby?” I asked, my tongue tracing up the shell of her ear.

“Yes, please,” she said, beyond pride.

“No,” I said, pushing back onto my knees as I reached for the condom, ripping it open, but letting her gaze move over me, working down my stomach to where I was fisting and stroking my cock. “Tell me you want to come around my cock,” I instructed her, watching her chest rise and fall with her rapid breath. “Say it,” I said, stroking a little faster, then slipping on the protection. “Or you don’t get it,” I added.

Sucking in a deep breath, she forced her gaze back upward. Then, in a voice that was so small I almost couldn’t hear it, she gave me what I wanted. “I want to come around your cock,” she whispered.

“Good girl,” I said, grabbing her legs, and yanking her up onto my thighs, then surging inside her, watching as her back arched and her lips parted while I filled her, as her walls stretched around me.

And, fuck, did she feel good.

“Fuck,” I groaned, pausing when I was settled to the hilt, trying to find some self-control.

I gave up on that, though.

There was no time for making this last, for turning it into an all-night thing. Not when I’d been needing her for days.

I grabbed her legs, pulling them up to rest on my shoulder as I started to fuck her.

Fast.

Unrelenting.

Her fingers dug into my thighs as she moaned, as she made little rocking motions with her hips as I fucked her.

Her pussy was a fucking vice grip as she got closer and closer, her moans filling the room.

“There you go,” I ground out, feeling her get close. “Let me feel you squeeze my cock.”

Then, like she’d been waiting for permission the whole time, her pussy was spasming around me as she came.

Her hand left my thigh, grabbing hold of my hand as she cried out her release.

I felt it again then.

Whatever unfamiliar, overwhelming sensation I’d felt the last time we’d fucked in the kitchen. The same feeling that had me pulling away, turning her, trying to put some distance between us, not wanting to look her in her face as she came, because something inside me said that it was dangerous, that there was something to fear here.

My hand pulled from hers, and I was grabbing her again, rolling her onto her stomach, then lifting her hips up toward me, so I could surge inside of her again, but with the disconnect something inside of me said I needed.

“Fuck, that’s a good girl,” I groaned as she came down from one orgasm, and started climbing toward another.

I used her hips to slam her back into me as I thrust hard and deep, each move making the headboard knock loudly against the wall, a sound that was quickly drowned out by her moaning as she got close again, her pussy tightening, then clenching my cock again and again as she came, this time taking me with her.

And I swear to fuck, I saw white as I slammed deep into her.

But just as intense, was that fucking strange sensation in my chest again.

Apparently, just not looking her in the face wasn't good enough.

That was the sobering thought that had me pulling away from her almost immediately.

I climbed off the bed to toss the condom in the bathroom before yanking my pants back up, then rushing right the fuck out of there, heading up to my own room to try to figure out what the fuck was going on with me.

Unfortunately, hours later, I had no new answers.

Just the understanding that being close to Halle was doing something to me, was giving her some sort of, I don't know, power over me.

And that? That was fucking unacceptable.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Halle

I wanted to cry.

I wouldn't let myself, because crying over that asshole was just never going to sit right with me.

But, God, I wanted to.

I had to press the heels of my hands hard into my eyes to fight off the tears that were burning there.

It was stupid.

I knew that.

We were both two grown, consenting adults.

And sex was just sex.

The problem was, I just couldn't seem to compartmentalize it like that. Sex meant something to me. There was a connection there that I couldn't deny. One that Cosimo clearly didn't feel toward me.

So what was the solution then?

I climbed off the bed, making my way to the bathroom, and finding the fresh tee I'd been about to put on when he'd broken in.

The solution, I knew, was to get the hell out of here.

I understood all too well how much of a threat there still was. For me. And my grandfather. But I couldn't stay here forever anyway.

I could, I don't know, call Lauren. Ask to borrow money. I knew she would give it to me. As much as my pride would hurt to have to take it from her.

With that, I could hire private security.

For myself and my grandfather.

It wasn't a permanent solution.

But maybe if I invested in cameras for the shop and my home, I could get proof that the brothers were stalking me, and make the police do something about it.

It wasn't a great plan.

Hell, it likely wasn't even a good one.

But it was something.

A plan of action.

A way of getting the hell away from Cosimo Costa, and reclaiming my damn life.

Looking at myself, I gave my reflection a nod.

It was a plan.

I didn't sleep that night, worrying myself to a stomachache about making my escape.

I cursed these stupid new buildings that didn't have fire escapes anymore. Stupid innovation and their damn fireproof stairwells and their positive pressure and fire doors.

Because, of course, the stairwell was located out in the hall.

Beyond the guards.

I heard Cosimo moving around upstairs at around six, going through his morning routine, getting dressed, making coffee, talking to Miko who he'd let in like he'd been expecting him.

I waited until the voices disappeared.

Then added another half an hour for good measure before grabbing myself a cup of coffee, knowing I would need it after not getting any sleep.

Then I took myself back into my room, carefully choosing an outfit, doing my hair, then slipping into my heels. I tucked my stolen phone into my pocket, even though it would likely be useless unless I went somewhere with access to wifi.

Then, with a lot more confidence than I felt, I strode through the apartment, and out the door.

The guards jumped and straightened, both sharing a worried look.

“What do you think you're doing?” one of them asked.

“Leaving,” I said, taking steps toward the elevator, only to have my arm snagged by one of them.

I carefully lowered my gaze to that hand, then just as slowly back to his face.

“I don't think Cosimo would like you putting your hands on me,” I said in a ‘cold, hard, bitch’ tone I'd heard Lauren need to adopt from time to time when someone was disrespecting her.

When I say he dropped my arm fast, you would have sworn I'd burned him.

“I'm leaving. You can follow if you want to, but I'm leaving,” I said, hitting the button for the elevator.

I wasn't surprised when they joined me, though I was a bit disappointed. I kind of hoped they would just accept that I was a free woman, allowed to come and go if she wanted to.

Apparently, that was not the case.

But it was fine.

I had a plan.

One I was crossing my fingers would work.

I strode down the street, feeling one of them beside me, and the other behind.

I had to admit that it felt good just to be outside, to be moving, to feel the damn sun on my face. I don't think I'd ever been stuck inside for so long before.

"I need to go in here," I declared as I turned into the pharmacy.

I'd been there a million times before. I knew it like the back of my hand.

I was counting on their discomfort as I led them confidently down the feminine care aisle, and I wasn't exactly disappointed by how tense they seemed as I grabbed a box of tampons off the shelf, then opened it, and pulled one out.

"I have to run to the bathroom," I told them, waving the tampon at one of them while pushing the box into the other one's hands.

Then I made a beeline for the bathroom. Much like a woman in need of a tampon would.

The thing was, the ladies room was down a hallway that opened up at the other end as well. So I just kept walking, tossing the tampon into the trash, then emerging behind my guards who were so busy feeling uncomfortable about holding a box of tampons that they weren't scanning the store like they might normally be.

I just... walked right out.

Back into the crush of people.

I had no money, so I couldn't escape into a cab or the subway like I could if I did. But I'd chosen the most understated outfit I could when I'd chosen what I was going to wear.

I reached up, twisting my hair into the claw clip I'd had hanging off the bottom of my sweater, hoping that they

wouldn't be smart enough to spot the difference in a crowd as I picked up the pace.

I wasn't that far from Lauren's place.

And her doorman knew me.

He would let me in.

Lauren wouldn't be home, but that was okay.

I could see if I remembered her number to call her, ask her to unlock the door with her phone app.

If I couldn't, well, I could just hang there until she got home from work. Whenever that was.

Waiting on Lauren was leaps and bounds better than trying to avoid Cosimo and the strange, conflicting feelings I had toward him.

I wouldn't let myself look back, even if everything in me wanted to see if they were behind me, if they were gaining on me.

I kept my focus on the street, on the next block I needed to turn onto, then her brick building ahead of me.

"Miss Whitlock," the doorman greeted me with a warm smile as he pulled open the door for me, seemingly oblivious to the panic that was still twisting in my stomach, sure someone was going to reach out and grab me at any moment.

Cosimo's men.

The brothers.

Someone.

But, just like that, I was inside Lauren's building.

Safe.

I rode the elevator and walked down the hall toward her apartment, knocking, but hearing nothing. I hadn't been expecting to.

I leaned back against her door, pulling out my phone, and bringing up the wifi to sign into hers, knowing the password by heart.

I had no luck remembering her number.

But I did remember that she was on my socials, and that I could download the app, sign in, and message her on there.

Laur, please unlock your apartment door. I need to stay with you for a bit.

She was busy at work, always. I never knew her to respond to me except on her lunch or dinner breaks. And even then, rarely.

So I was shocked when I saw the dot-dot-dot appear next to her picture almost as soon as I'd messaged her.

Halle! Jesus Christ! I've been worried sick. I've been texting and calling!

There was a beep and click of her door, and I rushed inside before it could lock again.

I haven't had my phone.

Then I shot her my new number.

It was all of five seconds before my phone was ringing in my hand.

"Hey," I said, taking a deep breath. "Thanks for letting me in," I said, finding tears pricking my eyes. Maybe I hadn't been too far off with the tampon stunt, if I was suddenly so emotional over everything.

"Halle, what the hell is going on?" she hissed, voice low, like she didn't want anyone to hear.

"It's a long story," I admitted.

“I need to hear it. The shop has been closed. For *days*. I was about to file a Missing Persons report.”

“Someone attacked my grandfather,” I told her. “He’s been in the hospital for a while,” I added.

“What?” she snapped, louder now, not caring what anyone thought. “What do you mean?”

“Someone came into the shop, knocked him out, then beat the hell out of him. Then,” I went on, wanting to get it all out at once, “one night, they broke into my apartment and attacked me.”

“Holy shit. Oh, my God. Are you okay?” she asked, voice tight.

“Yeah. I was just a little banged up. But... but I couldn’t stay there anymore. Laur, it was the brothers.”

“What brothers?”

“The ones of the guy who was killed,” I said. “The one I’d been on jury duty for. It was his brothers.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I’d deadlocked the jury. They... they must have figured it out, and were mad that their brother’s killer walked free because of me.”

“Whoa. Okay. Alright. Did you go to the police?”

“I did about my grandfather.”

“But not about you?” she asked, confused.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know... I thought they would think I was crazy for pointing the finger at them.”

“Where have you been then?” she asked.

“I don’t know if I should tell you this part,” I admitted.

“Well, now you have to,” she said.

“I, ah, I went to him.”

“To whom?”

“Cosimo Costa,” I said.

“*What?*” she hissed.

“I figured, and I admit I probably wasn’t thinking too clearly at the time. I’d been terrified. But I figured that he would have to protect me if he heard that I was the reason he was a free man.”

“And?”

“And I was right,” I admitted. “My grandfather and I have been under constant guard.”

“Okay,” she said, trying to process things. “But why haven’t you been in touch with me? Let me know what’s going on?”

“I didn’t have my phone. I left my apartment in a rush. And I haven’t been back.”

“Where have you been then?” she asked. “Halle?” she added to my silence. “Have you been *living with* that delicious piece of man meat?” she asked.

“I, yeah, yes.”

“Oh, my God. It’s like a smutty book. What’s his place like?”

“A penthouse that likely costs more money than I will ever see in ten lifetimes.”

“What happened?” she asked, suddenly serious, likely picking up on something in my tone.

“Nothing. I just... I was starting to feel like a prisoner. And I needed to leave. So I kind of... tricked my guards and ran off.”

“Okay, we are going to circle back to that, because, quite frankly, it sounds like an action movie. But, nope. You’re not fooling me. This isn’t your ‘I was starting to feel like a prisoner’ voice. Something else is up.”

“How would you know? I’ve never had to use my ‘I was starting to feel like a prisoner’ voice before.”

“Because I know you. And I know when you sound like you’re going to cry. Which you do. So, spill. I mean, you can do it now,” she said when I hesitated. “Or you can do it over margaritas later. But we both know margs make you even more emotional. You’ll be a blubbering mess. Might as well tell me now, when you have at least the hope of not sobbing about it.”

She was right about that.

“Things just got... complicated.”

“Complicated,” she repeated, clicking her tongue as I heard her heels click across the floor, then silence. Like she’d been walking somewhere for privacy before bursting out, “You fucked the mafia guy, didn’t you?”

My eyes squeezed shut as I admitted, “Yes.”

“Oh, my God. I mean, damn, good for you. That man just oozes sex. How was it?”

How did I explain this part?

Amazing.

Yet terrible.

“It was the best sex I think I’ve ever had,” I admitted.

“Of course it was,” Lauren agreed. “But?” she asked, sensing that one existed.

“But... he was really cold about it both times,” I told her.

“I... I guess that tracks. I mean, I can’t imagine mafia guys are all touchy-feely. He’s probably never even had a woman stay over before. Their world seems kind of cold and hard.”

That was true.

I’d told myself that more than a few times.

But knowing that didn’t really make me feel any better about it. It didn’t ease the sting of something that felt a hell of a lot like rejection.

“Okay, listen. Go into my room. Have a good soak. Use a face mask. Take a nap. Pamper yourself. I will bring home a metric ton of food. We will stuff our faces and talk this shit out, okay?”

God, I loved her.

“Okay,” I agreed, feeling a little lighter already.

I did exactly what she suggested, bathing, pampering, then napping in her guest room.

When I woke up, disoriented from vivid dreams of Cosimo, Lauren still hadn’t made it home, despite it being dark outside already.

I didn’t worry about her.

I mean, this was Lauren. The only person I knew who was more of a workaholic than my grandfather. And Cosimo, for that matter. She was determined to make an amazing life for herself, and that required her to sacrifice a lot of her free time. I couldn’t expect her to put all that aside just because I was crashing with her temporarily.

When six turned to seven, I felt anxiety starting to work its way up my spine.

Could the brothers have figured out that Lauren was, aside from my grandfather, my only close person? That, through her, they could get to me?

No.

I had to stop it.

I was getting too wrapped up in this situation.

I was safe.

Lauren was at work.

We were going to stuff our faces, and sort out my tangled web of emotions regarding Cosimo.

That was what we did.

We worked through things together.

It was stupid of me not to reach out to her sooner.

If I had, I probably wouldn't have needed to concoct a plan to lose my guards, and run away to hide in her apartment.

I went to her wine rack, picking out a cab that we'd both agreed was the best of the best, despite it only being twelve dollars a bottle. I grabbed glasses, and uncorked it, letting it rest.

But when another hour passed, I went ahead and poured myself a glass, sipping it to ease my nerves.

"Finally," I said when I heard a knock at the door.

I made my way across the apartment to open the door and help Lauren with the bags and bags of food she'd likely come home with.

I didn't even think twice about it.

I just slid the lock.

Then pulled the door open.

I didn't realize my mistake until it was too late...

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Cosimo

My ma still lived in the same condo my old man had owned when he was alive.

Why she wanted to stay in the place where she consistently got the shit beat out of her was completely beyond me. Especially since I knew both Silvano and myself had offered to buy her something else, somewhere that didn't remind her of years of unhappiness.

She'd been stubborn about it, though.

She was staying, and that was that.

I had to admit that over the years, she'd completely changed the place. Back when he was alive, my old man refused to let her change shit around there. I'd once woken up to him screaming at her about hanging new curtains.

She'd told him that she just wanted the place to feel more homey.

He'd raged that she might be okay with raising a pussy, but he'd be damned if his son liked that girly shit. And, well, he'd gone off from there into really fucking homophobic territory, ranting and raving until Ma was crying and pulling down the curtains.

Now, though, every goddamn trace of my old man was gone. In their places were things that screamed my mom.

Lots of pinks and florals, too many throw pillows, curtains on the windows. She'd even gutted the kitchen and replaced all the appliances, every light fixture in each room, and the primary bathroom was practically a spa, complete with a towel warmer and a TV.

"Honey!" she called, rushing toward me with outstretched arms. "I'm so glad you could make it," she said, grabbing both of my hands, and giving them a squeeze, very aware that, for the most part, I didn't like being hugged, that I never easily accepted physical contact. She used to try to press it when I was still a kid, until a friend of hers told her that she needed to respect my boundaries.

To be fair, I wouldn't call them my boundaries.

I'd called them the walls my father had forced me to build.

And I'd never really figured out how to break them down myself.

"Food smells great," I told her, offering her the flowers I'd brought.

I hadn't been sure about them. But Miko had talked me into it. Hell, he'd been the one to take the phone out of my hand when I'd been starting to feed my ma an excuse about why I couldn't come for lunch, then reminded me that I was supposed to be trying to make amends. And that my mother was trying to make that happen by feeding me.

"Oh, you remembered!" she said, sniffing the Calla lilies.

Of course I remembered.

It was another argument from my childhood.

Calla lilies on the dining room table. My father coming home in a mood—because he was always in a mood—and zeroing in on them.

“You putting fucking funeral flowers on my dining table?” he’d roared, and I remembered distinctly the way my ma had shrank away from him immediately, knowing what was coming. “The fuck you doing spending my money on fucking flowers anyway?”

At some point, he’d picked up the glass pitcher, and hurled it at the wall, missing Ma by all of six inches.

Every time I’d visited since his death, though, she always had some around.

“Come, sit,” she said, waving at the island, then going to the other side, stirring something on the stove. “How have you been?”

“I’m good, Ma. Just been busy. Trying to put shit to rights,” I added.

“I heard that you’re... protecting a woman,” she said, tone careful as she turned away to look at what was in the oven. I knew she wanted to pry. But she was being careful because she knew how hard it was to get me to talk about, well, fucking anything.

It was just starting to occur to me how fucking sad that was.

“I am,” I confirmed.

“Oh?” she asked, brow raised, but she was pretending only to be partially interested as she wiped down the already clean counter. “What is she like?” she asked.

“Determined. Hardworking. Really dedicated to her family business and to her aging grandfather.”

“That’s nice. Is she pretty?” she asked.

“She’s gorgeous,” I said, watching as her eyes lit up.

I wasn’t stupid.

I saw the way she fawned over the babies and kids in the family. She wanted to be a grandma like all the other moms from her generation. Unfortunately for her, both her sons were cold, detached assholes who had almost no hope of finding spouses and procreating.

Admittedly, I'd never even given it a thought before.

Suddenly, though, I was wondering about it.

If I didn't marry and have kids, what would the next forty years look like? More of this? Working nonstop. Casual sex. Occasionally seeing my family.

That didn't seem like something worth aspiring to.

At least not anymore.

I was going to go ahead and not wonder the reason for the sudden change.

"Really? What's her name?"

"Halle."

"Oh, that's a pretty name. What is her family business?"

"Antiques," I told her.

She asked several more questions about Halle that only made me want to cut this meal short, shirk all my afternoon work responsibilities, and go back to my place to get into bed with her, and watch her ride me.

Just when she was taking the stuffed shells out of the oven, though, the door opened.

And in walked fucking Silvano.

"Hey, Ma, you think about... the fuck is he doing here?" he asked, his cold gaze landing on me.

"Boys, can we not?" Ma asked, sighing hard. "I just want one nice meal with *both* of my boys for a change. Is that too much to ask?"

"No," I said, shaking my head.

"No, Ma," Silvano said, walking over to let her hug him. He was slightly more comfortable with physical contact than I

was, but it was clear he wasn't enjoying it, either.

“Cosimo was just telling me about this lovely woman Halle who is staying with him,” Ma said, making me have to suppress a grumble.

Silvano's smirk said I was going to be ribbed about this relentlessly in the future.

“Remind me,” I said as we all moved to sit at the table. “When's the last time you had a woman in your life, Sil?” I said, getting a dark look from him.

But, just as I hoped, Ma jumped on it.

“You know, he's not wrong, honey. I don't think you have ever brought a woman to my table.”

“He hasn't either,” Silvano said, gesturing toward me.

“Well, no, but there's hope now, it seems,” she said.

I chose not to correct her.

Why, I had no idea.

But the conversation moved quickly from my love life, and the lack of one for Silvano, focusing instead on this shit with Lore and Renzo Lombardi.

“She's still on that?” I asked, shaking my head. “I thought Gav and the other brothers put an end to that.”

To that, Mom's brows pinched.

“I think we need to remember that Lore is a grown woman capable of making her own decisions. And I don't like the idea of the men in this family brow-beating any of the women out of a decision she wants to make.”

“We're not brow-beating anyone, Ma,” Silvano assured her. “She can do whatever she wants. Even if that means marrying a fucking low-life like Renzo Lombardi.”

Honestly, all said and done, it was probably the most civil meal I'd shared with my brother in my life. And Ma seemed to be over the moon about it as she got out the pie she'd baked for dessert, despite this being lunch.

My phone buzzed in my jacket, and I reached for it only because I gave Miko strict instructions that I was not to be bothered for two hours while I was with my ma.

“This better be good,” I said, keeping my voice low, so Ma didn’t hear.

Silvano looked over, brows pinched, likely knowing that I wouldn’t want to be contacted during lunch. Especially since it was the first one since my house arrest.

“Halle is missing,” Miko said, cutting right to the chase.

“What?”

I didn’t realize I’d all but yelled until my ma rushed back into the room, eyes wide, likely thinking she was going to need to break up a fight with the two of us.

“What the *fuck* do you mean she disappeared?”

I was yelling now.

Ma’s hand went to her heart, her eyes round, and Silvano was taking steps forward, ready for action.

“I don’t have the details yet,” Miko said, staying calm even in the face of my anger. “I just got the call. I’m ten minutes from your Ma’s house. I can swing by to get you and meet them.”

“No, Sil will drive me,” I said, looking over to see him nod in agreement. “Where are we meeting?” I asked, getting the address of a fucking pharmacy from him, then hanging up.

“No, no. Go, please,” Ma said, waving us toward the door. “Someone please keep me updated, though,” she demanded.

“Will do. Food was good, Ma,” Silvano was present enough of mind to say.

I didn’t.

I just rushed out the door without a word.

My mind was spinning.

Halle was gone?

Disappeared?

Missing?

What the fuck did that mean?

How the fuck had she even convinced the guards to take her out, when I'd been pretty clear about her staying the fuck in the penthouse.

"You can—" I started when he lucked into a parking spot half a block away from the pharmacy.

"I'm coming," he said, climbing out even as I did.

I normally would have argued.

I couldn't right then.

Because if something happened to Halle, I would call in the entire motherfucking Family to find her.

"What the *fuck*?" I exploded at Tony as soon as I saw him, shoving my hands into his chest for emphasis. "How the fuck did this happen?"

"She... she needed, ah..."

"Tampons," Miko supplied, rolling his eyes. "You can't fucking say tampons? How fucking old are you?"

"She grabbed a box, then she handed it to Joe. And took one out, said she had to... you know... go to the bathroom..."

"And you, what? Didn't keep an eye on the door?" I asked, teeth aching from my jaw clenching so tight.

"The women's bathroom is down its own hall," Joe said. "We couldn't lurk outside of it without other women freaking the fuck out. But she didn't come back out of the hall."

"What the fuck do you mean she didn't come back out?" I ground out.

"Turns out, the hallway opens up at the other end," Joe said, exhaling hard, knowing he'd fucked up.

"Were there people in the store?" Miko asked.

"Yeah. The place was hopping," Tony said.

“So, no way someone dragged her out of there against her will?”

“Nah, I don’t think so,” Joe said, shaking his head.

“So, you think this was all a ruse?” Miko asked.

“Think so,” Joe agreed, nodding. “She came out of the penthouse like a different person today,” he added.

“Different how?” I asked.

“Dunno. I mean, I’ve been with her every day since she moved in,” Joe said, and I didn’t correct him. “She was always just real nice. She came out all cold and calculated today. Tony tried to stop her, grabbed her arm. Not hard,” he clarified. “Just trying to stop her from just walking into the elevator. And she turned, all ice queen, and said you’d be pissed if he put his hands on her.”

She wasn’t wrong about that.

I would break his fucking hands if he put a bruise on her.

And not think twice about it, either.

“Then she said she was leaving, and it was up to us to go with her or not.”

“So you went,” Miko concluded.

“She had her mind made up, man,” Tony said.

“Then, when we got to the store and she picked up the box, I figured it was, you know, an emergency kinda situation,” Joe said.

“Also figured it might be what the mood was about,” Tony added, getting another eye roll out of Miko.

“Anyway, when she didn’t come out in five minutes, we got worried,” Joe said. “Went down the hallway, knocked on the door, called her name. When she didn’t answer, we went in. And she was gone.”

“Fuck,” I hissed, turning away from them, stalking down the street a bit, too antsy to stand still.

Five minutes wasn’t a long time.

But the city was, objectively, small. And crowded. She could have gotten way the fuck out of there in that time.

She could be anywhere.

“Going to her shop,” I said, rushing toward Silvano’s car.

“Right behind you,” Miko said, slapping his hand into Joe’s chest, making him and Tony snap to and follow him.

It was a short drive, but it felt like for-fucking-ever as my heart slammed against my ribcage, my stomach twisting itself into knots.

Why the fuck would she leave?

Not only leave, but leave her guards? Risk her safety?

“What’d you do to her?” Silvano asked, making my head whip over.

Because it was the same question I’d been asking myself.

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

I mean, I’d broken her door down. But that seemed all forgiven when she melted into me, when she’d writhed against me, when she’d moaned, and her pussy spasmed around my cock.

“You’re fucking her.”

It wasn’t a question, but I went ahead and answered anyway. “Yes.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Look, can’t claim I have any more experience with this shit than you do, but I’m closer to the Family these days. I see things.”

“And?”

“And seems like when they’re living with you, and you’re fucking them, shit gets complicated. Feelings-wise.”

“Feelings,” I repeated, the word sounding foreign on my lips.

“Yeah,” Silvano said with a little huff of laughter. “Know your old man fucked you up,” he said. “But you’re not a fucking kid anymore. You don’t gotta act like he trained you to act. Actually, seems like maybe it’d be the ultimate *Fuck you* to him if you stopped acting like he trained you to,” Silvano said, parking the car, then cutting the engine.

I climbed out with my head spinning.

Because, fuck, he was right.

It wasn’t enough that I didn’t abuse women and children like he had. I needed to undo the other shit he’d done to me. The coldness, the detachment. The inability to let anyone get close to me.

My mind played the night before back, trying to see it through Halle’s eyes, something I wasn’t sure I’d ever really attempted to do before.

And there I was.

Dropping her hand.

Turning her away to create distance.

Not even letting the sweat dry before climbing off the bed.

Then leaving her alone.

I wouldn’t pretend to know exactly what women wanted, but I’d seen enough of the healthy relationships in my Family to know that the men and women were affectionate with each other. Casual touches. Embracing. Stolen kisses when they thought no one was looking.

And there I’d left Halle.

Fucked.

And... discarded.

Because there was no way she could have known the conflict I’d been feeling inside, the knee-jerk need to get away from it, to detach from it. From *her*. From my growing feelings toward her.

“Fuck,” I hissed as I turned to look at the shop, finding it still dark, still gated.

It was a long shot.

She might have been reckless enough to lose her guards, but I didn't believe she was foolish enough to just open her business, all but putting a Welcome sign up for the brothers to find and attack her. Do vile shit to her.

On a growl, I moved toward the door that led up to the apartments, tearing up at them two at a time, hearing Silvano, Miko, Joe, and Tony rushing up behind me.

“Halle?” I called, knocking on her door. “Halle, open the door,” I demanded, then turned, ready to shoulder it open.

“Let's not give the neighbors a reason to call the police, huh, Boss?” Miko asked, grabbing my shoulder, and moving me out of the way.

He reached into his pocket for a lock pick set, and made short work of the lock.

He moved aside, letting me rush in first.

To find... nothing.

Nothing but the sad, dark little apartment I'd seen before.

“Fuck!” I snapped, swinging out an arm, and sending a book flying off of her kitchen counter. “Damn it,” I growled at myself, stooping to grab the book, and putting it back to place.

I wasn't going to fucking lash out.

That was too much like my father.

“What the fuck?” I said, raking a hand through my hair.

“Boss, what about the hospital?” Miko suggested, clearly the only one of us who had his head on right.

Of fucking course.

“Call the guards,” I demanded of Miko as I rushed back out of the apartment, down the stairs, then into the car.

“Not gonna wait to see if they say she's there or not?” Silvano asked, climbing into the driver's seat.

“Drive,” I demanded, needing to feel like I was doing something, not standing around like a fucking idiot.

“She could show, though,” I said when we got to the hospital, and Miko told me the guards hadn’t seen Halle.

“They said she called yesterday,” he added. “That’s... what is it?” he asked as I straightened.

“She has one of my burners,” I said.

“You hooked it up?” Miko asked.

Fuck.

“No. She’s gotta be using it on wifi... the library,” I said, remembering that she frequented it there.

It was public.

To her, it would feel relatively safe.

I ran around like a fucking fool all afternoon and evening, even going back to The Empress to see if she was staying there again.

Just... nothing.

“She’s gotta have someone, right?” Silvano asked, looking at me. “Aside from her grandfather, I mean.”

She did have someone else.

Her fucking best friend.

“Christ,” I hissed. “Miko!” I called.

“What’s up, boss?”

“The best friend. Lauren-something. Where can I find her?” I asked.

As it turned out, work.

We found her at work.

In fact, we waited outside of her building until she made her way out, her focus on her phone as she typed rapidly.

So she missed us.

Until we were all flanking her.

She tensed even before her gaze lifted. And when it did, it found me.

“This... tracks,” she decided, nodding at me.

“Where is she?” I asked, wincing a bit at the forcefulness in my tone. This was her best friend. Her knee-jerk reaction would be to protect her from aggressive men. Which was exactly how I was coming off.

“Oh, big guy, what’d you do to her?” she asked, her gaze moving over me, seemingly unbothered by the men all around her.

“I fucked up,” I admitted.

“Pretty big, if she ran away while in danger,” Lauren said.

“She is, Lauren,” I said. “In danger. She can’t be wandering around the city alone. She was attacked while she *had* a guard.”

“Hence the overkill now,” she said, gesturing around.

“Yes.”

Lauren sucked in a deep breath, then released it slowly.

“There are four men after her,” I pressed. “Men who almost killed her grandfather and one of my guards. I need to get her safe again.”

Lauren held my gaze for a moment, and I swear to fuck, it felt like she was seeing shit that I wasn’t intentionally showing her.

“She’s at my apartment,” she told me. “But I want to see her,” she added, voice firm.

“I’ll bring her to my apartment. Miko will take you there,” I said, waving toward Miko.

“You know... as pretty as all of you are, I think I will take my own ride there. Give me the address,” she demanded, surprisingly firm despite knowing she was talking to the mafia.

“Okay,” I agreed, waving toward the street, but giving Miko a nod.

He rushed to follow her as I turned and got in the car with Silvano, Tony, and Joe.

Lauren lived in a nice building with a doorman.

I wasn't surprised, given where she lived and how she dressed. And I tried to remind myself as I waited for Joe and Tony to distract the doorman, that she was much safer at Lauren's place than she'd be at her own.

I'd lucked out when a resident made their way out, holding the door open for me, then made my way up the elevator with anticipation sizzling through my veins.

I was careful to make my footsteps light as I got close to Lauren's door, hoping she would think it was her friend, or possibly dinner getting delivered.

I even tried to knock more quietly than I normally would.

As I hoped, Halle seemed to be expecting Lauren or food, because she didn't even look through the peephole.

She just slid the locks, and pulled the door open.

Then there she was.

Looking tired, a little red-eyed, and completely fucking shocked to see me standing there.

I really should have, you know, practiced what I was going to say to her before I actually got to the door.

Because what came out from between my lips was probably the worst fucking thing I could have said.

“Baby, are you out of your fucking mind?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Halle

I almost would have preferred to open the door to find the brothers standing there.

Instead of Cosimo.

Looking pissed.

I didn't even try to say anything. I just reached for the door, ready to slam it in his face.

A mistake, obviously, because his hand shot out, pushing it open as he moved inside.

“Go away, Cosimo,” I said, taking a few steps back. “I don't want your protection anymore,” I added, turning away from him, and making a beeline for my half-filled wineglass.

I had a feeling I was going to need it.

“Tough shit,” he snapped as I took a sip. “I don't give a fuck if you want my protection anymore. You're getting it.”

“You can't force me back to your place,” I insisted.

“No?” he asked, and there was something in his tone that I didn’t trust.

“No.”

“Hm,” he said. “Not even if I had Lauren at my place?” he asked.

There was no way to hide my shock, even if I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction.

“You kidnapped Lauren?” I hissed, my heartbeat thudding.

“Lauren went to my apartment in a taxi, and is waiting for you there.”

“No,” I objected. “No way.”

“Yes, yes way. It seems your friend is a fuckuva lot more rational than you are,” he said.

Lauren wasn’t riding the tumultuous waves of her emotions about this whole situation. She hadn’t had sex with Cosimo, then found herself feeling discarded and somehow unwanted by him. She hadn’t been hiding in her room, trying to avoid even running into him because she felt emotionally raw around him. And, apparently, completely incapable of fending off his advances, even if getting physical again was only going to complicate things.

“I’m not leaving with you,” I said, putting my wineglass down to cross my arms. “I’m done with you,” I added for emphasis.

“Are you?” he asked, head tipping to the side a bit as he regarded me.

“Yes. Believe me, I’ve had enough,” I added.

“Enough?” he asked, taking a step closer, then another.

I swear each inch he moved closer to me, he sucked up more of the air.

“More than,” I said with a little nod.

“Really?” he asked, now so close that I could feel his front brush mine. His hand rose, fingertips teasing over my chest.

“So your heart is beating this fast because you’re done with me?” he asked. “And the way you’re trembling, that’s you having enough of me?” he asked, and, damn him, there was a little shiver coursing through me at his nearness.

My gaze slipped upward, wanting nothing more than to get lost in those deep eyes of his.

“I never said I didn’t want you,” I admitted. “I don’t *want* to want you.”

“I’m a dick,” he said.

“Yes,” I agreed.

His hand slid behind my neck, fingers pressing into the tight muscles.

“I was raised by a real dick,” he told me, surprising me with the change of conversation. “He tried to beat anything that resembled softness out of me. Think maybe he succeeded more than I realized,” he confessed. “I can’t promise I’ll ever be an easy man to want, or to want to want,” he added, lips tipping up ever so slightly. “But, for you, I’m willing to try. And that’s more than I’ve ever given anyone before.”

I could see a young Cosimo at the hands of an overbearing, cruel father, someone who thought a man in the mafia couldn’t have emotions, couldn’t be kind. So he’d worked on beating Cosimo down, then rebuilding him into the image he wanted him to become.

The thing was, he hadn’t succeeded.

Not really.

Because there *was* kindness in Cosimo.

I’d seen little signs of it since I’d first officially met him.

And if he was willing to try to show me more of that, to fight against the coldness of his upbringing, the abuse of his father, that said something, didn’t it?

Because the Cosimo I knew didn’t seem to give a damn what others thought, or cared how he’d affected them.

But he cared about those things with me.

He wanted to work on those things for me.

I couldn't ask for more than that.

All he could do was try.

And all I could do was let him.

"I'll probably still be a dick sometimes," he admitted.

I felt my lips twitch at that.

"I think it would require a lobotomy to change that," I said, getting a little chuckle out of him. "I don't care if you're a dick," I said. "I care that you're not a dick to me."

"That's fair."

"And there've been times when you haven't been," I admitted. "Which is probably the only reason things... have happened at all. But I don't like being left feeling used. That's never going to be okay with me," I told him, feeling those stupid tears sting my eyes again.

"Used?" he asked, brows pinched, like maybe he hadn't even considered that before. "Because I left," he concluded.

"Yeah."

"I left because I was, I don't know, feeling something that freaked the fuck out of me," he told me. "And I felt like I had to get the hell away from it."

"From me," I clarified.

"No. From what I was feeling toward you. It's different."

"It doesn't *feel* different."

"I'm starting to see that," he agreed, nodding. "I said I want to try, Halle. But I'm gonna need you to talk to me, to call me out, not hide away."

That was fair.

It was childish to hide away.

Adults communicated. They swallowed back their insecurities and vulnerabilities and discussed their problems.

"I can do that," I said, nodding.

“Yeah?” he asked, using his hand on my neck to pull me closer, our chests brushing, and I swear my insides melted just at that.

“Yes,” I said. “And you’re probably going to regret demanding I call you out,” I warned, watching his eyes warm as he smiled.

“I can take it,” he said, fingers sinking into my hair to tug it gently, angling my head up.

Then his lips were on mine.

Softer than I was used to with him.

Almost gentle, though nothing about him made you think he was capable.

But he was.

For me.

Just for me.

That was what had my arms going up and around his neck, holding on tight as his lips slanted over mine again and again.

It wasn’t long before he was walking backward, taking me with him across the apartment, then dropping down on the couch, me straddling him.

“You scared the shit out of me today,” he admitted, his lips on my neck, making little sparks of desire ignite at the touch even as his words made my belly do flip-flops.

I scared him.

Little old me had the power to scare a big, bad mafia guy.

“Don’t ever fucking do that to me again,” he demanded as his hands went to my hips, pulling them down on his lap, making me feel his hard cock against me.

“Okay,” I agreed, my hips rocking against him as the need hit a fever pitch in my body.

Cosimo’s hands grabbed the hem of my shirt, drawing it upward and off. His head fell back with a quick exhale as his gaze moved over me. One of his hands whispered up my

stomach, teasing the underside of my breast, making a shiver move through me.

His fingers moved up, covering my breast, and giving it a firm squeeze before starting to roll my nipple as my hips continued to rock against him, getting a hint of what I wanted, but not quite enough.

Cosimo released my breasts, then grabbed my hips. He lifted me off him, pressing me back onto the couch, and reaching down for my waistband. He worked free my button and zipper before drawing my pants down my legs, then off.

He was between them not a moment later, his mouth moving over me through the barely-there material of my panties.

His tongue worked my clit relentlessly as his fingers slipped into my panties, and thrust inside me.

He worked me until I was moaning and writhing.

Then pulled away just as I was about to get relief.

His lazy smirk said he was pleased with his timing as he pulled off my panties, then moved to sit once again, then reaching to pull me over him.

I reached between us, undoing his belt and pants, then reaching inside to free his cock.

“You going to ride me?” he asked as he reached for his wallet, and withdrew a condom.

“Yes,” I whimpered, aching to feel him as he slid on the protection.

Finished, he fisted his cock, and rested his other hand on my hip.

“Take me in,” he demanded. “I need to feel you squeezing my cock.”

I didn’t need any more encouragement than that.

I shifted over him, then lowered down, feeling him slide in, inch by thick inch until he was buried deep.

“Ride me, baby,” he demanded, voice tight, like he was already as far gone as I was.

I started slow, wanting to savor this, but it wasn't long before my body was screaming for release, making me ride him hard and fast as my body drove up toward that peak, then crashed down, leaving me falling into Cosimo's chest, my face in his neck as I cried out my release.

He wasn't done with me yet, though.

As I came back down, I found him still hard inside me.

His arm went around my lower back, holding me against him as he got to his feet, the location unknown until I felt the wall against my back.

Then he was fucking me, hard and fast and deep, driving me right back up again, leaving me breathless and needy as my eyes slid shut.

“No,” Cosimo growled. “Look at me. I need you to look at me when you come,” he demanded.

My heavy eyelids fluttered open, watching his stupidly gorgeous face as he pushed me off that edge, and sent me crashing again.

“Fuck,” Cosimo hissed, thrusting faster, then settling deep as he came, his gaze on mine the whole time.

I knew that maybe for some, it wasn't a big deal.

But, it seemed, for Cosimo, orgasms with eye contact were a huge deal.

“Oh, God,” I groaned after the haze slipped away again, my gaze moving around the apartment behind Cosimo.

“What?” he asked, slowly lowering me down to my own feet.

“I hope she doesn't have any cameras or anything in here,” I said, my cheeks feeling warm.

“We'll have to tell her to erase the footage without watching it,” Cosimo said, smirk wicked.

“We are not telling her that. She can’t know we just did this in her apartment.”

“We can offer the penthouse to her and her boyfriend anytime they want it,” he offered as he walked toward the kitchen, finding the garbage, and getting rid of the condom.

He tucked himself away, then pulled out the bag, bringing it over to the door. Where I was still standing. Stark naked. Something he appreciated as his gaze moved lazily over me.

“She doesn’t have a boyfriend,” I said.

“A solo mission then,” he teased, in a better mood than I was used to seeing him in.

“We can’t invite my best friend to come to your penthouse and masturbate,” I said, loving the way his smile stretched wide enough to make his eyes crinkle. That was a first.

“Our,” he said.

“What?” I asked, starting to move back toward the couch to grab my clothes.

“Our penthouse,” he said.

“It’s definitely not mine,” I said, rolling my eyes at him over my shoulder.

“You’re going to be living there indefinitely, so I think you can start calling it that,” he said, landing a slap to my ass as I bent down to fetch my panties.

“About that,” I said, ignoring the way my insatiable body sizzled a little at that slap.

“About what?” he asked, tensing.

“I can’t be there indefinitely. As in all day and all night forever,” I told him. “I have a life. A family business. I can’t stay locked away in the penthouse.”

He looked irritated at that, but tamped it down.

“We’ll... figure that out,” he said. “Maybe not tomorrow or the next day, but I’ll get on it.”

“Okay,” I agreed, finished putting my clothes on, and walking toward him, pressing my hands into his chest. “Thank you,” I said, leaning up, and pressing a kiss to his cheek.

The look on his face at that was freaking priceless.

Kind of confusion mixed with shock and just a small bit of something akin to bashfulness.

Oh, it was going to be fun to see him soften a little.

Even if it was only for me.

But first, I had to do some damage control.

“Okay. I need to go and explain all of this to Lauren,” I said.

“You haven’t told her anything?” he asked.

“And how would I do that when you wouldn’t let me go get my phone?” I shot back, giving him a raised brow look.

“Touché,” he said, wrapping an arm around my waist as he led me to the door, pausing only to grab the garbage bag that he tossed down the chute in the hall before we took the elevator down. “We can take a trip there tomorrow,” he offered. “Grab any of the shit you want. Everything else can be thrown on the curb,” he told me.

“Ah, no,” I said, shooting him a scrunched brow look. “I’m not getting rid of anything. Just in case.”

“In case, what? In case we don’t work out? Sorry to break it to you, baby, but you’re fucking stuck with me now,” he told me as the elevator met the lobby. “No one gets to see a softer side of me and lives. So, since I can’t kill you, you’re just gonna have to put up with me. Forever.”

If this was him starting to try, well, I was starting to think that maybe forever with him wouldn’t be so bad.

“Sorry, guys,” I said, wincing when I saw my guards from that morning standing outside. “I didn’t get you in a ton of trouble, did I?”

“They got lucky that you are safe,” Cosimo said, using his big-scary-mafia-capo voice. It was absurd how attractive I

found it.

There was a man I didn't know standing near the car. Tall, dark, handsome, but with a hard gaze that reminded me a bit of Cosimo.

"This is Silvano," Cosimo said, gesturing toward him. "My brother," he added. "Sil, this is Halle."

"You're the reason my ma is going to be on my ass from now until eternity, huh?" he asked, sighing hard as he shook his head, then climbed into the driver's seat.

"I'd say he grows on you," Cosimo said. "But I'd be lying. Come on, you in the middle," he said, holding the door open for me.

Then, flanked with Joey on one side of me, and Cosimo on the other, we headed back to the penthouse.

With Cosimo's hand squeezing my thigh the entire way.

We made it up to the penthouse to find the entire island covered in food.

"She made me go pick up all the food she ordered for you two," Miko said when he saw me looking at it.

"Where is she?" I asked, not seeing her anywhere.

Miko reached up, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Snooping," he admitted. "Said she was gonna make sure the boss doesn't have a cage or torture devices anywhere in here."

Yeah, that sounded like her.

"Lauren!" I yelled, walking toward the stairs. "Stop being nosy. I've already checked out the whole place!" I called, turning to look at Cosimo who had his brows raised, but his lips were tipped up.

"Okay, no torture devices," Lauren said, walking out of Cosimo's bedroom. "But a bag on the bathroom counter with a box of condoms in it. We love a safe king," she said as I felt my face go on fire. "Oh, relax. We're all adults here. We all bang. I know I do. I know *you* do. I know you *do him*," she said, jerking her chin toward Cosimo. "And, well, looking like

you look, I'm assuming you get plenty of pussy too," she said to Miko who, incredibly, looked a little bashful at her bluntness.

"So, this," she said as she got to the lower landing, and waved a hand down my body, "is a really nice outfit."

"He took me to Saks," I admitted. "I had a personal shopper," I added, voice low.

"Oh, was it Jeffrey?" she asked.

"It was!"

"He's the best. He knows how to style me. I had this one other older lady who seemed to think that because I am plus-sized, I should just put tents over my body all the time. So, food?" she asked, waving toward the island. "I think we have enough to share," she added, looking to the guys.

"I, ah, I gotta go see my ma," Miko said.

"I'll leave you two to talk for a bit," Cosimo said. "I don't think I need to say this, but just in case your stubborn ass forgot... stay in the penthouse," he said, his hand tracing my lower back as he passed on his way to the door.

"Okay then," Lauren said as soon as the door clicked closed. "Girl, what the *fuck*?" she said.

"I know. I know. It's a lot."

"Oh, I'm not even talking about the attacks and private security," she said. "We'll get there. We have to start with... holy crap... the way that man looks at you."

"The way he looks at me?" I asked as I grabbed plates.

"Like you're the only person in the entire world that he likes," she said, taking a plate from me.

"That's... probably not that far off," I admitted. "He's... difficult."

"Obviously, or you wouldn't have run to my place. I mean, not for nothing, because I love my place, but no way in hell would I willingly leave this place. Did you see his tub?" she

asked. “I mean, he would need to learn to sacrifice half of his closet. Well, maybe two-thirds,” she mused.

“Laur, he’s dating me, not you,” I reminded her, smiling huge.

To that, she let out a dramatic sigh as she opened the carton of Chinese food. “Listen, let a girl fantasize, will you?” she said, picking up the carton, and shaking some rice onto her place before handing it to me. “So, he got you a private shopper. We have to start there.”

“He got me an entire wardrobe. Minus bras and pajamas.”

“I mean, obviously,” she agreed. “You’re gorg. Of course he wants you nearly naked all the time. “If my girls sat as high as yours do, I wouldn’t wear a bra either.”

“You can’t compare when yours are twice as big as mine,” I said, shaking my head.

“I had to lift my shirt to get an EKG at my yearly physical. I swear the little baby doctor looked shellshocked when he saw the girls in their balconette,” she said, patting one of her boobs. “Anyway. Designer clothing haul. Score. Love that for you.”

“He went down on me in the dressing room,” I admitted, watching Lauren’s mouth fall open in what I could only call joyful scandal.

“You little slut. I love it. Is he good with his mouth? He carried himself like he knows what he’s doing between a woman’s thighs.”

“He is good. He knows exactly what he’s doing.”

“So he’s stupidly good-looking, rich, generous, and a good lover? And you’re running away because...”

“Because we weren’t communicating,” I admitted.

“It sucks to have to be all mature in grown-up relationships, right? Sometimes I miss the games and dramatics of relationships in our teens. But that was all surface, y’know? If you want to dig deeper than that, you have

to have the hard talks and rip open the old wounds. I figure a guy growing up in the mafia has plenty of those.”

“Yeah, it seems like his father was physically and emotionally abusive. Which has made this thing with us... challenging for him. But he said he wants to try.”

“That’s a lot from a powerful man like him,” she said, grabbing some sweet & sour chicken, then opening the box for the pizza.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “He’s an asshole, but he’s... he’s nice. To me.”

“That’s like the ultimate goal, isn’t it?” she asked, passing me a container with pasta and meatballs in it. “To be a strong man’s weakness? I could swoon just thinking about it,” she said, pressing a hand to her heart. “I’m so incredibly happy for you and not at all jealous,” she said, making me laugh.

“I can ask if any of his cousins are single. There’s like a million of these guys. What?” I asked as her smile went lascivious.

“Just... having a moment,” she said, closing her eyes. “Imagining myself with half a dozen of those yummy guys,” she added. “*Oh, that’s right, baby, help him take off his shirt for mama,*” she said, making me toss a noodle at her.

“I think you need to spend less time with your vibrator, and get a man on top of you,” I told her.

“That would be funny if it wasn’t so painfully true,” she admitted. “I upgraded to a plug-in vibe because I was going through so many batteries. Anywho,” she said, shaking her head at herself. “When’s the wedding?” she asked.

God, this was exactly what I’d been needing.

Someone to talk about this whole situation with.

I was kicking myself for not reaching out to her sooner, to listen to her tease and laugh, to playfully remind me not to take myself and everything so seriously. To stop analyzing. To just enjoy.

“So, what about the shop?” she asked a while later as we both put our plates on the coffee table. I’d needed to pop the top button of my jeans, prompting Lauren to lift her shirt and show me the little bits of elastic on the sides of her waistband that she called ‘lifesavers for a stress eater.’

“Cosimo said he was going to figure that out soon. He knows I want to get back to it. But I have to let him make sure it’s safe. Especially after the attack...” I said, then launched into all those ugly details.

Lauren sat back when I was done, exhaling hard.

“Can we be sister-wives?” she asked, making me jolt back, surprised.

“What?”

“I mean, like, the moral of that whole story is he saw a threat, and immediately tried to protect you from it. When his first attempt failed, he went all-out. And during that, he fed, spoiled, and fucked you senseless. It’s just not fair that one woman gets to have all of that,” she said. “Stop being a selfish bitch and share with your best friend,” she said. But then she reached over, brushing my bangs off my forehead, and checking out the cuts there. They were healed, but still red. “I owe this man a big thank you for keeping you safe. Do you think he accepts nature’s credit card?” she asked, waving down at her body.

“He’s mine. Go offer your credit card to Miko,” I said.

“I think you’re right,” she said, suddenly serious.

“About what?”

“That he’s yours. That your his. I really think this might be it for you. And I get that it’s... unconventional. But I’m so happy you found the guy who appreciates how special you are. God, remember Brian?” she asked, lip curling. “Forgot your birthday, anniversary, and Valentine’s Day? Then had the nerve to act like you were being irrational for dumping his ass. I bet Cosimo orders a mean flower arrangement.”

I bet that was probably true.

If there was one thing the man did well, it was excess.

Lauren and I cleaned up dinner, and found a bottle of wine.

And you could say the conversation devolved from there. In the best way possible. Until we were laughing so hard that our stomachs hurt.

Eventually, the door popped open, and Cosimo walked in to me strutting—and by ‘strutting,’ I mean ‘stumbling’ thanks to all the wine—in the little black dress that Jeffrey had picked out for me to a clapping and cheering Lauren, who was on her belly on the floor, snapping pictures on her phone.

“And from the men’s collection, we have Cosimo Costa wearing the McYummy suit. Come on, give us a strut!” Lauren said in a deep imitation of an announcer voice.

“Absolutely fucking not,” he said, but his lips were twitching. “Seems like you two have had fun,” he said.

“You know, I just need a pillow. A pillow and a blanket,” Lauren said, letting out a big yawn. “I’m just gonna sleep right here.”

“You can’t sleep on the floor... without me,” I said, kicking out of my shoes, and nearly taking out the glass door with one of the heels with it as I tried to lower down next to Lauren. Only to have Cosimo’s hands grab me, and pull me back onto my feet.

“I don’t think so. Your ass is gonna be in my bed.”

“What about my ass?” Lauren asked, batting her lashes at him playfully.

“I think your ass should probably sleep in the guest room,” he said. “I will have one of my men take you to work tomorrow. And home,” he added.

“Ohhh, did I score me a mafia beau?” she asked. “Can my ass be in *his* bed tonight?”

“Lauren thinks she should be my sister-wife,” I told Cosimo, stifling a big yawn myself. “I told her I’m not sharing you.”

“Selfish,” Lauren grumbled as she got onto all fours, and started to crawl.

“The fuck are you doing?” Cosimo asked.

“Gravity...,” she started, squinting hard. “I don’t know, something about it being a bitch.”

“How the fuck much did you two drink?” Cosimo asked, shaking his head at us.

“A bottle,” I said.

“Each,” Lauren added.

“That explains it,” Cosimo said. “You want a hand?” he asked as Lauren made her way toward the guest room.

“I should help her,” I said, trying to move away from Cosimo, but the floor seemed to wobble, leaving me swaying. Cosimo grabbed me, pulling me to his side.

“She’s got it,” he said as Lauren made it into the room.

He walked me with him to the guest room, where we watched Lauren crawl up onto the bed, where she rolled onto her stomach.

“This... stupid...” she grumbled, reaching up under her shirt, trying to unclasp her bra. “Boobs are stupid,” she decided, giving up, and crawling up to the pillows.

She was out cold in less than a minute.

“The world spinning?” Cosimo asked as I leaned more fully into him as he pulled the door closed.

“You smell good,” I said, closing my eyes.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he said.

The next thing I knew, he’d bent down, scooped me up, and carried me upstairs to his bed. Where he stripped me out of the dress, pulled the covers up over me, brought me a cup of water, and urged me to get some sleep.

The last memory I had before sleep claimed me was Cosimo pulling me onto his chest.

It might have been the best night of my life.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Cosimo

I'd never gone to sleep with a woman in my arms.

So I'd never woken up to one there, either.

Honestly, I'd been disoriented for a second, feeling the weight of her on me, the tickle of her hair over my chest, the warmth of her breath on my skin.

But as soon as sleep lessened its hold on me, I felt that strange sensation in my chest. The same one I'd felt each time I was getting close to Halle.

Only this time, I reminded myself that it wasn't something to shun, to walk away from, to be afraid of.

I told myself that it was a giant 'Fuck you' to my father when I pulled her closer, when I pressed my lips to the top of her head.

Silvano had been right.

As much as a part of me hated to admit that.

But each time I acted opposite of how he'd trained me to, I was proving that I wasn't like him, that I was better than he'd been.

"Oh, turn the jackhammers down," Halle grumbled a while later, making my lips curve up.

"I'll get you something for that," I said, rolling her off to her side, and climbing out of bed.

I yanked a pair of pajama pants up before heading downstairs, finding Lauren already in the kitchen, hair a mess, squinting at the morning sun.

"Fuck you, sun, fuck you," she grumbled, not realizing she wasn't alone until the stair creaked as I descended. "Boo. Hiss. Damn you for having that amazing wine on hand," she grumbled as she ripped the coffee pot out of the machine.

"Here, how about I do that?" I said, taking it from her. "And you take this," I added, pulling open a cabinet to hand her packets of electrolyte power. "There's water in the fridge," I added.

"Oh, thank God," she said, pulling out two. "I'll bring one up to Halle-Bear. Is she decent?"

"She's not," I said, getting a smile out of Lauren.

"That's cool. I mean, I was the one who sat with her when she got her hoo-ha waxed the first time," she said. "You're welcome, by the way," she said with a smile before heading upstairs, her steps slow and heavy.

I finished the coffee, ordered breakfast, then briefed Lauren's first shift guard before the girls finally emerged, Halle wearing my button-up from the day before.

And, fuck, was that a good look.

Even if she looked like she was also silently cursing the sun.

"Oh, great. I wanted another of you suit-wearing hot guys to see me at this, my lowest moment," Lauren grumbled, squinting at me. "Alright, Mr. Tall, Dark, and Smoldering, we gotta get going," she said.

“Text me,” Halle demanded. “On the number we talked on yesterday. Once I get my phone back, I will let you know.”

“Sounds good. Love you,” she said, giving Halle a hug. “And you, I’m not forgiving you for the wine,” she said, narrowing her eyes at me as she opened the door.

“She needs a guard?” Halle asked as soon as they were gone.

“I’m just being careful,” I told her as she chugged some of the electrolyte water. “I don’t want anything happening to her.”

“Careful, she’s having fantasies about some sort of six-men-one-woman fantasy about you guys,” Halle warned.

“Hey, that’s their problem,” I said, handing her a cup of coffee. “You want some meds?” I asked.

“I think the electrolytes will do the trick,” she said. “Sorry we were kind of messy last night.”

“It was good seeing you have some fun,” I said.

“Are you leaving?” she asked, glancing at the clock.

“Not yet,” I said. “Breakfast is coming. Figure we can share that before I head out. I’m working on the shop problem today.”

“Oh, good. My grandfather keeps asking. I feel guilty lying to him. Can we go see him today?” she asked.

Fuck.

I wasn’t prepared for how much I liked how that sounded.

We.

“Let me know what time works, and I’ll fit it in.”

“Maybe lunchtime?” she said. “He should still be pretty awake then. They are talking about stepping him down to a rehabilitation facility. I don’t know how that will work out for the guards,” she added, looking worried.

Hospitals, the Family had experience with. Rehab centers, not so much. But we would have to figure it out. Like

anywhere else, I was sure money would talk. Actually, maybe even more so in a place like that where the staff was horribly overworked and criminally underpaid. A few grand to mind their businesses about the men in suits being there round-the-clock to protect a little old man.

Hopefully, by the time he was able to leave the rehab facility, I will have some sort of solution to the Myers brothers problem. Because this shit couldn't go on forever. I had to be able to give Halle some semblance of her former life back. Minus the horrible apartment. Because now that I got to know what it was like to go to sleep and wake up with her, I was pretty sure I never wanted to sleep alone again.

"I'll figure it out," I assured her.

"Is that your answer to everything?" she asked, shooting me a soft smile.

"Learned over the years that there's not much I can't figure out if I work at it. Or stick Miko on it," I admitted.

"He really does seem to be really mature for his age, doesn't he?" she asked.

"He's been working hustles since he was in middle school. Made him hungry. He grew up fast. I'm dreading the day I gotta let him get his own crew," I admitted. "Finding someone that good to work closely with me won't be easy."

Especially with my trust issues, Family or not.

"What about Venezia?" she asked.

"I like Venezia. And I think Miko bringing him to me was proof that he thinks he can take his place too. We'll see. He's still down for the time being."

"I should probably go visit him, right? Now that I'm not a complete prisoner anymore," she added with a look that said I better not deny her these requests.

"He's a moody fuck right now, but if you wanna see him, we can drop in. Or have Miko drag his ass outta his apartment to meet us for dinner somewhere."

"We can go out to dinner?" she asked, eyes brightening.

“Yeah... why couldn't we?” I asked.

“Because... you know...” she said, gesturing out.

“A lot of my life involves situations where some people might want to hurt me, baby. If I let that impact how I live my life, I'd never leave home.”

The funny thing was, I had been letting it impact how *she* lived her life. Almost as if, from the beginning, I cared more about her life than I did my own.

“If you're gonna be with me, there's gonna have to be an understanding that there is no guarantee of safety all the time,” I told her, realizing this was a conversation we likely should have had before I told her I wanted her moving in.

“I mean... no one has any guarantee of safety, though,” she said. “Especially women,” she added. “I think maybe I am safer with you than I would be on my own, even without the brothers being in the picture.”

That was true.

Everyone knew not to fuck with mafia old women and kids. It seemed like the stories I knew of in the Family that involved the women getting hurt or taken all happened before they were, officially, mafia wives or mothers.

“That's true,” I agreed. I wasn't sure there would ever be a day when I was comfortable not having a guard on her. Though I wasn't gonna freak her out by admitting that. “I'm not going to ever do something to put you at risk. If I'm saying going out to eat is safe, it is.”

“Do you think there will ever be a day when we don't have to worry about these brothers?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“That's... that's a very definitive answer,” she said, brow raised.

“One way or another, they will stop being a problem eventually.” I watched as her mind worked through all the possible ways I could mean that. “Just a reminder that shit like

this... that's the life," I said, not sure what feeling she landed on in the end.

"I knew that going in," she reminded me. "I've known exactly what it meant since the moment I walked into that courtroom."

"You never told me why you deadlocked that jury," I said.

"The girl."

"What's that?"

"The girl. She came into the courthouse one day. Nicholas's ex. She'd been bruised in one of the pictures with him. I figured that's why you did it."

"Part of it. Lily lives in the building. She's hardly more than a kid. One night, I came home to find her passed out in the elevator, beaten and raped. By Nicholas and all her brothers."

"Oh, my God," she said, her hand going to her heart. "Oh, God. That's so much worse than I thought."

"Lily didn't want to go to the police, didn't want to stand trial. She just wanted to try to move past it. But I couldn't let it rest. I meant to get them all. I would have, if I hadn't been so impulsive. Things just didn't work out that way."

"My father used to beat the hell out of my mom," she admitted, surprising me. "I used to fantasize about killing him. So... I got why you did it. Even more so now," she added.

"My old man beat the shit out of my step-mom too, when he wasn't beating the shit out of me."

"What about your brother?" she asked.

"Not as much. Silvano is my step-brother, technically. And my old man definitely made him feel like he wasn't a *real* Costa. So he didn't give as much of a fuck about how he behaved. And when I could, I tried to take the heat for him. I was used to it at that point."

"I'm sorry," she said, walking over toward me, then wrapping her arms around me, her head resting on my chest.

“When did he die?”

“In my late teens. Fucker choked on a steak at a restaurant. I probably could have saved him,” I admitted. “I chose not to.”

“I understand.”

“What about your old man?”

“He eventually went away for domestic abuse against his girlfriend he was dating after my mom took my brother and I to the city to live with my grandfather. I have no idea what became of him after that. I hope he choked on some steak too.”

“I could... make that happen,” I said.

To that, Halle pulled back just enough to look up at me.

“Did you just offer to off my father for me?” she asked, a bemused smile toying with her lips.

“Yeah.”

“That’s maybe the most romantic thing anyone has said to me,” she declared, smiling big. “But, how about we don’t get you possibly racking up another murder charge?” she suggested. “I’m kind of enjoying having you free.”

Suddenly, I realized I had a reason, other than my own preference, for wanting to stay free.

Before, my family, *the* Family, and friends just hadn’t been enough.

With Halle around, I had someone I wanted to come home to, to wake up with, to spend all my free time with. Build a life and future with.

I wouldn’t pretend to know what that future looked like.

But I was, for the first time, excited to find out.

There was a loud, frantic knock at the door, making Halle jerk away from me, and had me rushing across the apartment to pull the door open.

“Boss,” Miko said, walking across the apartment. “Turn the fucking news on,” he said, making my back straighten as

he found the remote, and had the TV appearing out of its cabinet.

The news, for us, was rarely a good thing.

Our entire organization operated under the radar.

Getting *on* it was always bad for us as a whole.

I moved forward as Miko found the channel, then turned the volume up.

“The bodies of the three brothers have been located inside the basement of the fourth brother, Robert Myers,” the newscaster said.

“The fuck?” I hissed, walking closer.

“The suspect, Robert Myers, has been brought in on three separate murder charges,” the newscaster went on. “Police have not immediately commented on questions from Channel Three about whether this changes their previous claims that the fifth brother, Nicholas Myers, was murdered by notorious mafia capo Cosimo Costa. Who, as you will recall, was let free after a jury deadlocked on his trial...”

“What the fuck is going on?” I said, shaking my head.

“You didn’t do this?” Halle asked, moving next to me.

“No, baby. Why—“

“Robert,” she said, exhaling hard. “That was the one who attacked me,” she said, watching the footage of him being arrested, eyes huge, confused, not knowing what the hell was going on. “See his hand?” she asked, pointing to the TV where he had it wrapped up. “I hit it with a meat tenderizer.”

“I didn’t even know which one it was,” I admitted, reaching out to pull her closer. “We’re under strict ‘no kill’ orders about this,” I told her. “I don’t understand how this happened,” I admitted.

We were still watching the news when there was another knock at the door, prompting Miko to go answer.

Then in walked Silvano, someone who’d only been to my place, I don’t know, once in all the time that I’d been living

here.

He walked casually in, like he belonged, grabbing himself a mug of coffee, then moving over into the living room, standing a few feet from Halle.

“Crazy shit, huh?” he asked, taking a sip of his coffee.

My gaze shot to Miko, wanting to know if his mind was going in the same direction as mine. I found his brows raised, his gaze moving from Silvano to me.

Sil had done it.

Sil had killed the three brothers.

And framed the fourth.

Because if there was one person who knew how to get away with murder, it was the man the Family hired to clean up crime scenes for the rest of us.

The thing was, Silvano wasn't a killer.

He was just the cleaning crew.

But he'd done it.

For Halle, sure.

But also for me.

“Lorenzo thought anything happening to the brothers would put the heat back on the Family,” I said, choosing my words carefully.

“Oh, yeah? Well, good thing it was the other brother to whack them all,” he said, shrugging.

“Sil...” I said, shaking my head at him.

“Seems like there's self-defense wounds and under nail scrapings and shit. Sounds pretty open-and-shut to me. No deadlocked juries with this one.”

Honestly, if there was a single person in the world who could get away with this, it was Silvano.

He'd never see the inside of a courtroom.

But justice was finally served.

Lily would be able to regain more of her life.

Halle would have her freedom back.

It was over.

And I didn't have to do a goddamn thing.

"Sounds like me and you gotta take a trip to see the Boss today," I said, looking at Silvano's profile.

"I can handle it," Silvano said, shrugging. Though, technically, he'd never been in trouble with Lorenzo before. Unlike the rest of us, Silvano didn't run a crew. He just worked when someone had a clean-up job for him. There was nothing to ever be in trouble for.

"I know you can, but you don't have to," I said, wondering if this was it. If this was finally the end of a lifelong battle between the two of us.

Suddenly, I wanted that to be the case.

I found myself craving things I'd never wanted before.

Stability.

Harmony.

Family.

It didn't take someone really in touch with their feelings to know that it was all because of Halle.

"So, does this mean... I'm free to move around as I please?" Halle asked as the news went to the weather forecast.

"With a guard," I qualified. "Maybe two," I added, getting an eye roll out of her. "Just for the time being. Why? Where did you want to go?"

"Buy some bras," she said, getting a snort out of Miko.

"In that case, no, you're on lockdown still."

"Hey, I've already proven that I can outsmart your guards," she reminded me.

"Maybe. But not Miko," I said, smirking when she shot me small eyes at that, knowing he was no fool.

“Damn you,” she grumbled. “Fine. I just want to go to the shop today then,” she said.

“Think that will work,” I said. “Miko and one more guard, just out of an abundance of caution,” I told her.

“Okay. That’s totally fine,” she said, sounding excited to get back to work.

As much as some part of me really liked the idea of her just in the penthouse all day, waiting for me, I knew that was not something I could ask or expect of her. She had a life. Besides, she would likely be a lot more understanding of my taxing work schedule if she had her own life going for her. Her own interests and passions.

“Dinner later,” I said.

“Yes,” she agreed. Then, in a voice that only I could hear. “Then an early bedtime,” she said.

“Abso-fucking-lutely,” I agreed. “Alright. You and Miko can have the breakfast I ordered. Silvano and I are gonna get going after I throw some clothes on.”

By the time I came down, Miko and Sil were on the other side of the island from Halle, picking at the food, talking easily.

I liked that.

How easily she got on with my people.

These men that I hoped she would start to see as her people.

“Ready?” Silvano asked as I came down.

“Yep,” I agreed, but stopping to haul Halle against me, pressing my lips to hers, hard but shorter than either of us would have liked, given how she melted into me. “Dinner,” I repeated.

“I’ll be here,” she agreed, giving me a smile.

Yeah, she would.

And, what's more, I was really fucking looking forward to it.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Halle - 3 days

It was surprisingly easy.

Living with him.

Being with him.

I guess an argument could be made for the fact that I'd already been casually living with him before we became an item.

But we fell into a sort of routine. Waking up in the middle of the night, or very early morning, rolling around in the sheets, passing back out, then waking up and having coffee and breakfast in the morning before we both headed off to work.

My grandfather was officially in the step-down facility, and there was a clock on him coming home. I knew that meant he would want to be back at the shop, so I was working overtime to try to not only get the shop in the best possible

shape, but also setting up the website, and having Cosimo's guys set up a real security system, and better locks.

Miko even made sure the bathroom door was unstuck.

Things were moving.

And then, magic.

Someone came into the shop right before closing with a box full of old junk they said they'd cleaned out of their grandparents' apartment after they passed. They didn't even want to wait for me to appraise and pay them for any of it. They just wanted it gone.

And at the bottom of that box?

Not one, but *two* carved and painted Greater Yellowlegs duck decoys.

I only knew that because I'd been so fascinated at the idea that duck decoys could be worth a lot of money, so I'd done a deep dive in research.

These birds?

These were incredibly rare.

The last time one was sold was almost two decades ago.

And it sold for seventy-five grand.

For *one*.

Any guilt I felt about the shop being closed for a few days was gone as I staged the item up on a display I'd set up for the sole purpose of taking pictures, and snapped several to put up on the website.

"Want me to take all that out to the dumpster?" Miko asked, waving toward the ducks and the rest of the box. There were some antiques inside, but nothing else anywhere near as valuable.

"This is not garbage," I told him, waving the ducks. "This is as good as a lottery ticket.

"Yeah? I'll never understand this shit," he admitted, shaking his head.

“It’s fascinating when you really get into it,” I insisted, taking the ducks back to the safe in the back, just in case.

“You ready to head home?” he asked.

Home.

God, I liked the sound of that.

It was starting to feel that way, too.

What with my new clothes in his closet, my toothbrush in his drawer, my books on the coffee table.

For a man who’d admitted to me that he’d never had a woman even in his penthouse before, let alone moving in, he’d been really easy going about the kinds of things that had given previous boyfriends panic attacks. Like sharing his dresser and closet. Like having my tampons under the sink. Like changing his schedule to spend more time with me.

Maybe it was just easier when something inside said you’d found the right person.

Was it possibly insane that my right person was a member of the mafia? Yeah, kind of. But I couldn’t deny the way my heart felt like it swelled when Cosimo was nearby.

“Yeah. I want to stop at the grocery store first, though. I’m making dinner tonight,” I declared.

I couldn’t explain the urge to cook for him, especially given that it wasn’t something I particularly enjoyed or had any major skills with.

I think it was some form of nesting.

A few hours later, Cosimo was home, uncorking a bottle of wine, then sitting down at the table.

I put some food on his plate, watching as he grabbed his fork, scooped some up, and put it into his mouth.

His face was unreadable as he chewed.

Then, out of nowhere, he reached for my hand, pulling me closer as he burst out laughing.

“Oh, baby,” he said, pulling me onto his lap. “Love that you want to cook for me, but I think we are going to have to agree that this just isn’t your forte,” he said, scooping more up, and holding the fork up to my lips.

I almost didn’t want to try it myself, given his reaction. But, I reminded myself, he was used to all the women in his family. They probably all cooked gourmet Italian. Not my best attempt at some classic Americana. So it was probably fine by normal tastebud standards.

Or that was what I thought until my lips parted, and I got to taste the meal I’d been working on for hours.

Yeah, it was not good.

Not only was it not good, but it was disgusting.

“Oh, God,” I grimaced, swallowing it down just to get it out of my mouth.

“It’s okay,” he said, smile suddenly a little devilish. “I know what I want to eat for dinner,” he told me as he moved his place setting out of the way, grabbed me, and laid me back against the table.

Then, yeah, he had me for dinner.

And we had each other on damn near every surface of the main floor before we fell onto the couch. Boneless. Satisfied.

“I’ll order in,” he said as his hand drifted lazily down my spine.

Cosimo - 3 weeks

“You’re gonna be fine,” I insisted as Halle fiddled with her dress for the fifth time in three minutes.

I’d taken her back to the store, wanting her to pick out some of the shit she hadn’t gotten the last time.

Including some bras, even if I stood by my belief that she didn’t need one. She’d reasoned that she did. If only for events like this.

She was meeting my ma.

Any time I talked to my ma since it came out that Halle was living with me, she was insisting I bring my girl to her table, so they could meet.

“Half the Family has met her, and I still haven’t,” she’d reasoned. “Even Silvano has met her before I have,” she added, sounding close to tears at the idea that I might deny her again.

I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

So here we were.

With Halle in a simple dark blue dress that she’d hemmed and hawed for hours before we’d left, despite Jeffrey having told her it would be perfect for a ‘meeting the mom’ type event. Pretty, but not demanding everyone’s attention. Modest, but not completely conservative.

She was holding a pie.

One we’d bought.

Since we both agreed that the culinary arts were not one of Halle's specialties. Which was fine. There were plenty of women in the family who loved to cook, and were great at it. We would never be wanting for a hot, Italian meal.

"She's gonna fucking love you," I told her, my hand pressing into her lower back. "You have no idea how much she's been waiting for this day. She had pretty much lost hope on seeing one of us bring a woman to her table."

"She's not going to hate me for not being able to cook?"

"No."

"Are you just trying to appease me?" she asked, slitting her eyes at me.

"I'm not above that," I admitted. "But no."

"The fuck you standing out here for?" Silvano asked, coming up behind us. "Is the door locked?" he asked, then reached past Halle to push it open himself.

Sil struggled to read a room, but sometimes that worked out in my favor. I was sure we'd be standing outside the door for another ten minutes before she got up her nerve to go in.

"Hone—" my ma started, arms outstretched toward Silvano. For all of two seconds. Before her gaze landed on Halle instead. "Oh, there she is!" she said, voice going higher. "Oh, you're even prettier than Silvano said!" she said, making a beeline for Halle, arms still out like they were the oldest friends. "And you two look so nice together," she added as she pulled Halle in for a hug. The big kind. Because she somehow knew that Halle would allow that more than her sons would.

The strangest thing happened, though.

All the stiffness left Halle's body as my ma's arms went around her, pulling her close. A split second later, Halle's arms went around my ma as well.

I wondered if this was something she felt she'd been missing since losing her own mother. That some part of her was craving that maternal touch. If that was the case, I was

happy to share mine with her. And, Lord knew, my ma would be over the fucking moon about the situation.

“I’ve heard so many amazing things about you,” Ma said, her hand going around Halle’s waist, and leading her into the kitchen.

“Nice to see you too, Ma,” Silvano said, shooting a smirk my way. “How long you think this is gonna satisfy her before she gets on my ass about not having a woman?” he asked.

“Oh, you probably have six months. Maybe a year.”

“She’s gonna have to get used to disappointment. I got no fucking interest in that.”

“Only got time and space in your life for dead bodies, huh?” I asked, but for once, he didn’t rise to the bait.

Something fundamental had changed between us that day when the brothers were found dead and the other arrested for their murders. No, we weren’t like some of the other brothers in the Family, but we were closer than we’d ever been. We still fought, but not with the bitterness of old. Hell, we even shared non-family meals twice.

My life suddenly had a lot of balance and harmony, and I really couldn’t place the praise on anyone other than Halle for all of it.

“Ah, Ma,” I called as she pushed Halle toward a pot on the stove. “I don’t think you want her cooking,” I added, getting huge eyes from my mother, who was clearly horrified by my behavior.

“Cosimo Costa,” she snapped, ready to sink her teeth into me. She didn’t scold us much, not even when we were younger. She knew we got enough of that shit from my father. But when she did, it was always about us being rude.

“No, no, he’s not being mean,” Halle assured her. “I’m really not a good cook,” she told her. “We kind of just... order in or go out,” she added.

“Don’t worry, honey,” she said, handing her a spoon. “You’ve got this. I’m right here to keep an eye. Don’t listen to

the boys.”

Enjoying the us-versus-them thing, Halle shot a smile in our direction.

“Right? They don’t know how to cook either,” she insisted. “What?” she asked at my ma’s look. “Do they? Do you know how to cook?” Halle asked, shooting small eyes at me.

“Yeah, I know how to cook.”

“Like grill a steak and scramble an egg, or *cook*?” she asked. Because, yeah, Halle could cook an egg or flip a grilled cheese. Even make mostly edible pasta. It was in the more complicated meals where she floundered.

“Cook,” I admitted.

“I’ve been living with you for about a month,” she said, fired up about this for some reason. “And we have eaten out for almost every meal. And you can *cook*? Well, you’re cooking dinner tomorrow night then,” she said, lifting her chin in a way that I knew meant she was gonna dig her heels in about it.

That seemed to break the ice, though, and the rest of the meal went off without a hitch. Lots of lighthearted teasing and sharing of stories that weren’t too intense in nature. Just getting to know each other.

By the time we walked out of there, both my Ma and Halle were tipsy on the copious amount of wine served, and Halle was agreeing to have brunch with Ma and Lauren over the weekend.

“For the record, if something happens with us,” Halle said in the backseat of the car, giving me a bleary-eyed smile, “I’m keeping your mom, and you’re just gonna have to be an orphan.”

“Baby, nothing is happening between us,” I assured her, pulling her legs over my lap.

“I dunno. If you keep lying to me...”

“It never came up,” I insisted.

“Oh, what? Thirty or so times we’ve talked about dinner, and it never occurred to you to say *Hey, I can cook!*”

“No, baby, it never occurred to me,” I admitted. “I never cook.”

“Well, now you’re going to be doing it at least twice a month from now until eternity,” she warned me. “And I’ll cook twice a month too.”

“Baby, you don’t have to fucking threaten me,” I said, getting a confused look for a second before she burst into laughter.

And, fuck, I could listen to that sound forever.

I was going to make sure I never did anything to threaten that potential future.

“Oh, and your mom wants to know how many kids we’re going to have,” she added as she snuggled into my chest, yawning already.

Kids.

I’d never given them a thought before.

Even if the thought would have crossed my mind, I would have brushed it away as impossible. I would have thought I was tainted. That my genes were no good. That I couldn’t chance the idea of being like my own father.

Now, though?

Now, I was starting to see that I was nothing like him.

And some part of me was curious to see little Cosimo kids with Halle’s eyes and her warmer heart.

“I told her two,” Halle said, letting out a dreamy sigh.

“Two,” I repeated. “Sounds like a plan.”

Halle - 3 years

“Did you find him?” I asked, hearing the panic in my voice, and knowing I needed to try to keep myself calm. I’d been reading this really eye-opening, yet terrifying, book about how generational trauma could be passed down through maternal emotions during their pregnancy. And I was trying like hell to keep myself as temperate as possible.

But when your elderly grandfather went missing, yeah, you started to get a little anxious.

Cosimo moved forward, pressing a finger over the worry lines between my brows.

“He’s playing poker with Ant and the guys,” he told me, smirking.

I wasn’t the only one who’d really taken to being a part of a big family.

I didn’t think it was possible, but it seemed like my grandfather loved it even more than I did.

Gone were his bologna sandwiches. He was eating dinner at a different family member’s house each night of the week.

He was at every holiday, delighting the next generation of kids with the fantastical stories he’d once told me and my

brother.

And, apparently, he was gambling with the guys.

“I want to be annoyed because I was worried sick, but that’s kind of the cutest thing I’ve ever heard,” I admitted.

“He was kicking their asses, too,” Cosimo said, smirking. “Ant looked a little shellshocked as he lost another hand. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he was cheating.”

Honestly, I wouldn’t put it past the old man.

He used to cheat in board games when we were kids.

The man liked to win.

No sane person would cheat the mafia, but my grandfather knew they would never hurt him, so he felt a certain safety doing it.

“I like that he’s got a whole life going on now,” I admitted as we walked over to the couch. “But I think I need to put a tracker on him or something.” He had a phone that we paid for, so I could track that. But the man never remembered to bring it with him when he went out.

He’d done incredible after the hospital stay and stint in the rehabilitation center, getting way more strength back than he’d had going in. More energy. More mental clarity, even.

He’d gone back to the shop with gusto.

Slowly but surely, though, as he got to know the Costas, he suddenly was okay with me taking over, even with me closing early, so he could get to someone’s table for a meal.

I even needed to hire a staff.

Eventually, he almost fully stepped back, save for the occasional weekend when he had nothing else going on, and liked to go in to teach the new employees some of his endless knowledge of antiques.

The shop was doing twice the amount of business as it had been before. I attributed that to a cleaner, easier to navigate store as well as the online store.

I couldn't help but feel a lot of pride about that.

I'd been so worried all those years I was in school and not feeling a real "pull" to any one career.

Apparently, that was because this was what I was meant to do all along. For the legacy, of course. I planned to give the store to my kids one day. Though I had no delusions about them. If we had sons, they would be in the other *Family* business. But if we had girls? They could have the store and a solid foundation for their futures.

Whitlock Antiques was going to stand the test of time.

I'd even taken over the landlord work, too. Updating the apartments, giving the people who lived there nicer places to call home.

When I thought about it, I'd gotten an incredible amount of things done over the course of three years. All the while getting to know my new family, getting engaged, planning a wedding, building a life, and eventually, starting a family of our own.

We hadn't been in a rush on that.

We both acknowledged we needed more time to establish ourselves first, to work on our own relationship and dynamic. And Cosimo, well, he knew he needed to spend more time with kids before he had his own.

At Christmas dinner, someone had passed a baby to him, and he'd held it like a hot potato with a panicked look on his face.

It had been both hilarious and charming to watch him slowly learn how to interact with different age groups of kids.

The horrified way he would react when a baby cried in his arms. Or got stinky when he was holding them.

The way he could never seem to watch his mouth around toddlers who seemed to be sponges for foul language.

How he talked to young, grade school kids the same way he would to adults, and couldn't understand when they looked up at him with scrunched-brow looks.

The mothers all smiled and assured me that their husbands were the same way before they had their own, and that it really took living with a baby through all of its stages for them to truly understand their development.

I knew Cosimo had been, but I'd never been worried.

Because I got to be on the receiving end of Cosimo Costa's unique brand of love. And it was nothing short of amazing. He would be a great dad. Whether he knew that yet or not.

"Hey, Abby," he said as we sat there and our ancient rescue mutt climbed off of her bed and made her way over to him, begging for his attention as she always did. She hardly cared that I existed, save for when I fed her.

We hadn't chosen Abby.

In fact, I learned that no one in the Costa family actually ever chose their own pets.

On some random day without any warning whatsoever, you just had a knock on your door. And there was Brio. With some creature in his arms that he insisted was your new family member.

"No fucking way," Cosimo said.

"She was fifteen minutes away from being killed, man," Brio said to Cosimo's raised brow look. I'd known him well enough at that time to know he was about to tell Brio to take that dog and leave.

Those words alone had me melting.

I mean, she was scraggly, arthritic, moody, afraid of the elevator, and had only half of her teeth left.

But she needed a home.

I'd never had a pet before.

My father had claimed he'd been allergic. Then I'd been in college and unable to have something even if I wanted to adopt.

"So you take her."

“Got a house full,” Brio said, shaking his head as he reached down to release Abby’s leash. “You got none. House ain’t a home without a pet,” he declared as Abby walked over to Cosimo, sat her little fluffy butt down, and wiggled her tail so hard her whole body shook.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” he said, exhaling hard. Like he already knew he’d lost the battle.

So then... we had a dog.

Cosimo joked sometimes that she was more like half a dog, but as much as he teased her, he loved that damn dog. I constantly came down to find him talking to her, petting her, sneaking her treats even though the vet told us to make sure to keep her weight down for her arthritis.

He’d even had his men build her a potty spot out on the balcony with grass in the summer and mulch in the winter, so she didn’t have to go in the “big, bad elevator” more than absolutely necessary.

“How do you think she’s going to handle the baby?” I asked.

“Well, she’s mostly deaf these days,” he said, reaching down to gently set her on his lap. “She probably won’t even notice he’s here,” he said.

“You’re probably right,” I agreed, scooting closer to Cosimo, feeling his arm go around me. “Can you believe in six weeks, we’re going to finally be able to hold him?” I asked as his hand went to my belly.

“I’m looking forward to shoving him in Silvano’s arms. Gotta make sure we got a camera handy for that,” he said, making my lips curve up.

I was still holding out hope that Silvano would find his person.

The same went for them all, honestly.

All these hard men. They needed a soft place to land.

It was honestly hard to believe at times how much Cosimo had changed since we’d gotten together.

Sure, he was still that cold, cocky prick when it came to work stuff. But he was soft and sweet with me. And I couldn't wait to see him be that way with our baby.

Cosimo - 20 years

It sounded like a fucking brawl was going on in the penthouse.

It probably was.

I'd worked really fucking hard not to make the mistakes of my father.

Unfortunately, our sons still managed to have a similar rivalry as Silvano and I did. Though it lacked the bitterness we used to share. One moment, they were at each other's throats. The next, they were going to go hang out with friends like nothing happened.

Sibling rivalry.

The problem was they were getting bigger.

These weren't the 'toss a building block at your brother's head' days. These were the 'someone is bleeding and bruised' days.

The guys in the family who had sons claimed they would grow out of it.

Halle and I were starting to have our doubts.

"Is it bad that, if it weren't me being afraid for the breakables, I kind of want to turn around and go back out for dessert?" Halle asked as I unlocked the door.

"It's the third fight this month," I said, reaching for the knob. "I get it."

But we were good parents.

We had to go in.

And there they were.

Our sons.

One, seventeen. The other, just shy of sixteen.

Fucking clones of me at their age, both of them. The only difference being our older son got Halle's eyes, and the younger one got mine.

They were both in that stage after a big growth spurt where they seemed to be all limbs and not enough meat on their bones. Despite the fact that we literally couldn't keep enough food in the house because they never fucking stopped eating.

The younger one was in a long hair stage that Halle liked because she thought it made him look younger still.

As expected, they were on the ground, beating the shit out of each other. They never pulled punches, either. They were like fucking feral dogs in a fight.

What neither of us expected, though, was a girl sitting on the couch, looking scared as fuck.

It must have been her presence that made Halle start forward.

I was the one who broke up fights.

They were big kids.

She could too easily get hurt.

Then I'd have to give them a world of hell for hurting their mom. Even though I knew they would feel guilty as hell about it without me going there.

But suddenly, Halle was storming over to those boys that easily outweighed her by fifty pounds each, and several inches.

Reaching down, she grabbed the back of one of their shirts, yanking with everything in her.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing?” she yelled, her voice ferocious enough to make my brows raise. And the boys? Fuck, they looked wide-eyed and terrified.

Because Halle wasn't much of a yeller.

And she rarely cursed like that.

“Acting like a bunch of lowlives in front of a girl? Like you were raised by animals!” she raged at the boys who were both sitting on their asses on the floor, one holding his lip, the other his nose. Both of them bleeding. And looking sufficiently chastened. “How dare you embarrass your father and me like this? The *Family* like this?” she went on, and the boys shared a look of consternation. “And making this poor girl scared of you? That is unacceptable. And there are going to be consequences, do you hear me?” she raged.

“Yes, ma'am,” they chimed immediately, voices low.

“You okay, sweetie?” she asked, all honey-sweet as she turned to the girl.

“Yeah,” the girl said, giving Halle a small smile.

“Melody, I sincerely apologize for how my sons have behaved tonight, making you feel uncomfortable in our home. I will think of a way to make them make this up to you. But until then, can I bring you home?”

“I can—” our younger son said.

The fire was back, making her turn so fast that both our boys stiffened.

“Excuse me, is anyone speaking to you right now?” she snapped.

“No, ma’am,” they chorused.

“I didn’t think so,” she said, then turned back to Melody. “Do you want me to walk you back to your apartment?” she asked, since Melody lived in our building.

“No, thank you. I’m okay,” she said, giving Halle a smile as she moved out from behind the couch. “Thank you,” she added, then started to cross the apartment.

“Mel...” our younger son started to say, but shut right the fuck up when the girl whipped her head in his direction, and pinned him with a look that made my blood run cold.

He *big* fucked up, it seemed.

“Don’t talk to her,” our older son snapped.

“Yeah,” Melody said when she reached the door. “Don’t talk to me.”

With that, she was gone.

But the boys were back to staring at each other like they were about to get into it again.

“Someone better start talking,” Halle said. Then, loud enough to make me fucking jolt, “Now!”

“My plans fell through,” our older son said. “So I came home early. Caught Mel in the elevator. So I figured she was coming up to see him,” he said, then glared at his brother. “But I opened the door to find his fucking ass—“

“Watch it,” Halle snapped.

“To find *him* on the couch with Lani,” he said.

Fuck.

It was worse than I’d imagined.

Lani was our older son’s on-again-off-again girl.

And Mel was our younger son's ex girl that he'd been trying to woo back for a week or two.

"We weren't doing anything," our younger son insisted.

"I know what I saw. Mel knows what she saw. Be a fucking man and own up to it."

"Good men don't settle fights with their hands in front of innocent women. I'm ashamed of both of you tonight," Halle declared. "Go to your rooms. I don't want to see either of you right now."

With that, the boys climbed off the floor, and made their way down the hall.

We'd needed to convert a storage room into a living space, take down a wall of the guest room, then split the bigger space in two to give them each their own space since neither Halle nor I wanted to move. This place had too much meaning to us.

Halle waited for each door to shut before turning to me with a big grin.

"How'd I do?" she asked, bouncing on her heels.

My brows pinched at that. "What?" I asked.

"At being the angry Italian matriarch," she clarified. "I've always watched the women in this family with wonder when they got all loud and bossy. I always wanted to be like that when a situation called for it."

"In that case," I said, lips curving up, "you did fucking great. Almost pissed myself and I wasn't even in trouble."

"So, how do we punish them now?" she asked, coming close, and wrapping her arms around my lower back.

"Dunno. Does the shop need to be catalogued?" I asked, smirking.

"And put them around priceless antiques?" she asked, shaking her head.

"That's a good point," I agreed.

“Hey, isn’t Lorenzo working on the meat shop?” she asked. It recently had a burst pipe that caused major damage and meant it had to be shut down and gutted. “Maybe some hard manual labor with all their uncles breathing down their neck will whip them into shape.”

“They’ll hate it. It’s perfect,” I said, pulling her close.

“Tell me again they’ll grow out of it,” she demanded.

“They will. Hell, even Silvano and I worked it out.”

“And that only took, what, twenty-something years?”

“Exactly. So... we’re getting close with them,” I said. “Another four or so years.”

“I don’t think I’ll make it,” she sighed, pressing her forehead to my chest.

“Remember that time when the kids were in grade school and they both got a stomach virus the same week the dogs got into that food that upset their stomachs too?” I asked, still having some PTSD about that whole situation.

“Oh, God. That was the worst.”

“We made it through that,” I reminded her. “We can make it through this.”

“Turn it down!” one of the boys yelled as the other one put on music.

And, of course, the music got louder.

“Ugh,” she grumbled.

“I’ll get the wine,” I said, pressing a kiss to her head to turn and pour her a glass.

She was a second glass in when one of the bedroom doors opened, and out walked our eldest son, coming around the couch to sit down on the coffee table in front of us.

“I stand by the fact that what he did was wrong,” he started.

“Okay,” Halle agreed.

“But I shouldn’t have handled it in front of Mel and Lani. I’ll apologize to them. And I’m sorry for disrespecting both of you and this family,” he said.

With that, he got up, and went back to his room.

Not five minutes later, our other son came out with his own speech. Where he insisted that he’d been trying to talk up his brother to Lani, and the whole thing was a misunderstanding, but that he was sorry for disrespecting us.

“Well,” Halle said, slipping her legs over my lap, and snuggling in. “I guess we did a good job with them after all.”

“With you as their mom, there was no question about that,” I told her. “They got all their good from you,” I said. “Except for the cooking thing. Thank fuck, they got that from me.”

“Hey, I can’t be perfect,” she said, nuzzling into my neck.

The thing was, she was perfect.

And so was the life we’d built together.

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Shady Valley Henchmen MC

Judge
Crow
Slash
Sway
Detroit

STANDALONES WITHIN NAVESINK BANK:

Vigilante
Grudge Match
The Rise of Ferryn
Counterfeit Love
Of Snakes and Men

OTHER SERIES AND STANDALONES:

Stars Landing

What The Heart Needs
What The Heart Wants
What The Heart Finds
What The Heart Knows
The Stars Landing Deviant
What The Heart Learns

Surrogate

The Sex Surrogate
Dr. Chase Hudson

The Green Series

Into the Green
Escape from the Green

Seven Sins MC

The Sacrifice
The Healer
The Thrall
The Demonslayer
The Professor

Costa Family

The Woman in the Trunk
The Woman in the Back Room

The Woman with the Scar
The Woman on the Exam Table
The Woman with the Flowers
The Woman with the Secret
The Woman on the Jury

DEBT
Dissent
Stuffed: A Thanksgiving Romance
Unwrapped
Peace, Love, & Macarons
A Navesink Bank Christmas
Don't Come
Fix It Up
N.Y.E.
faire l'amour
Revenge
There Better Be Pie
Ugly Sweater Weather
I Like Being Watched
The Woman with the Ring
Love and Other Nightmares
Love in the Time of Zombies
Primal

Under the pen name JGALA:

The Heir Apparent

The Winter Queen

Jessica Gadziala is the USA TODAY Bestselling author of over 100 steamy romance novels featuring all sorts of twisty and turny plots, strong heroines, lovable side characters, steam, and epic HEAs.

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<https://discord.gg/yXCvuWTJ>

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<3/ Jessica