

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

N.J. ADEL

THE ITALIAN

SON

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THE ITALIAN SON

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ALL CHARACTERS DEPICTED ARE OVER THE AGE OF
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Author Note

The Italian Son is part two of a duet and the finale of the Mafia world in the Forbidden Cruel Italians series. It can't be read as a standalone. You'll need to read, at least, *The Italian Dom* first.

You might like to read ***The Italian Obsession*** and ***Savage Crown*** before the duet, too, to avoid spoilers and/or connect with the characters better with the elaborate backstory.

Reading Order:

1. *The Italian Marriage (Standalone)*
2. *The Italian Obsession (Standalone)*
3. *The Italian Dom (Duet part 1)*
- 3.5 *Savage Crown (Intersecting Novella)*
4. *The Italian Son (Duet part 2)*

Trigger Warning:

The whole list. Don't read if you have any!

Dedication

To the dark corners of our minds

To the ruin

To the words I never got to say to you

CHAPTER 1

Ravenna

One Year Ago

I lied under oath.

That was pretty much my job description. All the years of studying the human brain and the psychology behind our nature, the meticulous training, the catcalls, the spitting—prisoners were big on hauling their bodily fluids, and I was glad it was only saliva I'd received so far—the threat of violence every time the door buzzed locked behind me as I entered the interview room, and the confinement with the sickest and dirtiest of minds weren't to make me a forensic psychologist. They were meant to make me a perjurer.

Why, did you ask?

Because I was a debt payment. To the Mob.

No, not the kind that was pretty enough or important enough to be collected in marriage. My flat chest and nerd glasses didn't inspire made men to use me for their sick pleasures and call it a day. Neither did my no longer rich or powerful, drowning-in-debt corrupt ex politician of a father.

Instead I was given the best education to become the shrink who would lie under oath to free convicted mobsters in the state of Illinois.

That's what you get when you skip two years and nerdly blurt out in a school built by the Mafia for the Mafia you wanna be a doctor instead of asking for a boob job like any normal teenager.

God, I fucking hate Chicago.

“Doctor Berlusconi?” Adam Polanski, the defendant’s attorney, yanked me out of my thoughts.

I shifted in the witness stand, clearing my throat. “Yes?”

“Can you tell us what the culprit was thinking when he did *this*?” He pointed at a magnified projection image of a bloody corpse of a woman with multiple stab wounds. The defendant’s murdered wife.

“Objection, Your Honor. The witness can’t know what the defendant was thinking,” the prosecutor said.

But I did. The *defendant* killed his wife after she knew he was cheating on her so she wouldn’t sue his ass and take his money. He’d told me himself with a proud smirk.

“Doctor Berlusconi is an expert witness, Your Honor. She was called in because she’s the defendant’s psychiatrist and she’s an expert in her field,” Polanski said.

Wrong. Despite my intelligence, dedication and Master’s degree, I wasn’t qualified to be an expert. I needed, at least, five more years in the field and a real PhD, not one that was falsified like my new birth certificate—I was almost twenty-two in reality, not twenty-seven—to make me more legitimate for the role. Just like Polanski was paid heavily to make sure a guilty murderer avoided jail time, I was called in to lie for the same reason.

“Overruled. Proceed,” the judge prompted.

I wouldn’t be surprised if Judge DeLuca was particularly selected for this case, too. He and my father played poker together and had bonded over a long history of gambling debts and shady favors. “After examining the defendant, Viktor Safin, who has been my patient for the past three months, my professional diagnosis for him is schizophrenia with paranoia. His paranoid delusions in particular focus on the constant fear of being poisoned. In my professional opinion, on the day of the crime, Safin, in a paranoid delusion of his, believed his wife was trying to poison him.”

“And in your professional opinion, do you believe Viktor intended to murder his wife?” Polanski asked.

“No,” I lied without batting an eye. I’d learned to lie without a single quiver to my body or voice since the moment my father was tied helpless, a knife to his eye, and a gun barrel was shoved into my mom’s mouth right in front of me and my baby brother. “In that moment, Viktor was unable to distinguish reality from delusion. He felt threatened in the midst of his delusional state, and, in his mind, he was defending himself.”

“Thank you, Doctor Berlusconi. No more questions.”

Shame and revulsion tugged at my conscience, but I had to numb it or rather smother it. A violent murder had occurred, and the man sitting at the defendant’s table was as guilty as it got. I wasn’t any less guilty for helping him go free.

But I had no choice.

Well, I did. Everybody had a choice. I chose to free murderous monsters so other violent murders in my family wouldn’t occur. Selfish? Weak? Immoral? Absolutely. But what would you do when the lives of the people you loved the most were at the mercy of brutal criminals, and you were the only one that could spare them?

Say no? Fight? I did, at first. The result was a broken hip, a kidney that couldn’t be salvaged and a scar across my back that would never go away. Then I fought again, which made them realize I didn’t care enough about my life if I’d have to live it with blood on my hands. So they took a life I cared about. My baby brother’s.

Now, what would you have done next?

Yeah, that was what I thought.

“Doctor Berlusconi.” The prosecutor looked me in the eye as it was his turn to cross examine me. Could he see through my blatant lies? Did he know I was nothing but a tool passed among the hands of monsters? Would he do something about it? “You’ve provided a speculated reason as to the murder. In your professional opinion, how do you explain why Viktor Safin instead of simply walking away from the allegedly

poisoned dinner chose to stab his wife, who was almost half his size, twelve times to defend himself?”

Polanski objected, of course. This entire charade was to prove Safin didn't choose to murder his wife and didn't think at any given moment taking her life was wrong or had any criminal intent.

My never-going-to-work-right-again hip screamed at me while I waited for the prosecutor to rephrase.

“You may answer, Doctor.” Judge DeLuca gave me my cue.

“Mr. Safin didn't choose to stab his wife. In fact, when he grabbed the dinner knife from her hand and stabbed her with it, he wasn't stabbing his wife at all.”

The prosecutor cocked a brow. “Then whom was he stabbing?”

“Stan.”

“Stan?”

“Due to Mr. Safin's paranoia, he believed his wife was having an affair with a man named Stan. He also believed Stan was his wife's accomplice in the poisoning attempt and he was lurking in the house that night. During his delusion, Mr. Safin, after he walked away from the dinner table, refusing to eat, he turned and saw Stan in the dining room, sitting in his wife's chair, holding a knife. He believed Stan lunged at him, and so he fought, grabbed the knife and stabbed him in self-defense.”

“Are you telling me and the court that when Viktor Safin plunged a knife into his wife's body twelve times, he thought she was a man called Stan?”

“And Stan was attacking him with the dinner knife he held in his hand, so Mr. Safin defended himself against the attack, yes.”

His head jerked back, arms wide in the air. “Wow. During the course of your treatment of Viktor Safin, has he revealed the last name of Stan or given you any proof that his wife was in fact having an affair?”

“No and no. In my opinion, and after talking to the wife myself during the course of my treatment, Stan doesn’t exist. Only in Safin’s head.”

“How convenient.”

“Objection!”

“Sustained. Careful, counselor.”

The prosecutor gave a short sigh. “Has Viktor Safin given you a physical description of Stan, Doctor?”

“He has.” After coaching him. This whole defense plan was premeditated. From the moment Safin entered my practice, describing his delusions, I knew he was planning something horrible. It’d been the case with all affiliated *patients* who came to see me. Safin was Bratva and was no different. I wasn’t aware of his exact intentions at first, but it didn’t take a genius to know it was a future crime.

I’d pretended to treat him, given him medications—which I was certain he didn’t touch—and even provided counseling to his wife in couples’ therapy. But what he needed me for was filling the gaps and taking the stand. Despite the food poisoning and infidelity history in his wife’s family that could actually trigger the paranoid delusions I testified he had, Safin wasn’t mentally ill. He knew the difference between right and wrong, and when he stabbed his wife twelve times, he knew exactly what he was doing and whom he was killing.

The prosecutor’s lips pursed in obvious irritation. “Care to share, Doctor?”

“Mid-thirties. Over six feet. Blue eyes. Dark brown hair and beard.”

He stared at the defendant and then back at me. “You’re almost describing Viktor Safin himself.”

“The wife had argued the same when she tried to exonerate herself in our sessions, too, and when she urged her husband to stop fighting with Stan on multiple occasions both publicly and in their house. She mentioned she was severely embarrassed and humiliated by Safin’s episodes.” Which were staged to gather enough witnesses to prove the delusions. “But

that was the description my patient gave me. Like I said, I don't believe Stan exists in real life, and it's not uncommon for paranoid patients to project an image of themselves in their delusions."

"Do you think Stan could be a projection of Viktor Safin's own infidelity?"

"Objection!"

The prosecutor referenced proven evidence of Safin's affair so the judge allowed the question.

"It's possible," I said.

"Has Mrs. Safin revealed to you during your sessions that she was aware of her husband's affair?"

"Yes."

"How did she react?"

"She was devastated and angry. She said she was considering having a divorce."

"Did the defendant agree to grant her a divorce?"

"Not that I know of. My observations state Viktor Safin was fond of his wife despite what he believed of her, and he didn't want a divorce. Even his infidelity, to him, was a reflex to hers."

"Is it possible, on the night of the heinous murder, Mr. and Mrs. Safin were arguing about the divorce, as the help has testified, and he suspected she was trying to poison him because he wouldn't grant her the divorce?"

The prosecutor was digging the grave of this case. "It's possible."

"And is it possible, right in that moment, that he was lucid enough to end that argument in blood?"

"Objection, Your Honor. This is—"

"Overruled. Answer the question, Doctor."

"Your hypothesis dictates the defendant wasn't acting under the influence of his delusion when he thought the dinner

his wife had made was poisoned. You're suggesting it was a rational suspicion. If that was the case, then it establishes that Mr. Safin was indeed lucid enough to walk away from the dinner table after the argument, which clearly indicates he had no intention to retaliate or harm his wife. What would motivate him to return and stab his wife to death? If that was his intention, why didn't he do it in the heat of the argument?

“On the other hand, his wife, if she did poison him, would be the one inclined to finish the task, don't you think? So perhaps, based on your hypothesis, Mrs. Safin attacked her husband with the dinner knife, and he, whether you assume he was in a delusion or not, still killed his attacker in self-defense.

“But the witnesses—”

“The answer to your question is no, Counselor. In my professional opinion, which is the only thing I'm here to give, it was when Safin looked back at his wife's seat on his way out that the delusion of Stan attacking him manifested and thus Safin defended himself. Your hypothesis contradicts my documented findings and diagnosis. Everything else regarding this case is your job to prove or discredit.”

A flash of anger stained his face. I was sure after this argument, Polanski's irresistible impulse insanity defense would hold, and Viktor Safin would walk away with murder. I assumed the prosecutor had reached the same conclusion when he marched toward his table. “I'm done. No more questions, Your Honor.”

I wished I'd been done, too. With my profession, with the state of Illinois, with the Mob.

With everything.

CHAPTER 2

Leo

You always hurt the ones you love.

When she hurt me, did she love me? I knew I loved her when I did.

Even now, a year later of getting my bones smashed and teeth shattered, of having the sickest fuck of the Lanzas mark every inch of my skin with his fucking knife, literally cutting pieces of me, I was still obsessively in love with Lina Baldi.

The girl that put me under her spell before I even saw her face. The woman that stood in white next to me, vowing to be mine forever. The bitch who took my last name, only it wasn't me who gave it to her.

Why?

The infinite questions spun in circles in my head every day since I'd been captured. They tortured me as hard as Domenico Lanza did.

Why when I closed my bruised eyes did I still see the green ones and the fragile smile that lied to me? Why in the quietness of the dark did the sound of her violin echo louder than the resonating pain of my fissuring skin? Why as the taste of my blood sickened me did I only wish it was replaced by her taste even though I'd never had a chance to know what it was?

Why wouldn't my heart stop beating, stop screaming her name? Why was the memory of her face the only thing keeping me alive? Why when she'd betrayed me did I still want to protect her from the monster she chose over me?

Why did I always fall for a woman who wouldn't choose me? Why hadn't I fallen for someone like Nicky Baldi? One who, unlike Lina, unlike Sia, remained faithful to the man

she'd promised herself even when she saw him for the monster he truly was?

With my swollen gaze, I stared at the feisty blonde that was supposed to be *my* sister-in-law, who stood in front of my cage in shock, refusing to believe my words that were the blatant truth because she was loyal to her man. "Congratulations, by the way. You followed your sister's lead and got yourself a Mob husband, and I thought you were the smart one."

"Shut the fuck up. You don't know the first thing about me or Lina or Dom," she spat.

My heart fluttered and cursed at the sound of her name. If Lina was as half as faithful as her sister, none of this shit we were all in would have happened. As much as I needed to win Nicky over, I admired her devotion for Domenico Lanza. "I know one thing. Something you and I have in common, maybe Lina, as well, and I think you know it, too."

She banged the shovel in her hand against the cage metal bars. "You don't get to say her name on your filthy tongue, and I have nothing in common with *you*."

"So we weren't both tools in Tino Bellomo's hands? People he lured into his world no matter how hard we rejected and fought it? People he chewed and spat after we became exactly what he wanted?"

I snarled. How could a father fuck his son over like that? How could he do all these horrible things and act like he was a caring, loving human fucking being? Why was I in a cage, hated and forsaken, when he was the one that pushed me over the edge into the black hole of the world he ruled? How, after all the damage he'd done, could Lina choose him over me?

Fire seared my insides, eating what was left of my soul. "Think about it, Nicky. I didn't want to be a made man. I'd stayed away from the Mafia all my life until I fell in love with your sister so much I gave up my good life for her." And he fucking took her away from me. "I went through with my initiation just so he'd protect her until I could. And he agreed, using my love for her only so I'd be his underboss, even though he wanted her for himself all along." My smashed

hands clawed into maimed fists as I tugged at the rusty chains. “Even though he had no fucking intention of letting her go.”

“Shut up.”

I groaned with pain and wrath. “And then there’s you. You loved your school and hated the Mob more than anything. How did you end up marrying a sick fuck like Domenico before you even graduated? I take it it wasn’t your choice, and I have a good guess who forced you into it, until you no longer knew yourself, until you’ve been shaped into what he always wanted you to be.”

“I said shut up.”

“After a while, it makes you think the world you’ve long rejected has been what you’ve always wanted right from the start, thinking he was doing you a favor, opening your eyes, forcing you to see what you didn’t want to see for *your own good*. Sounds familiar? It sounds too fucking familiar to me.”

“Shut up. Shut up! SHUT UP!” The shovel bellowed against the bars, echoing her anger, mirroring mine, before she fell to her knees.

“I could see it on your face, fucking hear it in your voice, Nicky. How much of a fool you think you are, and how much you fucking hate my father for getting you here, for letting you get used like that.” I knew it because I felt as irrelevant and stupid as she felt. “Everything that has happened was because of him. I know how much you want him dead. I know it because I feel it, too. Another thing we have in common. Our hate for Sebastiano fucking Bellomo.” Although no one would ever hate him as much as I did.

She didn’t say anything. She wasn’t looking at me anymore. But I knew she listened.

“I should have never shot at your sister. It was the worst mistake I’ve ever made, and I’m paying for it with my life.” I meant that. They said people like me didn’t feel guilt or remorse. They said we were incapable of love, too. I wished it’d been true. I wished I’d never fallen in love with Lina or Sia before her. I wished I hadn’t been eaten by all that regret. I

should have learned from my mistake with Sia. I should have learned to control it. But how could I've let my wife live to breathe another man's air? How could I've let her heart beat with another man's name?

"If I got a do over, I'd make it right." I meant that, too. Even if it was the last thing I got to do. "I'd kill Tino Bellomo, and I didn't care if I was shot dead right after it."

"Shut up, you son of a bitch," she whispered. If I didn't know her well enough, I'd think she was sobbing.

She didn't want me to shut up. She wanted me to live up to my word. I was one step away from getting Nicky to put our differences aside so we could get what we both had wanted since my father dug his stinky claws into my wife. So I could finally be free. "Domenico always comes from this door, the one that opens to your playroom. He never enters the way you came in. That was only for the soldiers who clean up after him. It's been two days since they changed the buckets, which means they're not coming today—"

"No." She jumped to her feet, but her eyes flickered toward the playroom door.

C'mon, Nicky, be a good—or bad—girl, and take the bait. Get me the fuck out of here. I know you want to.

"No!" She jabbed a finger in my direction. "I know what you're doing here, but I'm not falling for this shit. You're no better than him. You're no better than either of them. If anything you're worse. I won't be used or manipulated again. I'm not falling for this shit!"

Worse? How was I worse than Don Bellomo, the fucker who burned people alive, who got his wife and unborn baby slaughtered because of his greed, who stole his son's bride, who fucking raped my wife, her sister, and ruined all of our lives?

How was I worse than the Lanzas' animal, the sadist who flayed his victims and fed them his cum before he chopped them to pieces and fed them to the coyotes, the man who had been using his wife for revenge?

Yes, I had no control over my compulsions or anger. Yes, I hurt the people I loved. But my father and her husband were no different. Besides, had anybody tried to see how those I loved the most had hurt me first? How had they torn me to pieces with their lies, deceit and betrayal? How had they taken everything from me and left me all alone?

I might be an asshole, a psycho fuck, the bad guy, but I wasn't the only one. At least, I was trying to fix that one mistake that brought everything to the ground. "I'm the only one who can take down the man we hate the most, and you know it. I'm your last chance at it, Nicky, so let me do what I was supposed to do a year ago. Let me fix it for the both of us."

"It's too late."

"No, it's not. If Tino is gone, the Lanzas would no longer care about retaliation on any other Bellomo. You'll be free. You'll get your life back."

"What about my sister?"

I smiled internally. That question only meant one thing. Nicky was considering helping me escape. I just had to choose my next words carefully and say the right thing to convince her to open that cage.

"I know you can't trust me, and I'm not stupid to ask you to. But use your head. I have no crew, and he has an army and the Lanzas to take me down. I'd be shot on the spot before I'd even blink, let alone do anything to your sister...but I won't let them shoot me until I put a bullet in Il Lupo's brain first." The picture of my father's head and blood splattered on a wall sent a jolt of ecstasy through me. I glanced at the playroom door. "Domenico hasn't returned yet, which means he isn't coming back tonight. He never takes that long of a break. If you hurry and use that shovel, you can break the lock and shackles in no time."

"I can't do this. I'll be a traitor. They'll kill me. I can't do this."

“No one has to know. Just get me out of here like they do with the shit. If we get caught, I’ll say I forced you. I’ve been banging those bars with my feet and loosening up the shackles for a while now. You could say I broke the cage and stole that shovel from you, threatened you or whatever.”

“No. No. Jesus, you’re the fucking devil.”

“If I’m the devil, what does that make of Don Bellomo?”

Her silence told me I was close to win.

“C’mon, Nicky. You have the power to fix everything. Free me so I can save us all from the monster called Sebastiano Bellomo. I know you want it. You know deep inside it’s the only way to truly save yourself and your sister from any future fucked up shit you’ll be manipulated into doing.”

She stared at me, her breath catching, her jaws parting and snapping and clenching.

I pulled at my chains, lifting my body with a growl, doing my best to stand straight. “So what’s it gonna be, Nicky? Are you strong enough to do what has to be done?”

Her gaze wavered as she shook her head, but then she stepped toward me, eyeing the deadbolt and padlock on the cage door. My heartbeat sped at the springing hope of freedom. After a year of torture and captivity, I’d never thought I’d see the sun or Lina’s face again. Now, as demons haunted Nicky’s approaching eyes, not only could I get out of here alive, but also I could win the war Don Bellomo thought I’d lost.

Shaking, she touched the bars. My heart pulsed in my temples as the moment I’d long anticipated had finally come. “Thank you, Nicky. You’re doing the right thing to save your sister.”

Suddenly, she stopped and shot a glare at me. “Fuck you.”

Icy cold waves of trepidation hit me, as if the remaining of my blood rushed out of my body, when she turned on her heels and headed where she came from.

“No. No! Nicole, come back here. You’re making a mistake. You’re making a fucking mistake!”

CHAPTER 3

Ravenna

One Year Ago

MOB BITCH.

The angry blood red graffiti on my practice door welcomed me back to Highland Park. It wasn't hard to guess who did it. Someone who wasn't afraid of the Mob to call it out like that. Someone who was in the Mob, but didn't like the team I played for on the Safin's trial.

See, Viktor and his wife belonged to two different families. He was Russian, and she was Italian, just like my parents. But as Viktor had explained to me, his wife wasn't on good terms with her family when she married him—she was a traitor's daughter or whatever—so her death and his acquittal wouldn't instigate retaliation issues.

The graffiti begged to differ. Did that mean The Italians were after me now?

I grabbed my bag and headed back to the car. A call to the Russians was in order. Not that I was afraid of torture or death. Not as long as it was mine. I deserved it. I had blood on my hands, and there hadn't been a day since my brother died that I didn't wish for my life to end, too.

Texting Safin, I inserted the key into the ignition. I hesitated for a second before I turned it. What if they set the car to explode? I was only gone for two minutes. It was highly doubtful they'd had enough time to set the explosive device, but made men were more than skilled at performing their criminal activities. Besides, the device could be ignited by a controller they had and not the ignition. Shit.

Swiftly, I grabbed my stuff and the gun in the glove compartment and practically ran away from the car. I should have headed straight home once I arrived in town. If I could, I would avoid any time spent in that house for the rest of my life, but I should have checked on Papa.

Jumping into the next cab, I called him. *Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring.* Shit.

I asked the driver to speed as much as he could and called Papa again. “Please, pick up.”

My heart contracted at the long, annoying ringing. Why wouldn't he pick up the phone? Something wasn't right. My mind pictured the worst and most vicious scenarios.

“Could you please hurry?” My voice was higher than I intended. Being rude to the poor driver wasn't going to solve anything.

He swore in Russian before and after he said he was going as fast as he could. I might have taken my mother's last name lately, but I was as fluent in Russian as I was in English and Italian. I pretended I didn't understand what he called me, though, because if I didn't, I'd unfairly pour all the agitation and trepidation swirling inside me now on him. He was impolite but not at fault for what might happen to my family. I was.

I texted Safin, who hadn't answer me yet, again, praying, as if God would listen to someone like me, Papa was safe. Eyes darting between what seemed to be a never ending road to the house and the dark screen of my phone, I popped in a Prozac.

After five minutes of trying to reach Papa and blowing Safin's burner with texts, the cab finally reached my house. I threw some money at the driver and sprang out of the cab, his Russian curses trailing behind me.

The phone vibrated in my hand as I almost ripped my bag, grabbing the gun and looking for the keys. Swiftly, I answered. “What took you so long? They're after me, and I can't get hold of my father.”

“The Italians aren’t that naive, Doc. If they wanted you dead, they wouldn’t send you a ridiculous message, you’d be dead.”

Son of a bitch. “How reassuring.”

He chuckled. “Relax. I promised you and your father protection, and you’ll have it. But I know you don’t need it, so get your shit together. They’re probably just scaring you because they want something from you. You know the drill by now.”

With that he just hung up. I stabbed the keyhole and barged into the house, anger and anxiety kicking despite the pill. “Papa! Papa, where are you?!”

I dropped everything on the console except for the gun and tiptoed down the hall to his bedroom. The door was ajar, the late afternoon sun spilling out of it. I got the gun ready and carefully pushed the door open. “Papa.”

There was no glimpse of him or his wheelchair. I checked the bathroom, too, and it was empty. Fuck.

I raced back to the main hall, not bothering to look upstairs. He hadn’t been up there since he lost the function of his legs after my brother’s funeral. “Papa!”

“Ravenna, I’m here.” His wheelchair appeared from the lounge, and I could finally breathe.

I ran toward him, putting the gun down. “Jesus, Papa. Why aren’t you answering your—” The words stuck in my throat when a man in a black suit emerged behind my father, grabbing hold of the wheelchair.

“Sorry, malyshka.” Papa swallowed as the man in the suit pried the gun out of my hand. “We have guests.”

“Doctor Berlusconi.” The man gestured at the lounge as if it was his own house, and I was the guest. “Join us, per favore.”

Sweat trickling down the back of my silk blouse, I followed without a word; I didn’t even try to fight for the gun.

When I entered, I spotted another man on the couch. Late thirties. Light beard. Tattoos of skulls and thorns around his wrist. His suit was gray and much more expensive than that of the other man. I presumed the one who took my gun was the bodyguard, and the man watching our TV, making himself comfortable in our own home, was the boss.

“I love this movie,” the boss said without looking at me. “Come watch with me, Doc.”

I wouldn’t leave my father’s side. I held tight to his arm. “Thanks, but I just got back from Chicago. I’m too tired to enjoy a movie right now. How may I help you, Don Lanza?”

He uncrossed his legs and slowly turned his head toward me, a sickening smile on his face. “You know who I am?”

It wasn’t hard to guess. Safin’s wife was Nina Lanza, Enzo Lanza’s cousin. “I’ve never had the pleasure to meet you before, but you don’t need an introduction.”

He pierced me with a steel gaze for long blood curdling moments. “And yet you did what you did in court, freeing the coward prick that killed my cousin.”

I blinked once. “I’m sorry for your loss. But Viktor Safin suffers from a serious mental illness. He is my patient, and I had to testify in court, describing his—”

“Cut the bullshit, Doc. Lying will only make things worse.”

Papa squeezed my hand, his pale blue eyes wrinkling, beseeching me to comply. I sighed, too tired to defy but also too sick of everything my life had turned to be.

“Then I won’t waste your precious time. I’m sure you have more important things to do than redecorate my practice door or watch TV.” I grabbed a chair and sat next to Papa. “Now, to what do we owe the honor of your visit, Don Lanza?”

The Mob boss smirked and gave a small nod. “Let’s put it that way. You helped the murderer of one of my own walk free. In our book, I think you know what that means.”

“Please, Enzo. She’s just a kid. If you want to retaliate, I’m right in front of you, but leave her alone,” Papa begged.

I didn't know if it was Safin's call or how much I'd come to know of the Mafia code by now or the Prozac or if it was me being fed up with this bullshit, but I wasn't afraid of Lanza's empty threat. If he wanted me dead, we wouldn't be having this conversation at all. I nudged Papa to stop talking and looked at Lanza right in the eye. "I do know what it means. It means I owe you one."

Lanza chuckled at my father. "Your girl is smart, Chernov." His glance returned on me. "Too smart for her own good."

Papa mumbled a plea in Russian at me, again asking me to comply. The man that once had been so strong, whose footsteps alone instigated fear wherever it landed, whose word was heard and obeyed, was now so weak and frightened and humiliated. Crippled in every sense of the word.

"How's your mamma, Ravenna?" Lanza asked. "Is she still...not well?"

A lump clogged my throat. Why would he bring her up? Was it a threat or a preface?

"I hear she's in Filicudi now," he continued.

"You heard correctly."

"Nice island. Have you visited her lately?"

I shook my head, the lump in my throat growing. "I'm not very welcome there."

"But she's your mamma. You gotta check on her."

"She doesn't want to see me. I'm sure you know why." I killed her baby boy, and she'd been suffering from PTSD since. She'd left us and decided to go back to Italy, where she locked herself up in a mental institution in Filicudi. Her bellowing screams at me the last time I tried to visit still echoed in my ears.

Lanza leaned forward, menace darkening his eyes. "I think I'm not making myself clear. Like you eloquently said, you owe me, so you *will* go to Filicudi to *check on your mother* because I need you there and that's the only way we can settle that score."

Confusion clouded my mind. “How?” It couldn’t be about a case. “I’m not licensed to testify in Italy.”

He snorted. “I don’t need you in court, Doc. Courts are for pussies like that pig Safin.”

“Then why did you let him go to court? Why didn’t you solve the situation with him the way pussies don’t, Don Lanza?”

“Ravenna,” Papa said, shocked.

Lanza raised a hand in my father’s direction, his lips stretching with another sickening grin. “If that piece of shit married my Nina with my blessing and did what he did, believe me, he wouldn’t have made it to court. But Vincenzo had pumped enough of his treacherous and greedy blood into his daughter to make her as stupid as he was. She thought the Russians would help her gain a better status after what her father did. She disobeyed me and married Safin without my consent. Look what that got her.” He let out a sigh. “It doesn’t mean I won’t avenge her death, of course. Blood is blood.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“To make you understand I’m a strict believer in retribution. Everybody has to pay for their mistakes.”

He let his cousin die in retribution, and she was his blood. I wasn’t, so what would he do to me? I pushed my glasses up my nose and pursed my lips. “Why do you need me in Filicudi, Don Lanza?”

He smiled again. “To be a shrink. Isn’t that your job?”

“You have a patient there? Is that what it’s all about, you want me to treat someone in Filicudi?”

“Not exactly. What I want is for you to run that nuthouse your mamma is in.”

“Run it?”

“A nice promotion, vero?”

Absolutely. Running a mental facility would be a dream coming true. I’d finally be a real doctor, one who treated real

patients, not criminals who wanted a free get out of jail card. But why would Enzo Lanza offer me a reward when he should be punishing me? Something wasn't right. "What's in Filicudi, Don Lanza? Or should I say who?"

Taking a deep breath, he nodded at his bodyguard. The man in the black suit left my father's wheelchair and reached inside the pocket of his jacket, his gun showing on his side. Then he gave me a photo.

The second I laid eyes on the man in the photo, my heart skipped a beat. "He's... After what happened in Chicago, I didn't think... Is he still alive?"

Lanza rolled his eyes and grunted. "His father's wish."

I nodded, shaking, not knowing how to feel or respond. I hadn't seen that face in years. He hadn't changed much since the last time I saw him, and many memories I'd locked away came rushing in, invading me like a hurricane.

"How do you know him?"

"Anybody who lives here knows who Leo Bellomo is and what happened between him and his father," I answered carefully, not taking my eyes off the picture.

"I'm asking how *you* know him."

Was my body language giving away too much? "We...we went to school together." That was all I volunteered.

"Ah, I keep forgetting you were one of those Bellomo kids."

That was a lie. He knew exactly where I went to school and why I became who I was now. But what else did he know to choose me for whatever dirty mission he had in mind? "Is he in Filicudi? In the same mental institution my mom is in?"

"Well, that's where you come in."

My eyes darted up at him as I finally grasped what he was asking me to do. A wave of coldness washed over my body as my skin rose in goosebumps. "No. Please. Not him. Anyone but him."

He cocked a brow. “Why not?”

“Because...” I quivered, hesitant to answer. “Because Sebastiano Bellomo is the only Mafia boss that hasn’t asked me to do his dirty work for him. Not even after he let me finish my education at his school when we no longer could afford it. I’m in debt to him. Betraying him is the last thing I want to do.”

“Tino has been my friend and ally before you were even born, Ravenna. This has nothing to do with Tino and everything to do with his fucking son who betrayed us all.”

“But—”

“What would the man you’re so grateful to do when he knew that your mamma’s real last name wasn’t Berlusconi?”

I gasped, my heart sinking to my knees. No one knew that secret. How did he know?

“What would he do when he knew, all this time, he’d been taking in a *Seppi* kid at his school?” Lanza knew exactly how to silence me.

I froze in place, not even able to breathe.

“Enzio, you can’t do this,” Papa rasped. “If Tino knew my wife belonged to the family that killed his, he’d burn us alive. Isn’t it enough what has happened to us already? My boy is dead before he even got a chance to live. I’m in a fucking wheelchair for the rest of my life, and my wife has lost her mind. I don’t care about what happens to me, but my daughter doesn’t deserve this. Stop making my children pay for my mistakes.”

“Then knock some sense into your daughter’s head.” Lanza switched his gaze toward me. “Not only will I be more than happy to keep your secret, but if you take the job I’m offering, all your debt will also go away.”

“You mean she’ll never have to do any more favors to any Mob family ever again?” Papa asked.

“Si, si. She’ll be free to do however she pleases.”

“Malyshka,” Papa squeezed my hand, “do you hear this? You won’t have to lie in court again or deal with any of those men. All you have to do is this one last job, and it’ll be over. You’ll be free, Ravenna. You’ll finally be safe and free.”

My heart thrummed in my ears as tears dropped from my eyes onto Leo’s photo.

“Please listen to the man, Ravenna. Please, malyshka. *Please.*”

CHAPTER 4

Leo

When life drowned you in despair and cruelty, you didn't know who you'd become once you resurface.

In here, I had nothing left. As time passed and every breath of mine felt shared with my tormenter or the agony he caused, space turned into vacuum and so did my soul.

Except when it came to her.

I tried to forget. I tried to give in. But she was always there. I didn't want to love. I didn't want to feel. I didn't want to hope. But she was always there.

Love wasn't meant to exist with my sins. Emotions were a curse so bright it squeezed shadows out of my darkness, forcing me to see it all without a chance to hide. And hope, the worst of them all, compelled me to relive desires I'd smothered to survive.

I'd managed to stay alive in torture for a year, feeding on the hopeless fantasies of my twisted mind. With the hope Nicky had given me and then brutally yanked away, I had to face truths I'd ignored for so long I wasn't sure I'd recover from them anymore.

The chains rattled against my growls of wrath and pain as my bleeding feet kicked the cage bars hard enough to make them bleed some more.

A breath whiffed in from the side. One I'd recognize for what was left of my life. My jailer's.

"I was gonna get him out, but it wasn't safe yet. You think I don't know we're fucked?" the Lanza dog seethed, a phone on his ear as he rushed in from the secret door. "I'll handle it."

"Look who's back for more." My eyes darted at him. "What, you couldn't find your woman waiting in bed to take care of the hard-on you get every time you're done with me?"

He hung up, his eyes sweeping the place, glowing in the dark like those of a beast about to tear his prey. “Where the fuck is she? What did you say to her?”

I laughed as he spotted the broken door. “You just missed her...and all the secrets we shared. I wished you’d been here to listen to the heartfelt conversation we’d had yourself.”

He dashed toward the exit Nicky had taken. “I’ll deal with you later, you fucking prick.”

“Can’t fucking wait.”

He stopped in his tracks as the door squeaked ajar. His tall frame blocked the view, but it wasn’t hard to guess who froze him in place. A sated smile burst on my swollen lips.

“Nicky,” Domenico whispered.

“Who was on the phone?” Nicky’s voice was sharp as steel.

“Nicky—”

“Who were you speaking to when you said you knew you were fucked because of my knowing your dirty little secret?” she interrupted, her head popping above his shoulder as she tried to go past him and get back in here.

He blocked her way, gripping her shoulders. “Baby, just come with me.”

“Don’t. Baby. Me.” She shrugged away, the shovel in her hand wobbling like her chin. “And don’t touch me.”

“Okay.” He raised his hands in surrender. “Just come with me, and I’ll explain.”

“No. I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what the fuck Leo Bellomo is doing here.”

“Busted,” I sang, and then I laughed again.

“Shut the fuck up! What did you tell her?!” he barked.

She used the moment of distraction to enter the room. “That he couldn’t have escaped Filicudi because he’d never been there. Because you fucking had him all along!”

His head whipped toward her. “Don’t listen to this fuck. He’s lying.”

Am I now?

“Is he?” She spat. “So when we got the news that he broke out of the loony bin on Christmas, he wasn’t here?”

Domenico’s hands clenched into fists as he gritted his teeth, shaking his head.

“Remember when I had to stay in the mansion, in forced proximity with you because of it, and when you lured me back to my place, pretending to be protecting me from him, only to be alone with me, only so you could fucking play your game that forced me to marry you?”

Domenico wiped both hands over his face and then pressed them together under his chin, rocking them in regret. So fucking Italian. What was he really remorseful for? Playing her or getting caught?

“And when you said that he left Italy so you could bring me here and fucking ruin me forever,” her hair bounced off her shoulders and some of it got stuck to her sweaty forehead as her whole body shook with rage, “you didn’t have him chained in your fucking cage?”

“Oh, he did,” I chuckled. “But don’t listen to me. I’m the fucking liar.”

He shrieked, baring his teeth at me. “I’m gonna kill you if you don’t shut the fuck up.”

I managed to shrug. “Is that a promise you intend to keep, sweetheart, or are you just full of shit like you’ve always been?”

“Yes, Dom, what kind of promise are you making now? Oh, I know. The only kind you do. The kind you never intend to keep because it just serves a purpose, and it doesn’t matter who you lie to or hurt or kill to get what you and la famiglia want.”

He took a step toward her, but she held up the shovel as a weapon between them. “Don’t fucking come near me, you

lying son of a bitch.”

“Nicky, just drop the shovel and come with me. I’ll explain.”

“I said I’m not leaving here until you tell me the truth. Who was on the phone?”

She was wasting her time, asking the wrong question. She shouldn’t be asking or talking at all. She should be plotting her revenge and taking merciless actions to execute it. She should have just let me out and let me handle that motherfucker she married and all the other motherfuckers he was their bitch. “I think we all know the answer to that question, Nicky.”

She glanced between me and him. “It’s Enzo, isn’t it? You and him arranged for all this.” She pointed at the cage. “Leo’s punishment for breaking the engagement with Claudia is this, and I…” A bitter snort erupted from her throat. “I am Tino’s punishment. The Lanzas make him pay for not keeping his son in check by ruining his sister-in-law.”

Wrong. Legitimate deduction, but no. It wasn’t that simple. Besides, Enzo and my father were two asses in one pair of underwear. The Lanza Capo wouldn’t have played Tino that bad.

“No, Nicky. You were never part of any payoff, I swear. I married you because I’ve wanted you from the first moment I laid eyes on you, since I saw you at Tino’s restaurant on Valentine’s Day with your sister, before that fuck even proposed to her,” Domenico said.

“Oh, how romantic. And I’m supposed to just take your word for it?” she mocked.

I had to say I believed him, and not because his voice was dripping with honesty; all of us could lie on demand without a blink. I believed him because I knew, without a doubt, who was behind my punishment.

“If you don’t believe me ask Tino,” he said, wounded.

“Tino?” She nodded pensively. “You know what, Dom? The only reason I might believe what you said is what I heard when you returned to your torture room. When you came in,

you were looking for me, knowing I was here, and whoever was on the phone was the one who told you. It couldn't be Enzo because my sister is the only one who knew I suspected something was happening down here. She was worried, and when I didn't call her back, she must have called again and again, but there was no reception all the way to this room. She must have freaked out, and of course, asked Tino for help... and *he* called you..."

"Bingo!" I wheezed an attempt for a deep breath, but all I could sniff in was blood and fury. "The answer to every fucked up, diabolical, unruly question is always *Tino*."

"It's him, isn't it? Your bestie and you have plotted all this together. A favor for a favor. You keep his boy where he can never break free, punish him for what he did, and he gives you the girl." She laughed bitterly and then moaned. "I can't believe I was that stupid."

"No, Nicky, no! Fuck! Tino never decided to give you to me until that day I lied to him about sleeping with you. What we have, you and I, has nothing to do with anything between the Lanzas and the Bellomos, and it's never been part of any famiglia plan or any plan whatsoever." He approached her, his eyes locked on hers. "Yes, I lied to you about having Leo here, but everything I've done, every lie, every act of revenge, every step in my plan to make you mine was just for that, to make you mine."

She snorted. "So Tino Bellomo wasn't the mastermind behind this charade?"

He just shook his head.

"Then who is it?" she asked.

Yeah, Dom, who the fuck put me in this shithole and made you my jailer?

His jaw clenched. "You know I can't tell you. You're just gonna have to trust me on this one, baby, like you trusted me with everything else."

"Trust you?" She giggled. "Oh my God. I might have been an idiot for so long that you believe I can still trust anything

you say or do, but no more.”

“Please, Nicky. I’ll do anything to prove what I’m saying. Just give me some time.”

“You’ll do anything?”

“Yes. Even if you want me to go on my knees and beg, I will. You know I won’t do that for anyone, but only for you, I will.”

“Make him do it,” I said. “Who doesn’t like a good groveling?”

He swore at me while she squinted at him. “I have something better in mind,” she said.

“Anything you want,” he emphasized.

She tilted her chin up, her gaze darkening. “Kill him.”

What now?

“Kill Bellomo, Dom.”

He stared at her in disbelief while I managed to blink. “Uh...you might wanna be a little more specific.”

“Tino. I want you to kill Tino Bellomo,” she said.

Phew. Yeah, I can live with that, although I’d rather I did it.

“It’s the only way to believe you. If Tino isn’t the one who was on the phone, it means you went behind his back and imprisoned his son,” she continued. “You betrayed him once. You can do it again.”

“Nicky, baby, you’re not thinking straight. Are you even listening to yourself right now? Let’s say I’m that fucking traitor who would do something that low, what about you? Do you think your sister will ever forgive you for betraying her?”

“My sister’s forgiveness is my business not yours.”

“And betraying her? Please.” I snorted a snarl. “She’ll be doing her a favor.”

Domenico mustered an angry ball of phlegm and spat in my direction. “Well, here’s your sanity check, baby. If Leo

Bellomo thinks something is a good idea, it means it's time to steer away from it.”

“Maybe, but not when it comes to Tino,” she said.

Atta girl. Cazzo. I sounded a lot like him now.

“I’m not gonna kill Tino Bellomo, Nicky. I already told you why.”

“I think we’re past the loyalty shit you kept talking about, and if you’re worried about retaliation, look around you. Who’s gonna retaliate for his death? I’ll take care of my sister, and you already have his son. You can kill him, too, for all I care.”

I scowled. “Aww, and I thought we were friends.”

He looked at her like she was the insane one here. “Nicky, what you’re asking for is impossible.”

“Of course, because you’re a lying son of a bitch who cooked all this with Tino.”

“No, Nicky. You don’t understand! Cazzo!” He ran his hands through his hair, and then he reached for her arm. “Just come with me. Let me get you out of here before that fucker gets more into your head.”

She flinched away. “I’m leaving, but not with you.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I’m out of here, out of this house, out of this country, out of your fucking life forever.”

“Nicky,” he sighed, “now it’s not the time for joking.”

“Well, how about that for a joke?” She spun and sashayed to the door.

He grabbed her wrist. “You know I won’t let you do that.”

She yanked herself out of his grip. “Too bad because I’m not asking permission.”

“Fuck this shit.” He held both her arms and spun her in his direction. “You’re not going anywhere. You’re mine, and I’ll never let you go. Don’t ever forget that.”

The man who was groveling a second ago showed his true animalistic colors, protecting his territory. That was what I should have done with Lina. Shot Tino and then grabbed her, no matter how much she hated me, and took her away, showing her that she was mine no matter what. I should have never let her go. Even in my moment of madness, I should have never given up. That was how Domenico got his girl. That was how my father made my wife his.

But how was I supposed to silence the voices that demanded my own destruction before anyone else's? How was I supposed to see beyond the raging fear when that one image of abandonment blackened my eyes?

Domenico and Tino might have their own demons, but they didn't have the voices or the fear. I did, and she was the only one who could take them away. Without her, I was lost, drowning among the shadows and the deadly noises.

"I'll never forgive you! Never! Don't touch me! Let me go!" Nicky's shouts as she fought her husband off filled the place. Hearing someone else's screams—not mine—in this room was refreshing. How would the lovers' quarrel end? Who would win this round?

"I don't care if you hate me or never forgive me for the rest of your life. I'll never let you go. You're mine. Do you hear me? Mine."

"Fuck you." She elbowed him in the jaw. "I said don't touch me."

Blood trickled from his mouth, but he didn't back down. He lunged at her, and she waved the shovel. Amused by tonight's entertainment, I watched, waiting it out, betting on Nicky even though I—and she—knew she had no chance. But who knew? Maybe she would be able to do what I couldn't. *Fly away, birdie. At least, one of us will be out of the cage.*

But it was when a *thwack* hit my ears that things got really interesting. As in I didn't see that one coming.

I had to blink twice to make sure what I'd just seen was real. My eyes zeroed in on Domenico's large body as it

tumbled on the concrete, and then on the blood pooling around his head.

I dragged my gaze up to Nicky, who was standing with the shovel in her hand, her brows hooked, her stare pinned in terror to silent, bleeding Domenico.

A laugh burst out of me in chunks. “Oops.”

CHAPTER 5

Leo

“Dom,” Nicky mumbled in shock as she fell to her knees next to her husband. “Dom, wake up. You can’t just...lie there.” She pressed her palm against his skull and listened for his breath. Then, gasping, she stared at me. “Is he dead?”

I hope not. That would be too easy. He’s been cutting pieces of me for a whole year. He deserves to feel the same pain first before he dies.

“I don’t know.” It was strange she was asking me. She must have been that devastated to seek any kind of solace from me. Or maybe she thought I was the expert when it came to killing. “I can’t tell from here.”

Her nostrils flared as she glared at me. Did she think I was tricking her into getting me out? I wasn’t. Well...maybe a little.

She shot to her feet and marched to the door, sniffing.

“No. Where are you going?”

“To get help.”

“Nicky, Nicky, listen to me. The second his soldiers walk into this room, you’re no longer safe.”

“I don’t care. I can’t let him die. I have to save him.”

“You have to care. Those men won’t bother if you’re his wife. They’ll capture you, and they’ll send you to either Enzo or Tino. These are the men that will decide your fate. What do you think it’ll be?”

She spun and stared at me, tears frozen in her eyes. “They’ll kill me. Tino already threatened to do it once. Now, he’ll do it for sure.”

“Yes. You have to run.”

“No. I can’t just leave him like this. I have to help him.”

That fucking conscience. “He used and betrayed you. Is he worth losing your life for? And what if he’s already dead? You’ll be sacrificing everything for nothing.”

“If he’s dead, then I deserve to die, too.” She looked down at Domenico’s body, quivering, tears dropping plenty on his body. “I’m a fucking killer.”

“Jesus, Nicky, now is not the time to lose it. Let self-preservation kick in and run. How long do you think you have before Tino calls to check in and then tells the soldiers to handle you?”

“Shut up. Why do you even care if I live or die? We’ve always hated each other. I’ve literally just asked Dom to kill you. You’re only telling me to run so I won’t help him and he’ll die.”

She might have never liked me, but I never reciprocated that hatred. I might even say I liked her. She was strong and smart. I admired her loyalty and toughness. The sister everyone wished for. The woman every man wanted in his corner. Not to mention how beautiful she was.

I’d always wondered why I hadn’t fallen for Nicky instead of Lina. The older sister was exactly my type. Tall, blonde, agile, feisty with blue eyes that would make you drown and you’d never want to come up. She reminded me a lot of Sia—before she turned into the brunette Gloria Morelli. Maybe that was why I never hated Nicky but also the reason I’d never developed anything more for her.

Who was I kidding? Like there was any logic to why every shred of my senses got fixated on that one single person. Why my mind, my heart, my breath wouldn’t function unless I could see her and know she was mine, or at least, she would be. Why my whole world revolved around her and without her the voices would urge me to destroy anything and everything. Even her. Even me.

“No, Nicky. Domenico’s death won’t do me any good. They’ll just replace him with someone else, and my destiny

will remain the same. Believe it or not, I'm looking out for you because despite what you think I don't hate you, and...I'm thinking about Lina. So should you. If you're gone, who's gonna help her?"

She sobbed, her breathing so rapid as if she was having a panic attack. "I don't know what to do."

"Just get out of here. Run."

She stared at Domenico one last time before she dragged herself back to the exit. Abruptly, a phone roared, making us both flinch.

Frozen and pale, she gaped at Domenico's pocket where he kept his phone. "That must be Tino."

"Yes. You have to go now, Nicky. There's no time."

"I... But... At least, I should tell him to send help."

"No!" I yelled as she crouched and reached for his pocket. "What the hell is wrong with you? He'll kill you. For fuck's sake just run."

She ignored me, and, with a shaking hand, she answered the Goddamn phone. *Jesus fuck*. Her lips parted with her gasps as she put the phone on her ear, but no words came out.

I shook my head at her, mouthing, "What are you doing?"

Her face contorted, and her jaws parted wider with a silent scream. She averted her gaze to the ceiling. Then tears squeezed from her eyes as they closed and she hung up.

A sigh of relief fled out of my hoarse throat. "Thank fuck. Now go. They'll be here any minute now."

She pressed the heel of her palm to her temple for a second before she smoothed her hair back. Then she bent over and patted Domenico's pockets.

"What the hell are you doing now? You're driving me crazy. Which part of *they're gonna be here any minute* did you not understand?"

"Shut up." She got up, keys dangling from her fist, and approached the cage.

I did shut up. What was going on here?

She touched the deadbolt and flashed the set of keys at me.
“Which one opens the lock and which undo the shackles?”

CHAPTER 6

Ravenna

I'd never been one to settle with a crowd. Neither my looks nor my brains allowed it. I wouldn't lie and say I preferred my solitude; in Filicudi I felt as exiled as the residents of the institution. But in a way, it had its perks.

One, I lived by the beach, and while everyone was enchanted by the summer here, winter was what fascinated me. I was a winter girl, coming from Illinois and all, but even I hated cruel February. In Italy, it was a different story. I had colder summer days in Highland Park and Chicago than some winter nights in here.

Two, I no longer had to free killers. I was studying them. Did I mention Filicudi Institution was more of a retirement home for Mafia exiles? The worst of the worst that had been banished by their own families because they had committed crimes more heinous than even the Mob could stomach. Those and the very few that didn't do anything wrong except having the wrong last name or were actually sick and needed medical help. Like Mom.

Beside the safety of my family, that was the biggest perk the Lanza's overture—well, order—had to offer; I got to see my mom daily.

At first, it wasn't easy. She wouldn't let me anywhere near her, and when I insisted, her protesting episodes ranged from silent to violent. She'd even threatened she'd ask for a transfer. My stay in Filicudi felt like the worst punishment for my sins. For the first couple of months, I cried myself to sleep, the desperate voices of guilt and shame wrapping tight around my head and soul, telling me to run and end everything. As a psychiatrist, I shouldn't let destructive, self-harm thoughts control me, but even us had moments of weakness when the world got too dark to see anything but despair.

Living like this, drowned in guilt and blame, hated by the people who should love you the most, alone, condemned to be a puppet in the hands of monsters, wasn't living at all, so why should I get out of bed to live another one of those days? Some people didn't deserve to live, and when you were a useless fuck that killed your brother, crippled your father, drove your mom mental and failed to help her gain her sanity back, you were certainly one of those people.

Despite my prayers that I'd get hit by a car or shanked by a patient—because ending things myself would have been too easy, and I needed the punishment and the pain—I continued to wake up, breathe and go to work where my own mother spat in my face and cursed me to hell and beyond.

I was grateful that I did because with time, things slowly got better. One thing led to another, and we enjoyed a few strolls, shared some meals...and cries. Her therapist assured me that my presence the past year had helped her make progress more than all the time she'd spent in the institution before my arrival. I believed, soon enough, she'd be out of Filicudi, and hopefully, she'd go back to living with Papa.

I couldn't believe it'd been a year already since I'd left him. I hated that I had to. I was all the family he had left. But the Lanzas' capo had arranged for home care for him. At least, I didn't have to worry about who would take care of him when I was gone.

Thankfully, in a few days, I'd see him again. I was finally allowed a few weeks of leave, and the Lanzas had booked us a nice stay in their Taormina resort. I arrived first to arrange for everything he'd need—accessible accommodation, flying assistance, a suitable rental car—for the overachiever itinerary I'd made. He hadn't been to Italy in so many years, and I'd planned to show him the whole country in those couple of weeks.

And perhaps our last stop would be Filicudi where he'd get to see Mom, if she'd allow it.

I knew better than to get my hopes up, but the potential alone made me happy, and happiness was something I hadn't

felt for a very long time I almost forgot what it meant. It was moments like these, moments of hope and love and reunion that made life worth living. If I succeeded at bringing my family together, my life wouldn't be a complete failure.

Zippering my jacket, I entered my car and turned on the GPS. I hadn't explored Taormina or any part of Sicily before. I thought it'd be a good idea to watch the sunrise in town rather from the beach for a change. They said they had an indoors farmers market on via Cappuccini under the church, too. The sky was barely cracking with the grayish blue of dawn. If I drove now, I'd make it to town in time for a nice walk to see the sunrise and buy some of the best lemons in the world.

Light orange and blue had started to paint the sky. The winding road was practically empty, so I hit the gas pedal hard, as if I was racing the sunrise. I narrowed my gaze at the peeking sun. "Who would arrive first? Me or you?"

It might be a little crazy to talk to objects, but apart from my patients and staff, I didn't have anyone to talk to. With my Dad far away now, I only called him once a day, and it was always brief. We'd run out of comfortable conversational topics long ago. I never really had any friends, and I wouldn't even get started on boyfriends.

The only time I'd come close to experience something remotely perceived as romantic from a man was an inappropriate encounter with my English teacher back at Bellomo. He was pretty much the only man, other than my father, who had ever told me I was beautiful. He had sick ulterior motives, of course, for sixteen-year-old me, at least, but years later, they didn't turn out to be that bad. I'd seen way worse.

Sometimes I wondered what would have happened if I'd allowed Mr. Isaac and myself to get carried away in that forbidden fantasy. I wouldn't have been the first girl to crush on her teacher or the first to lose her virginity to one.

Unhealthy and inappropriate and taboo? I knew that. But that was the kind of thoughts you got when boys wouldn't come near you because you were too smart for them or plain

called you ugly or never reciprocated your feelings because they were crushing hard on tall, Russian blondes and you became a twenty-something-year-old virgin that had yet to even have a proper kiss.

It sucked balls.

And if you were wondering why I didn't indulge in any sexual escapades in college, you hadn't been following my useless life journey. For starters, the Mob killed my brother, and I had no time for anything but studying to fulfill the purpose they had for me and taking care of my paralyzed father. Boys and friends were luxuries I couldn't afford. Getting anyone close was dangerous. I couldn't watch someone else I loved get hurt.

There was another reason, though. A secret I'd never told anyone. A silly infatuation I'd hidden for so long, even from the boy himself. He'd have never noticed me anyway. He was the hottest boy in class, in the whole school. The most powerful, too. Girls swarmed around him like bees. He must have known how attractive he was, but he played it off, nonchalant. He seemed to have eyes for one girl only, and that girl wasn't—would have never been—me.

Unfortunate for me, that infatuation grew into something unwholesome that I dragged along with me. A crutch I'd laid on my fears. A safety net that stopped me from taking that next step into anything that remotely resembled affection.

I sighed, wondering where Mr. Isaac was now. *Probably in jail for statutory rape.*

After snorting a chuckle, I bit my lip at the tingling between my thighs. I'd never had my needs met—except with my hands and a couple of times with a vibrator—so I was never really that horny or craving something specific because I didn't even know what to crave. But right now I was very aroused. It was probably the rush of the speed or the not so fleeting memory of—

My phone chimed. It was probably Papa. I hoped it wasn't a patient problem at the institution. That could mean a cancelation of my well-earned vacation.

I dug my hand in the purse, searching for the elusive phone. Why did nothing in your purse ever appear when you needed it?

“C’mon. I have a sun to race, and I can’t slow down. Come out, come out wherever you—”

Bam! Dun!

“Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my GOD!” *Screeeeech!*

Did I just hit someone? How did I hit someone? There was no one of the road.

With a gulp, I bolted out of the car and went to check the front. “Please be a donkey. Please be a fucking donkey.” Heart in my feet, I stared at the front bumper. “Jesus Christ.” There was blood on it, but I didn’t see anyone or anything in the proximity. “Hello?”

I scampered to the back, praying it was just a road kill. *Please, God, I can’t have another person’s blood on my hands.* “Hello?” Tears pricked my eyes as I scoured the back. There was no one there, too.

That didn’t make any sense. Where did the blood come from then?

Click! Something cold hit the back of my skull, and I recognized it immediately. It wasn’t the first time someone held a gun to my head.

Of all the times I’d imagined and prayed for my death, it’d never crossed my mind it’d be over a robbery.

Why now? Today was the first day in five long years that I’d sincerely looked forward to the future. Just when I’d begun to hope again and not feel like a total failure...

“You fucking coward. At least face me if you’re going to kill me.” My throat was raw as I rasped out my final words in Italian. Their provocative nature wasn’t out of courage but anger and frustration.

“I’m sorry,” a female said in Italian with an American accent. “I’m not going to kill you. Just get in the backseat please and no one is going to hurt you.”

A polite thief. Okay. That was better than a murderer. But why would she take me with her? This didn't seem like a robbery at all. "Am I a hostage?" I asked in English.

She didn't respond right away. "Would you rather I left you here in the middle of nowhere?"

I didn't know what compelled this woman to rob a car, but she was no criminal. No felonious person would say please or be concerned about the safety of a woman left on an empty road at dawn.

Perhaps I could work with that. "You know, I don't care about the car. I can give you some cash, too. If you just tell me what happened to you, I'm sure I can help."

She pressed the muzzle harder to my head. "Just get in the fucking car."

Raising my hands in surrender, I tilted slowly toward the backseat door. I heard her step behind me, and her hand was faster than mine to open the car.

I noticed the drops of blood on the asphalt. She must have been hurt. "I'm a doctor. I can tend to your wound."

"I'm fine. It's him who needs help."

A gasp escaped me as my eyes fell on the man sitting in my backseat. His bloody, black and blue face stared at me, and I gasped again, but before I could say anything, a sharp pain exploded against my head before I fell into the dark fog stealing my consciousness away.

CHAPTER 7

Ravenna

“What was I supposed to do? Leave her to be kidnapped and raped or shoot her? I’m not you!”

The yelling and the pain splitting my head in half forced my eyes open. It took me a moment to realize what was happening. Then I bolted upright, my hip screaming, panic surging through me, when it all came back to me.

“Besides, there’s so much I can do to keep you alive. She’s a doctor. You need her help.”

More pain seared my body, this time around my wrist. I stared at it to find I was cuffed to a pillar. “What the hell?” I yanked hard at the short chains, achieving nothing but making an irritating noise. “You can’t do this. Get me out of those restraints right now!”

Footsteps echoed toward me. My head jerked in their direction, and a blurry shadow of a womanly figure appeared. It must have been the woman who robbed me and took me hostage. I couldn’t see her face clearly without my glasses, which she must have taken off me.

“Please be quiet. I told you no one is gonna hurt you,” she said.

“You knocked me unconscious and cuffed me to a freaking pillar God only knew where. Excuse me if I find your words hard to believe.”

“I’m sorry. I just couldn’t risk your knowing where we headed.”

Fuck. Did they take me out of Taormina? I glanced around to get any clue as to where we were, but all I could see was an abandoned place with nothing but sunlight bouncing on dirt and dingy, burned down walls. The salty, sultry smell of the beach filled the air. Based on the light, no more than three

hours had passed since she took me. That meant we were still somewhere along the Sicilian coastline.

She came closer and squatted in front of me, stretching her hand with my glasses. “Here.”

Glaring at her, I grabbed them with my free hand and put them on. I could see her clearly enough now. She had long blond hair tied in a messy bun. Blue eyes. No makeup to hide the circles lack of sleep and stress had created under them. Nonetheless, she looked oddly familiar.

Her lips and skin were pale. The sick kind, not the natural one. Was it because of her bleeding wound? I checked the ground around her feet. There was no more blood. “You patched yourself up?”

She nodded. “It was just a scratch. Like I said, it’s my... *friend*...who needs help. I did the best that I could, but...”

Was the battered man I saw in the car real? My heart skipped a beat. “Did I really hit him with the car?”

She shook her head. “I threw a rock at the car and used his blood on the bumper to trick you. He was already hurt before you came. I’m sorry, but we had to get out of there, and you were the first car on the road.”

At least, she was being honest. “I’d be happy to help, but please, I need to get back to Taormina. There are people expecting me there. If I’m not, bad things will happen...to all of us.” My father would be worried sick. The Lanzas would suspect my sudden disappearance, and the consequences of that would never be good.

“Bad things have already happened, Doctor Berlusconi, and more will come.”

Well...she got that right. “How do you know my name? You went through my things?”

“Again, sorry about that...and for taking out and breaking the GPS in your car, but it was necessary. Um...I hope you don’t mind, but I texted your *papa*, too, letting him know you’re going on an early walking tour around Taormina. He kept calling, so...” She got to her feet and shoved her hand in

her pocket. Then she brought out little keys. “Now, can I trust you’re not going to run?”

I glanced at the gun she’d tucked in her jeans and made sure it was visible. It didn’t intimidate me, though. She wasn’t a killer. She was never going to shoot me with it.

“You might think I’m not gonna use it on you, and you’re probably right,” she looked me straight in the eye, reading my mind, “but the man with me will.”

I blinked once, reminding myself of her *friend’s* face. Then I swallowed. “Are you going to give it to him?”

“Only when I have to.”

When, not if. Although her voice, body language and behavior assured me she wasn’t referring to me in this incident, but a chill ran through me. Whatever those two had planned was ominous, to say the least, but I had no part in it. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Nonetheless, she might have been stable enough to make moral decisions, but, obviously, he wasn’t if I didn’t play by their rules. How did a woman like her get tangled into such a dangerous situation with a man like him?

“I’m gonna uncuff you now, but only if you promise you’re not gonna run. The nearest town is three miles away anyway. There’s nowhere to go.”

I nodded. “I promise.” It was easier to obey rather than fight. I’d long learned my lesson. Besides, there was a patient that needed my help. I couldn’t just leave him behind.

“Thank you.” She unlocked the cuffs and helped me up. Then she nodded at an open arch in this abandoned house. “He’s in there. I gave him something for the pain from your purse, but it only helped for a couple of hours. He’s in a really bad shape. I thought maybe you could give him something stronger before you take care of his injuries. You have quite the collection.”

“My job dictates it,” I said, a little more defensively than I’d have liked.

She held my arm, leading the way. “*Sure*. Speaking of your job, your ID says psychiatrist, but it doesn’t say where.”

I was glad I’d left my Filicudi card at the resort. If the face of the man I’d seen had indeed belonged to...*him*, we would have been having a different kind of conversation. “I have a practice back home. I’m only here on vacation. What about you?”

“The less you ask the better, Doctor.” She ushered me to a room with nothing but a few plastic bags, a broken bed, a stripped mattress lain on the ground, and the shirtless man bleeding on top of it, his arm cuffed to the bed.

My feet faltered at the entrance, and my breath caught. “Jesus.” I stared at him, at the scars marring his body, at the blood coming from his leg. “What have they done to you?”

Sweating, he moaned as he wrenched his back upright, his eyes barely open I wasn’t sure his bruises allowed him any vision. “Can you take a bullet out?”

His voice sent a shiver down my spine. It was exactly as I remembered it, masculine, rough, always wreaking havoc on my mind before my body. He might have looked like a different person now than he used to be five years ago, with his cropped hair, scars and contusions, but that voice I’d recognize anywhere.

If I had any doubt who that man was, it was all gone. This was Leo Bellomo. The man I was sent to Filicudi to fake his records and make it look like he’d been admitted there all this time. The man the Lanzas had obviously kept alive to torture for a whole year, and I helped them to do so.

The boy I went to school with. My silly infatuation. The secret I’d been holding on to for years. The star of my wet dreams.

“I told you she was a shrink. She can’t do shit,” he groaned at the woman.

Blinking the tears that were giving me away, I dragged myself toward him. “I can do it. Just let me take a look.”

“It didn’t hit the bone, but it didn’t come out,” he said, his voice hoarse and slightly shaking. He must have been in a lot of pain, and not just because of the bullet.

As I knelt beside him, I kept my head down, letting my hair cover my face, just in case he’d recognize me although I highly doubted it. He’d never noticed me. He might not have known I ever existed.

My hand trembled as I carefully touched his leg. All these years, I’d never imagined the first time I touched him was going to be like this. “I...um... Aside from the bullet, you have multiple fractures and other wounds that are infected. I’ll need some instruments, disinfectants, lots of gauze, antibiotics...and a sedative because this is going to be very painful.”

The woman grabbed some of the plastic bags and emptied them, the contents falling on the ground. “Are these enough?”

I examined the medical supplies that seemed to be sufficient to some extent. “I’ll still need some clean water, a sponge or washcloth, and a suture kit. I have one in the car, under the passenger’s seat with Lidocaine and a sedative.”

“I’ll get it.” She walked out.

I grabbed the scissors that were in the bag to cut his pants. Suddenly, his free hand squeezed my wrist. I gasped in terror. “What...”

“Don’t think about doing anything stupid,” he rasped. “I can snap your neck with one hand.”

The first time I touched him was to examine his wounds, and the first time he touched me was to threaten to snap my neck. Quite the fantasy I had here...

“I’m only going to cut your pants to get the bullet out,” I said, not daring to look at him yet. I glanced at his cuffs, though. “I understand why she had to restrain me, but what about you? I thought you two were friends.”

“Friends?” He let go of my hand and coughed a laugh. “No. We’re more than that. We’re fucking family.”

I glowered at the torn fabric of his worn-out pants as I cut through them. “Family?”

“She used to be my sister-in-law. Now, she’s my step aunt.” He laughed again, almost manically.

My heart squeezed. His laughter wasn’t humorous. It was pure pain and distress. So everything they said was true. Leo’s wedding was painted red because he and his father were in love with the same girl. Then when his father married her, Leo tried to kill him. He failed and got captured by the Lanzas, who had tortured him instead of admitting him to the institution in exile. The woman with him now was the girl’s sister—I knew I recognized her from somewhere—and for whatever reason she’d freed him. Now they were both on the run, hiding from the Lanzas.

“So...Berlusconi from Highland Park, huh?” he asked.

I just nodded.

“Matteo or Dante?”

He was testing me, but that wasn’t what caused my throat to bob with a swallow. I lied for a living. I could lie now, too. What made me nervous was that I’d reached his hip, cutting the waistband, and my hand was so close to his...business.

I had no clue how he was battered and scarred and dirty and smelled awful, yet he still looked so sexy to me. He had no idea how many times I’d imagined taking off his pants, wondered what kind of underwear he wore and drooled over the fantasy of seeing what was underneath...

Stop being a pervert and keep it professional. You’re here to treat him, not to molest him with your leering and filthy thoughts. I cleared my throat. “How do you know these names?”

“If you really are a Berlusconi from Highland Park, you’ll know the answer to that.”

My heart skipped a beat. Did he know I recognized him? Or worse, did he recognize me?

CHAPTER 8

Ravenna

“Is that why you won’t look me in the eye, Doc?” Leo asked.
“You know who I am, don’t you?”

Hands unsteady for a second, I proceeded with cutting the other leg of the pants. Then I took a deep breath and lifted my gaze to his in a calculated risk. A power move to diminish his doubt. I knew he never noticed me at school, and with his injuries, his vision was compromised. He wouldn’t recognize me, and I needed to show him I was in charge. The deep blue of his eyes threatened to ruin my plan, though, stripping me of all control. “All I know is that you’re in pain. Lots of it.” Pain I had a huge part in causing. “I can help take it away.”

He studied my face. Then his gaze dipped to my lips. Reflexively, I stared at his, and my breath caught. Busted and bloody or not, they were so alluring, sexier than ever, even though I could find no logical explanation to their appeal in their current state.

The only logic that dominated me now was that of my ovaries. The only proof I needed was the gathering moisture between my thighs. It could be a result of the remnants of my pathetic, adolescent dreams or it could have sprouted from the deep roots of my guilt. Either way, it was there, throbbing painfully beyond denial.

“You want to take my pain away?” he asked, mocking.

“I do. All of it if I could,” I blurted without thinking. “But I can only try as far as you’ll let me.”

His eyelids twitched. I couldn’t decide whether it was a blink or an eye roll. I swallowed, dragging my greedy stare away. The closeness between us had jumbled my thoughts enough. Looking away wasn’t as effective as I presumed it’d be, though. Where I sat, the sweat brought his scent—lying

under layers of ache, abhorrence and torture—to my nostrils, and it added to my growing need for him.

I must have gone out of my mind to be attracted to a man like Leo Bellomo still. When I was a kid, I lacked the knowledge and the experience to identify what he was. Now, I should have known better than to fantasize about anything that included a psychopath with a list of disorders that could fill ten charts. A made man. An epitome of everything that destroyed my family. A murderer.

A dead man walking.

Even after I helped him survive—for a few more days or hours, I didn't know—his fate was sealed in blood. Sooner or later, he'd be killed. Whether it'd be the Lanzas or the Bellomos that pulled the trigger, Leo Bellomo was destined to die.

I sighed at the contraction of my heart as I finally finished cutting his pants, wondering why I was filled with sadness at the thought of his demise, why I desired someone who had never bothered to look at me once before, why I cared about an evil killer.

“I found the kit, Doctor.” The woman returned and handed me the box. “I took the liberty of preparing one syringe with one dose of the sedative. The rest of the ampoules stay with me. I'm sure you don't mind.”

Damn it. I was hoping she might have been incautious enough to give me the whole box. Then I would've drugged them both and went on my way. That woman was no dumb blonde.

“There are no basins here, so I improvised.” She placed an unevenly split plastic bottle filled with water next to me, a piece of cloth in her other hand. “Do I need to sanitize this? It's from the shirt I was wearing earlier, the part that...didn't have any blood on.” Her voice shook in the end. What exactly had happened to them before they ran?

“It'll do. It's for cleaning him up. No offense, but...the condition of his hygiene could cause more infections,” I said

as politely as possible.

“None taken. I know I stink,” he said. “If you’d been where I’d been, you’d have known it was the least of my problems. You should’ve seen me a year ago. I was—”

“Fucking Prince Charming.” She interrupted bitterly. “The expensive suit, the cologne, the haircut, the mansion, the car... The perfect disguise that fooled young girls and made them walk right into your traps. Looks do deceive.”

I knew exactly how charming he looked before. How deceitful his looks might have been. There must be more to what she was saying, though. Her bitterness wasn’t just for Leo Bellomo.

“You got that right,” Leo strained his neck to glance up at her, “*Little kitten*, or is it *baby girl* now?”

She swore and bent to squeeze his throat, throwing a few threats.

“Can you please not do that?” I demanded, again without thinking. I couldn’t help the feeling that I didn’t want him to be in any more pain. He’d suffered enough.

Her head whipped toward me as she glared at me, part angry, part incredulous.

“I mean...if you can start with cleaning him up while I proceed with extracting the bullet that would be a better use of time,” I amended.

“What the fuck? I’m not giving this fuck a sponge bath.”

“Then maybe you should take him to a hospital where a proper nurse would and a more specialized doctor could take out the bullet...because on a second thought, I don’t think I can do it myself,” I dared.

Leo gurgled a laugh. “I’m starting to like you, Doc.”

My heart skittered. I knew he didn’t mean it the way I’d always wished he’d have, and I shouldn’t have wanted him to now, either, but hearing it from him made me feel like that little girl that had no other care or burden in the world except making a boy like her.

The woman left his neck but only to grab her gun and wave it at the two of us. “Let me make things clear here. You two are alive because *I* let you breathe. Don’t abuse the last part of my humanity that’s stopping me from killing you because God knows, after all that’s happened, I’m holding on to it by a fucking thread.”

I peered between the two of them. Was she bluffing? The tone of her voice indicated the emotional turmoil she was going through was real, but it was the look on Leo’s face that confirmed it. He’d lost his mocking humor, and all I could see in his gaze apart from the pain wasn’t rage or challenge or even alarm or fear. It was sorrow.

The emotion struck me as odd coming from him. Psychopaths lacked empathy to feel sorrow or guilt when it came to the consequences of their actions or manipulation. That led me to conclude whatever had happened to that woman wasn’t his doing. Not directly, at least.

Was that why she saved him?

She pushed the water bottle with the tip of her boot to his side and threw the piece of cloth at him. “You clean yourself up.” She raised a brow at me. “You help him. Then put him to sleep and take out the Goddamn thing. We don’t have a lot of time to waste. We gotta keep moving.”

I blew out a sigh instead of arguing. She obviously didn’t care about Leo to listen. She had her own demons to battle. Besides, the idea of touching Leo while sort of giving him a bath sent a big throb between my legs. I didn’t see why it bothered her to do it herself. It wasn’t like he belonged to her sister anymore. What girl would pass on an opportunity such as this?

Unless she was loyal to another man. A fiancé or a husband? She didn’t have any wedding rings on her fingers. Perhaps a boyfriend. A girl who looked like her would have no trouble finding a man.

“Can you, at least, take the cuffs off of him, please? It’ll be faster.” And my breasts wouldn’t be in his face when I cleaned that arm.

“No.”

“Look at him. Do you really think they’re necessary?”

“Oh, yes, they are.”

“But—”

“The cuffs stay, Doctor. End of story.”

“Do you have some sort of fetish with restraints or something? Is that how you draw power?” I mumbled.

Leo gave another one of his manic laughs. “Don’t mind her, Doc. She’s kinky like that. She can’t help it.”

She clenched her teeth at him. “Fuck you.” Her steps echoed away as she stalked out of the room. “And him. And every one of your fucking kind.”

CHAPTER 9

Leo

I hadn't been touched by a woman in a very long time. Years. Since Sia.

Shocking, right? After her death, you'd think I sank my cock in every wet pussy I'd been offered—or even hadn't been offered. After all, I was a Mafia prince. The son of Don Bellomo who took anything he wanted whenever he wanted without so much of a second thought.

But I wasn't him. I'd tried everything in my power not to be him. I went to fucking school, stayed away from the life and kept my cock in my pants. Even my wife I didn't get to touch because she was a virgin and I wanted to honor her. And in the end? I waited, and he stole her from me on my wedding night.

Everything I'd done to not turn into another Sebastiano Bellomo didn't matter. Not only that, but I'd become the bad guy. The villain, the killer, the devil, the source of all evil to be burned at the stake while he lived like a king and got the girl. He made me become him and left me to pay for all his mistakes with blood, pain, loneliness and heartache.

How could everybody love him and hate me? Why did they turn a blind eye on his sins, his crimes and even forgive him and not me?

Except for Nicky. The only person who saw Don Bellomo for who he really was and hated him as much as I did that she chose to side with me. And this nervous brunette, breathing on my shoulder while cleaning—and ogling—my bicep, who might not think I was the monster everybody should avoid at all costs.

After she temporarily stopped the bleeding in my leg, she said she'd clean me up first before taking the bullet out so the wound wouldn't get infected. Those Domenico's soldiers

fucks. They shot at Nicky and me as we escaped from the beachside. The bullet that hit her barely grazed the skin, but mine landed in the calf. They'd have gotten us if Nicky didn't shoot back at them with her husband's gun. I was glad she'd taken it before she let us out of that fucking room, and she knew how to use it—she'd grabbed cuffs on the way out, too, because, obviously, she didn't trust me. Another thing I was grateful for was how strong Nicky was. She'd managed to drag me out of the villa and run to the road.

It was my idea to trap the road and take the first car that came on. Nicky didn't approve at first—that fucking conscience again—but we both knew we had no chance at making it anywhere on foot with the shape I was in.

Luckily, the plan worked, and she drove us out of Taormina. She'd only stopped to get some water, food, clothes—her husband's blood was on her shirt, and I was desperate for a new outfit to wear after I was no longer bleeding—and the much needed medical supplies, using the doctor's cash. I gave Nicky directions to this place so we could hide until we figured out a way to get on a boat from Catania that would take us back to America. A burned down house right outside Catania, an hour or so from Taormina, that used to belong to the Seppis, which no one would guess we were hiding at. After my father had killed them, he took possession of everything the Seppis had, semi-burned it and left the rubbles as a symbol of what would happen to anyone who would even think about crossing him.

Who would have thought the place that once belonged to the killer of my mother would be the only shelter I could use right now?

I closed my eyes, pushing the rumbling rage for a second, distracting myself by wondering why the fuck Nicky took me with her. I'd asked her to help me escape once, but she told me to go fuck myself. Why now? Had she finally accepted I was the only one who could help her end Tino? Or did she take me as leverage for another plan I couldn't figure out yet?

Everything would be unraveled soon, I was sure. And I'd deal with it as soon as it did. Right now, I needed to focus on

surviving to go on with my own plan.

I shifted my focus toward my new friend—and her feminine touch my body hungered after. Unlike that of a professional doctor, her touch was shaky. As if she was a virgin who had never seen a half-naked man before or even gotten that close to one, let alone touched.

The accidental feather of her trembling fingers over the cords of my muscles was a reprieve, something I'd forgotten how it felt when all I'd had for a year was brutality. She had long, brown hair she let cover most of her face, as if the glasses weren't a shield strong enough to hide behind. Her body didn't give away much either. She hid it, too, under dark, oversized slacks and jacket. What was she hiding from? The world in general or me in particular? Most importantly, why?

As she wet the little rag—what Nicky had salvaged from the shirt she wore while we ran for our lives—and squeezed off the excess, water chimed along with our breaths through the silent room.

She hesitated. Dipped the washcloth again. Squeezed.

“Just think of me as the hood of your car or the surface of your desk,” I said.

She froze for a second, color flooding her cheeks. Then she chuckled. “Is my nervousness that obvious?”

“And she blushes, too.” *Beautifully, I might add.* “Are you sure you're a doctor?”

“Of course. It doesn't mean I'm completely impervious to the...nakedness or closeness of the human body...especially one so lean yet muscular as a lion like yours.” The last part was a covert mumble but I could hear it.

“Oh.”

“Oh?”

“I thought you were nervous because of the wounds and damage covering this human body, as if you were afraid to hurt me more than I'd already been hurt. I didn't think...” I lied in a tease.

Her blush deepened. “Well...that too.” She shook her head and put the cold cloth on my chest. I hissed with a flinch. The water seared some of Domenico’s flogging wounds and the flayed skin that hadn’t had a chance to heal yet. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” she apologized as if it were her fault.

“You’re not the one who hurt me. You’re only trying to help.”

Her lips twitched. “The one who hurt you should pay.”

Was that why she was so willing to help without any resistance after we practically robbed and kidnapped her? She empathized with me? “How do you know I didn’t deserve it?”

“No one deserves this.” She looked at me, and I could make the color of her eyes. Green with hints of gray. A shade I was familiar with, and not just because of Lina. “No matter what you did, you didn’t deserve this.”

Our gazes locked for a while before she dropped hers with a hitch to her breath. She returned to clean my shoulder and the slope leading down to my pectoral. Then she worked the pads of my pecs gently, pausing at every scar.

She swept the washcloth down my stomach, her fingertips warmer by the second. Even her breath falling on my skin was heating up. Laughter rippled through my belly, clenching my abs tight. She couldn’t be that innocent.

Her hands stopped in their tracks. “Please don’t laugh at me.”

“I’m not laughing at you. I’m laughing at the coincidence that put someone like you in the path of someone like me on a day like this.”

She pressed her lips and then licked them as her fingers traced the contours of my abs and the—now scarred—tattoos around them. I sucked in a hiss at the sensation. It wasn’t pain. There were no open wounds there. It was, despite the searing aches of the torture injuries and the bullet piercing my leg, a pleasant shiver that was about to raise the dead.

That shouldn’t happen. It hadn’t happened in a while. It was good to know it was still alive. I laughed again.

She sighed, and her eyes flickered between my cuffed wrist and my *hips*. Now that she was done with my torso, she must have been debating whether to do the other arm or go south.

“You can do my other arm later. It’s far from my leg to infect it,” I teased again, waiting for that beautiful blush to reappear.

“You’re right,” she said to my surprise. Then she swallowed, staring at my underwear—and the semi erection they outlined. “I’m going to cut these, too.”

The innocent doctor might not be as innocent as she seemed to be.

“How about I do that part? The cleaning too? I don’t think you want to go there.”

“Your arm among so many bones in your body is broken. It’s a miracle you’re still conscious and moving. You should do nothing but lie still. For weeks.”

“We both know that’s not gonna happen.”

“Then, at least, let me do this one thing for you.”

“Why? Why do you feel that much obligated to help me, to *take my pain away*?”

Her gaze narrowed at me, and another sigh burst out of her lips. “Because...I’m a doctor. I took an oath and everything.”

Bullshit.

She grabbed the scissor quickly and cut through the dirty fabric. “It’s nothing really. Just let me wash you. It’s no big—” She gasped when the fabric dropped off my cock.

I waited for the virgin shock to pass—because I truly believed she’d never seen a cock before. “You were saying?”

“It *is* big. I...um...I mean...” She took a deep breath and then let it out in an exaggerated exhale. “I can do it.”

“Are you sure? It’s gonna get bigger if you touch it.”

“Holy sh—” She swallowed the curse. What, she didn’t curse in public? “You know what? It’s fine. It’s just a

biological function that results in a pooling of blood in your incredibly large... Jesus.”

I laughed. “It’s called a boner, Doc. A cock is funny that way. You touch it, it gets hard.”

“I’m aware! I just didn’t expect that you...”

“That I still had enough blood to pool in my incredibly large...*Jesus?*”

She giggled for a second, before she stifled it with her fist over her mouth. Unlike all the sadistic laughs I’d been hearing from Domenico, the sound of her laughter was nice and genuine. One of the many sounds I’d thought I’d never hear again.

One I’d heard before.

She shifted, putting her knees on the mattress, and started with my hip. “I meant I didn’t expect you to be aroused by... me.” Then she ran the rag along my pelvic bone, her hand grazing my growing erection. My cock twitched in response.

My hips swiveled, and she looked up at me, flushed. “I’m as surprised as you are,” I said. “I normally have a much better control. I guess it’s been a while.”

She drew her hand over my abdomen, up past the swollen head of my cock, and down the other side. As the very edge of the washcloth brushed up against me, I hissed. Glancing between my face and groin, she did it again, going slowly up and around my erection, stroking it with the wet fabric.

“If you keep this up, you’re going to find out what other things a cock does when teased like that,” I said in warning.

She cleared her throat and tucked her hair behind her ear, the tips falling forward, brushing my skin. I didn’t know why a sudden urge to smell her hair sprouted in me. Maybe because dark brown hair drove me insane since Sia became Gloria. Or maybe because I missed Lina so much.

I twirled my pinky around a lock of the doctor’s hair, feeling how soft it was. She glanced at my finger and then

lifted her gaze at me. I brought her hair to my nose and inhaled.

Her eyes widened for a moment. But then she worked that rag on my cock again, and my erection was now stiff enough to be a threat.

Okay. She wants to play. “You want to see me come, don’t you?” My voice dropped deeper.

“Of course not. That would be...”

“Inappropriate? Wrong? Sick? Fucked up? It doesn’t matter. No one is here to judge. Just you and me. A man you’ll never see again. A man you shouldn’t be staring at his cock, teasing it like a dirty little slut, but you do it anyway because inside you *are* a dirty a little slut that wants something as wrong as touching a bad boy’s cock and being used for his pleasure.” I watched as her lips parted with a loud gasp, and I took another sniff at her hair, the scent going straight to my cock. “I could definitely use some pleasure right now, *Ravenna.*”

She closed her eyes and moaned as I drawled her name, as I recalled the only Ravenna I knew.

“Look at me, Ravenna.” As if I controlled her eyes, they rose slowly to meet mine. “Not my face. My hand. You’re gonna watch my hand. Now.”

She complied, and as soon as she did, I fisted my thick boner. In a rush, my breath left me as I ran my hand up and down my shaft.

“Oh...my...God.” She squirmed, as if she was the one about to come.

“You want to do this to me, don’t you?” I said roughly. “You want to know what it feels like and what I look like when I come...for you.”

Her mouth parted wide, begging to be filled.

“Don’t you, Ravenna?” My breathing quickened, pain and pleasure mixing together. “You want to know how my cock

feels in your hand, what kind of noises I'll make when my cum spills all over you?"

"Yes," she said, nodding her head as if she was in a fucking trance, looking at me like I was a god. "Oh yes."

"Allora, give me your hand, you little bitch. Show me if you know how to finish a guy off."

CHAPTER 10

Ravenna

I was a dirty slut. A little bitch like he called me for letting him talk to me like that, for allowing him to think he could use me for his pleasure like that, for soaking my panties while I listened and obeyed his filthy demands.

In awe, I put the washcloth on top of the bottle and stared as he kept up with stroking his massive erection in his big hand. Which was what you did when the man you'd been crushing on for years was stripped naked in front of you and you found out all your expectations was nothing compared to how well-hung he was.

He let go of his spectacular arousal and just cupped the base. His penis stretched on his lower belly from his groin to his fucking navel. "I want your hand, Ravenna. Now."

All my life, I hated being told what to do. It was all I did, and it infuriated me to the core. But when a husky command like that came out of a man like Leo Bellomo, when he was sprawled in front of me, fully aroused for me, because of me, I couldn't say no. Even if he was a psycho murderer who technically kidnapped me.

I might hate the order later, but now I'd—

He didn't give me a chance to show my consent and grabbed my hand himself. He took what he demanded I give and brought it to his mouth. His tongue darted out, and in a slow, erotic move, he licked my palm up to my fingers and down a couple of times, his eyes locked on mine. I shuddered hard at the feeling of his warm, wet tongue, drenching my panties, my heart and breath frantic. Then he placed my hand on his *cock*.

I couldn't name it a penis or an erection or anything medical. This was a dirty, erotic act, where I, a dirty slut, held a hard cock of a guy I was supposed to treat, not jerk off,

whom he thought I was a complete stranger he was taking advantage of to make him come.

Our gasps were almost synchronized as he folded my fingers around his girth. He was rock hard and scorching. So beautiful and sexy and masculine. Chewing my bottom lip, I stroked the hard length, feeling the soft skin move over the stiffness of him.

His mouth broke open with a low groan as his body arched a little. My eyes took one hell of a ride, watching the pure sex his body was. The scars didn't take down from his alluring masculinity. If anything, it added to it. To the world, Leo Bellomo might have been a sick killer, a criminal who had wronged so many and deserved the worst of punishments, but to me, he was a warrior, who had fought so viciously for what he believed was his. The wounds and scars were there to prove it. And even though he'd lost the battle, he'd fought even harder to survive.

His strength was as sexy as his beauty. And in this moment, as his confidence allowed him to forego all inhibitions, allowed him to show a stranger how he'd break without any fear or awkwardness, how vulnerable he could get, my feelings for Leo Bellomo dangerously intensified.

I stared down at where I was working him, his hand still on mine, waves and waves of tingling need engulfing me. It was the most erotic—and intimate—act I'd ever been a part of.

“What do I feel like in your hand, Ravenna?” he asked hoarsely, his hips jerking up.

A gathering storm of sexual pleasure. The best thing I've ever put in my fist. One I'd carve in my memory to remember forever even though it might never happen again.

But I couldn't tell him any of that.

“Not the time to be shy, Doc. The way you blush is sexy, but I wanna see and hear the brazen you.”

He thinks the way I blush is sexy? Did I hear that correctly? Leo Bellomo thinks something about me is sexy?

“Fine. I’ll make the dirty talking easier for you,” he rasped. “How wet my cock in your hand is making you, Doc? I bet you’re soaking your pants right now, not just your panties.”

I moaned shamelessly because he was absolutely right.

“You know what else I bet?” He took his hand off mine and touched my chin, tilting my face so I’d look at him. “I bet you’re dying to show me.”

I gasped. “Jesus, Le...” *Shit, shit, shit!* “*L-ord* Jesus.” I couldn’t believe I almost said his name and signed my death certificate. “No, you’re wrong. Relieving you is something. Stripping for you is something else,” I said fast before he’d notice my slip even though it was a lie. If he made me, I’d strip for him like the little bitch I was without so much of a protest.

He smirked. “*Relieving* me? Is that what you’re doing, you dirty, dirty bitch?”

My face blazed as I let out another gasp.

“So if I do this,” his fingers dipped to the zipper of my jacket and pulled it down until it opened, revealing my green top, “will you stop me?”

My mind was numb now. All I was thinking was that I had no bra under that top. I only wore a bra to work to look professional, but I didn’t have much to need support for in the first place. I had no fucking clue I was going to meet the man of my wet dreams today. And he was taking off my jacket and soon would see how so not sexy I was while I was just staring at him moon-eyed, letting him do things to me.

He pushed the jacket off me, and I, as if I no longer had a brain, finished shrugging it off for him. His gaze fell to my chest, and I’d never felt more self-conscious in my life. “I’m not much to look at.”

He licked his lips, staring intently at my breasts. “I’ll be the judge of that.”

I frowned incredulously and glanced down at my own chest. Then my eyes widened in shame as I understood what his eyes were feasting on. The seams of my hard, erect nipples

protruding through the fabric. “I’m not going to take off my shirt!”

He chuckled. “How about your pants?”

“I...I...”

He gripped the waistband of my slacks. “I wasn’t asking permission.”

“What?! No. I—”

He ran a finger on my mound and down my slit, slowly, devastatingly. My whole body shuddered at the sensation. When he followed the same motion back up and then again down, up and down, up and down, I was out of breath, my orgasm about to rapture just from that.

“So fucking wet.” He popped open the button of my slacks and worked the zipper. Then he cupped me whole over the panties. “Your pussy is so fucking wet, Doc.”

I moaned hard. It was loud enough for him to believe I was really a dirty bitch, but I couldn’t help it. Leo was touching me. His hand was on my pussy that was all wet for him. My hand faltered around his shaft as I shook harder.

“No, Ravenna. Don’t stop. I want you to rub me faster. You’re going faster on me now, little slut.”

As if he controlled my hand, I stroked him at a pace of his liking. I could tell from the low moan in his throat and how his head kicked back.

He slid one finger under my panties and pushed them aside. Then he stared at the wetness trickling between my thighs, his lips parting with the sexiest groan I’d ever heard. A stronger shudder took over me. That, the way my heart kept pumping hard and the oxygen I no longer remember how to intake set my head spinning. I was so dizzy I could faint. “This is wrong,” I whispered. “Please...”

I wanted to tell him to stop, but I was too caught up in the fantasy turned reality to dare say it. I knew engaging with Leo in any act sexual, intimate or otherwise was one of the most foolish, most dangerous and unethical things to do. The truth

was, though, I didn't give a fuck. I'd always wanted him, and pathetic as it may sound, having him right here, in this obscene manner, was my only way of having him at all.

“Please what? You want me to stop? You want me to stop touching you, Ravenna?”

No. A thousand times no.

“Maybe I should stop touching you so you'll do it yourself,” he rasped, his breathing labored.

“Do what?”

“Touch yourself while you jack me off. Show me how dirty you can get. Show me how loud you can be when you come for me as I will come for you.”

“Oh my God. You want me to masturbate in front of you?”

He nodded at my wetness and licked his lip. “Someone's gotta take care of that. It must be painful. What do you say? Is it gonna be you?” He rubbed one finger ever so slowly over my bare flesh, and my jaw hung low, my eyes rolling back. “Or me?”

“Me! *Me*. I'll do it.” One more move of his and I'd orgasm right away, embarrassing myself in front of him forever. If I touched myself, I'd have some control to delay it a bit, at least, until he came first.

A small smile touched his mouth as he withdrew his hand. I mourned the loss of his calloused touch instantly.

“Push your panties to the side and rub your little pussy. I wanna see it all.”

I widened the space between my knees and tilted to give him a better view. Then I followed his depraved instructions.

His stomach muscles tightened as he watched me humiliate myself in the most beautiful way and my fist worked his hardness, his tattoos stretching and returning to position. A flush of sweat gleamed on his clean yet marked flesh.

He was getting close. The closer he got, the faster my breath fled my lungs and my orgasm gathered in my clit. I

pumped him, focusing the friction at his plum-sized crown.

“Cazzo,” he said, his voice tight. “Spread your lips and get some of your juices on my cock.”

Holy fuck. Sweating, too, I parted myself and scooped some of my wetness with two fingers. Then I glazed his cock with my arousal.

“Don’t stop...” He drew the words out, his shoulders and neck straining, his pectorals flexing.

I rubbed him as fast as I could without hurting him, my fingers playing with my clit simultaneously. My head lolled back as the wicked pleasure rippled through me. Then he jerked and pulsed in my hand, warm liquid spilling on my skin. Swiftly, I glanced between his seed and the face he was making as he came all over my hand.

Fuck me, he was spectacular, and the glorious scent of his cum filled the room until I breathed it instead of air. “God!” I cried out, coming hard, joining him in a debauched song of sick, decadent pleasure.

When he was still, and I regained control over my breathing and became lucid enough to return to reality, I released him and used the washcloth to clean both of us.

“Is that what women want?” he suddenly asked.

I fixed my panties and slacks back in place. “What do you mean?”

“To be used without permission? To be taken instead of given?” A dark shadow haunted his gaze. “Is that what I should have done?”

He must have been talking about his ex-fiancée. An illogical stab of jealousy pierced me. I had no right whatsoever to demand or expect anything from him, not even respect. He didn’t even know who I was, and I’d just disgraced myself in front of him without even asking for anything in return. To him, I was nothing but disposable. Something to be used and tossed away after he was done.

Still, his mentioning her, proving *she* was all what he had in mind while *I* gave him pleasure, hurt. How invisible could I be? What could I have done more to make me him see *me* even for one moment in time?

“On and on

I galloped, racing with the setting sun,
And ere the crimson after-glow was passed,
I stood within Ravenna’s walls at last.”

My heart thudded in my chest. I hadn’t heard that poem in years, not since high school.

“I always wondered if he did.” He smirked.

I froze for a moment then I blinked. “Who?”

“You know who. Mr. Isaac chose that poem for sophomore year because he had a *thing* for you. So did he, Ravenna?”

My eyes widened in terror. How could he remember? Had Leo known who I was all this time?

“Did he take you like I should have taken Lina? Did you not say a word and let him stand within your walls after the crimson after-glow was passed? Did you just spread your legs for him and let him take your virginity, let him fuck you, let him use you to satisfy his sickness?”

Tears clouded my vision against my will. Tears of shame and pain and fear.

“You did, didn’t you? Just like you spread your legs for me and who knows who else?”

I knew he was projecting his traumatizing experience with his ex on me, but I was far from finding my psychiatrist self now. I wanted to silence him, not to bide my time until I figured out how to get out of here since he now knew who I was and my life was in serious danger, but because all my feelings had gathered and turned into one big bubble of rage.

Without so much of a blink, I stabbed the sedative syringe in his neck.

CHAPTER 11

Ravenna

“What the fuck happened here?” *Lina’s* sister came rushing in. She dropped the clothes in her grip and inspected Leo’s unmoving body and pale face in panic. “What did you do to him?”

Her sudden concern about his condition perplexed me. She didn’t seem to care about him earlier. Why the sudden change?

“He needs to stay alive. What the fuck did you do to him?!” she yelled at me.

“Why does he need to stay alive? Why are you so eager to save him?” Perhaps I’d misinterpreted her rejection to touch him earlier. Perhaps she had forbidden feelings for him that compelled her to risk everything to save his life. “Are you in love with him?”

She stared at me as if I was psychotic. Was it out of disbelief or denial? I wouldn’t be surprised if she was in love with Leo. His charms were undeniable, and all the girls that had ever been close to him fell under his spell. What did surprise me was Leo being obsessed with this woman’s sister and not her. Unlike Angelina Bellomo, she was his type, just like Anastasia was.

“Love?” she almost sobbed. “Loving a man is the worst thing you could do to yourself, Doctor. The only person that deserves your love is your blood.” She darted a glance at him. “It’s just my fucking luck that makes this *man* my last hope at saving my family. That’s why I need him alive.”

Okay. Now, it was clear. She hated Leo and was indeed in love with someone else. Someone who hurt her deep enough to side with a man she considered a threat to say the least.

“Now, tell me why the fuck does he look like a fucking corpse?” She glared at me. “What did you do to him?”

What did I do to him? Other than having sentenced him to a year of misery and pain? Nothing. What could be more awful to do to him? How could I find it in me to hurt him again even if he was hurting me? Even if it was to save myself?

I grabbed the clothes and made them into a pile to put under his leg. Keeping it elevated would help a faster and better healing, minimizing the risks. “I took out the bullet, stitched the wound closed and gave him something for the pain and antibiotics. He’ll be fine, considering.”

“Then why does he look so pale? He looked better before.”

“He’d lost a lot of blood. A man in his condition is lucky to be alive in the first place. I have no idea where he gets his strength. It must be something huge tethering him to life so he’d endure all this to survive for it.” Was it his love for the girl who chose his father over him? Or the revenge he yearned to pour on them? “He’ll be better with proper nutrition and enough rest.”

“And what is that,” she sniffed, “smell?”

Blood mixed with the essence of my shame. Leo’s arousal and mine. I blinked, pushing my glasses up my nose. Then I shrugged.

Her scrutiny fell heavy on me. I ignored it. She could judge me all she wanted. She didn’t know me or what I had to go through. I did something stupid and wrong, so what? I’d done so many of those out of fear and coercion. At least, this time, it was pleasurable.

“Can I ask you something, Doctor?”

I hesitated. Then I decided to take advantage of the situation. “Only if you’re willing to answer some of my questions in return.”

“I’ll go first. If two strangers jumped me, stole my car and took me with them to the middle of nowhere in a foreign country, I’d be fighting tooth and nail to find a way out. You haven’t even tried at anything that resembled an escape plan. You haven’t even tried to leave this very room. Why?”

I could psycho-analyze and explain my reasons and motives for hours. Starting from guilt and self-loathing to PTSD and fear. It'd be convincing, but it wouldn't be the ultimate truth.

“Sometimes you want things you know they're so far away you think they're impossible to happen. A dream you know it'll never come true, but you can't help yourself. A boy you can't seem to stop thinking about even though you'll never be on his mind, even though you're certain he won't bother to know your name, let alone see you.

“Then, unexpectedly, you come face to face with that dream. The boy does know your name. He remembers your face. He's noticed you. You're no longer invisible. He sees you, and somehow impossible is no longer a word to describe your dream. So you wait and dream some more because it turns out, sometimes, what you want, you might end up getting after all.

“Have you ever considered the fact that fighting is not always the wisest choice, and, sometimes, surrender garners the best results?”

A bitter chuckle fell past her mouth. “Trust me. It garners the worst results when you choose to surrender to a monster.” She clenched her teeth at Leo. “Like him.”

“Why do you hate him so much?”

“You don't know the first thing about what he's done, the people he's hurt, the crimes he's committed. Enough to say he's a psychopath.”

“That's your professional opinion?”

“Well, someone has to make one for you because you must be terrible at your job if you don't see it for yourself. He shot his ex-girlfriend dead and tried to do the same to his last. My sister.”

I thought he tried to kill his father, not his ex-fiancée. Murdering his girlfriend before Lina was news to me, too. As far as I knew Leo didn't have any known girlfriends. After Anastasia's family was burned alive, and she was nowhere to

be found, he just closed up on himself. Even in college—I may or may have kept up with his news after high school—he didn't have a girlfriend...or a boyfriend. *Yes, I've checked that, too.*

“I understand your anger. The murder of a loved one is one of the most human traumatizing experiences.” I knew that for a fact. “But have you ever thought about why he did it?” To him, Lina betrayed him. It wasn't an excuse to try to murder her, but he had no control over his urges. “The more a psychopath feels socially isolated, sad, and alone, the higher their risk for violence and impulsive and/or reckless behavior. Have you ever tried to understand what triggered him to do something that horrible and desperate? When psychopaths become violent, they're just as likely to hurt themselves as others.” I believed that was what he was doing when he chose to murder them. He was hurting himself as much as he was hurting them.

She snorted. “What the fuck are you trying to do here, saying this shit from some fucking stupid textbook?”

“All I'm trying to do is give you insight that might help you understand him and his actions.”

“I don't want to fucking understand. I can't ever understand why anyone would try to kill the one person I've sacrificed everything to protect.” Her nostrils flared as resentment filled her gaze. “He has one job to do. The only reason I saved his pathetic life. Then everything will be over, and I'll never have to see him or any of his fucking kind ever again.”

I scowled, a pang to my chest. Despite my silly, inexplicable hopes, I wasn't delusional. I knew all possible scenarios led to one inevitable, violent end for Leo. No matter what plan he or she had in mind, whether he succeeded or failed at executing them, he'd end up dead. Yet I couldn't stop my heart from hurting over him. *I mean, I've only just found him.* “Is there any—”

“No more questions. You've asked enough. It's my turn now.”

I knew exactly what she was going to ask.

“How long have you known Leo Bellomo?”

My answer might jeopardize my life, but it was bound to be revealed. It was irrelevant to her quest, though. She was definitely asking the wrong questions.

“All her life.”

Both our heads turned toward Leo, who had just answered for me. His eyes weren't open, but I felt as if he could see right through me.

“What the fuck? Care to explain?” she demanded.

“Her real name is Ravenna Chernova. She went to the same school we all went to, Nicky. I'm surprised you didn't recognize her,” he said, groaning when he tried to move his leg. I gestured for him not to move and adjusted my jacket that I'd covered his lower body with to keep him warm.

“I was a program kid, asshole. Didn't rub elbows with the rich Mob kids. I'd have never gotten involved with any of you if it hadn't been for Tino's and your sick obsession with my sister.”

“Sick obsession? Tino is the only sick fuck here. He was a thirty-year-old-something, grown ass man, whose wife and unborn baby had just been brutally murdered, and he did what? Groom a twelve-year-old girl until she became old enough to fuck. And even then, he didn't ask her to marry him. He fucking kidnapped her on her wedding night and raped her. My own fucking father raped my wife.”

A vein popped in Nicky's forehead, her face crimson and murderous. She seemed to be about to attack him.

I stepped in between them. “Why don't you take a walk, Nicky?”

She glared down at me. She was at about five inches taller than I was and much more athletic. In a physical fight, she'd easily take me. I'd take it. For him.

But what she did was walk past me and crouch down next to him, a sickening smile on her face. “Then why the fuck

instead of killing him you shot her, you sick fucking coward?” She articulated every syllable, stressing at the end. “If she’d had any doubt about her feelings before you pulled that trigger, they had all gone. You practically threw your beloved wife into another man’s arms. It’s because of you she’s now insanely in love with him. It’s because of you, she lies in his bed every night, happily letting him do all kinds of dirty—”

“Enough!” he thundered, shaking, what was seen of his eyeballs red. “Fucking enough!”

“No, it’s not enough.”

“For God’s sake, why are you like this?” I had to intervene.

With a bad case of resting bitch face, she cocked a brow at me. “Excuse you?”

“The man has lost almost everything. Why kick him when he’s down?”

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about so mind your own business, Doctor. I don’t need to hear any shit from another girl who can only get it wet for obsessive psycho fucks.”

My jaw dropped for a second, but then I scoffed. “You’re so narrow-minded. Your traumas have controlled all your capacity of understanding and destroyed your empathy. You see things from one perspective. Yours. Which, news flash, could be entirely wrong.”

“Wrong?!”

“Yes. About Leo and perhaps even about Don Bellomo. And don’t get me started about your sister.”

She shot to her feet, menace in her gaze. “My sister is just a kid who has been brainwashed. One word about her, and I wouldn’t mind smashing that not so smart mouth of yours, putting the cuffs back on your wrists and never taking them off all the time we have the pleasure of your company.”

In a situation such as this, I’d learned to shut the fuck up and do as I was told. But since I’d gotten here, since I’d seen the face of the one man I’d ever been passionate about, since

I'd touched him and allowed myself to be vulnerable with him, many things changed inside me. It'd rekindled the virtue of defiance in me, even though I knew it came with a price.

For Leo, for my crime against him, for a chance to atone, for a chance at saving him, I was willing to pay.

“Your sister isn't as innocent as you like to portray her, Nicky, and I think, deep down, you know that. She's made her own share of mistakes. She'd vowed to give herself to Leo, yet she betrayed him and married another man. His own father. It's devastating even for the sanest minds let alone the twisted ones.

“Despite your personal beliefs and your own interpretation of the situation, whether you think she's been brainwashed into her choices or she's too young to make any in the first place, your sister isn't exactly the victim here. She must have been aware of Leo's obsession and accepted it to agree to marry him. Perhaps even liked it. Needed it. Choosing Dom Bellomo, the man who has developed an even deeper obsession for her, and sharing a happy life by her standards with him confirm it.

“Let's face it, doesn't it have some sort of beauty to it to be the object of someone's obsession? You get all the attention and affection and intensity of devoted passion. You become the center of this one person's universe that they would do anything for you. Many girls would love to be a part of something that epic.” I knew I did.

“Oh my fucking God, even the shrink is a lost cause. What exactly do they teach you in therapy school?” she snapped. “No, Doctor Fucked Up. Obsession leads to manipulation, deceit and abuse. It doesn't have any fucking sort of beauty to it. It's pure fucking sickness that ruins a girl's life.”

What's going to happen if I just slap her? “Says the blonde girl with the full rack. You get too much attention to disdain it, I guess.”

Swearing, she clawed her fingers, but before she took her rage to the next level, Leo interrupted. “Is it true?”

“That being obsessed with a girl is sick? Fuck yes,” she huffed.

A deep scowl scarred his face. His chest rose and fell with accelerated breaths. Was he still agitated by her hurtful, provocative speech? “What she told me when she thought he was dead, was it only to hurt me, a way of getting back at me, or was it true?”

“I wasn’t there to know what fucked up shit you’re talking about now.”

“Was she pregnant?!”

Oh no. Please don’t answer the question. Not now, at least. But, of course, she would. As much as she wanted to hurt him, she wanted to fuel his fury to make sure he’d finish the task she’d freed him for.

“Yes, Leo. She was. And now they have a beautiful baby boy named Niccolino. The woman you were supposed to marry didn’t carry your babies. She carried your own brother in her womb. Tino’s son. Your replacement. The heir to—”

I punched her in the face. Someone had to.

She let out a chorus of curses. I was positive she was going to return the blow. I hadn’t been in several catfights, but even if I lost, as always, it’d be worth it this time.

When she lunged at me, I tried to run to gather some momentum to attack back and failed miserably. She was as fast and vicious as a cheetah. She grabbed me by the hair but didn’t punch me back. The cuffs chimed in her other fist, and she hooked them around my wrist and the free side of the bed. Then she marched away without a word.

“Nicky,” Leo called out before she exited the room. “I’ll tear Sebastiano Bellomo limb from limb and then rip his heart out as I watch the last light leave his eyes.”

She stared at him for a moment. “And I’ll be there.”

Shoulders slumped, I closed my eyes, a disappointed sigh leaving me. She’d managed to blind him with wrath and set his mind on going on a suicide mission. Killing Don Bellomo.

Leo is going to die, and there's nothing I can do to save him.

CHAPTER 12

Leo

“I understand now why you didn’t go for *her*,” Ravenna mumbled. “She’s an insufferable, cold-hearted bitch.”

“Nicole?” I asked absently, numb with rampant pain.

“When you told me she’s Lina’s sister, I was curious why you haven’t turned your obsessive compulsions toward her. She’s more your type.”

“You mean the blonde with the full rack?”

“Like Anastasia.”

I’d chuckle if I didn’t feel like a beast with his insides torn out of his body, forced to watch himself bleed out of his soul until he became a different beast. The one he was raised to be. “You were blonde once, too.”

There was a hitch to her breath. “You remember?”

“Yes, Ravenna. I remember everything.” I tilted my head to the side so I could see her face. “Was it because of me? To get my attention?”

Her jaw twisted as she blushed. “It didn’t work.”

“You know why?”

She lowered her head, her lips puckering. “Because I couldn’t pull off the full rack.”

Her ridiculous assumption infuriated me more than it should have. “No. It’s never been about looks. I know your psychiatrist mind is telling you people like me are incapable of love, only obsession.” Like that motherfucking Psychology professor who’d filled Sia’s mind with lies about me. “You’re wrong, but even if what I’ve felt for Sia, what I feel for Lina might be an obsession, it’s not a sickness or a delusion or something as naive as lust. I didn’t give up everything for fucking tits. You might not call it love, but it doesn’t make it

any less intense or beautiful or important. If anything, it's more. Much more."

"How do you know for sure it's more than lust?"

"Because I fell in love with Sia when I was thirteen, and Lina...I fell for her before I even saw her face."

"How so?"

"I was having an infuriating conversation with my father. She was playing her violin in the apartment building across from his. It drew me in like a spell." I closed my eyes, listening to the melody as if it were live now. "When everything you cherished and loved has been ripped out of your life, you can't help but hold on to the only beautiful thing left like a lifeline. It becomes your every last shred of hope, every dream, every last hint of good still lingering in you. And the pain, every ache you wish gone but nothing ever takes away, that one little thing becomes your only salvation to stop it. It's the only thing that can make you feel something different, anything other than all that *shit*."

A low scream raptured out of me. "Mamma was that for me. The only beautiful and innocent thing in a life where your father is Don Bellomo. And when she was gone, Sia was the only light I held on to so I wouldn't go insane. But she, too, was gone," tears burst out of my eyes, "and all I had left was pain and loss and rage piling up for years."

"Leo, Leo, take it easy, please. Try to calm down."

"Then I heard her music... It was so soft and beautiful but louder than a bomb. Louder than the voices. Louder than the screams of agony burning my mind and soul." I sniffled, peering at her. "I had to find her. I had to make her mine because without her...there's nothing but the fucking screams."

Her tears mirrored mine, and she nodded fervently. Did she understand me? Could she feel me? Or was she just trying to pacify me? To deceive me like everybody else?

She wiped her eyes with the heel of her palm. "What about the ex-girlfriend Nicole said you...? You never mentioned

her.”

Hadn't she figured it out already? “Ugh, I thought you were smart, Doc.”

Her frown stared at me. Then the revelation hit her. “Anastasia. She never died in the fire, did she?”

My mind leafed through the excruciating memories. “I saved her. I gave her a new name, a new life away from our fucking fathers’.” The sting of betrayal bubbled up inside me. “I gave her my dreams. My heart. I gave her everything! And in the end...”

“She betrayed you, too, like Lina. That's why you killed her.”

All the physical pain my body had endured so far didn't even compare to that of her unfaithfulness and abandonment. It hurt so fucking much I wanted to die. And after what Lina did, it fucking hurt even more. “I gave them everything!” I screamed again, louder, scratching at my temple. “Why?!”

“Leo, listen to me. They didn't understand you. Not everybody can. They couldn't see you the way you wanted to be seen. They didn't understand.”

“And you think you do? Just 'cause you read a few books and propped a few sick fucks you think you understand me?”

“Leo—”

“Go ahead, Doc. Give me your fucking diagnosis.”

“Please. I didn't mean—”

“Don't be shy. We're past that now. I'll fucking help you. Where do we start? Borderline personality disorder? Isn't that what you call it? Why I either push people away before they reject me or develop obsessions. The reason behind my mood swings and impulses. The reason I can't find anything to fill the fucking emptiness and so can't control my anger. Why I go from extreme love to extreme disdain,” I snapped my broken fingers, “just like that.”

“If you please just—”

“Or attachment disorders? Is it DSED? You know, lack of empathy and inability to trust, which leads to *delusional* jealousy. Or is it RAD? I always go for unattainable, unavailable strangers rather than the close ones that might actually care. Like rejecting Claudia and going for Lina. Like going for Sia...instead of *you*.”

She sobbed. “Would you please listen to me?”

“Not yet, Doc. We haven’t reached the part where I tell you the details about the *trauma* that shaped me. The reason behind my anxiety disorder and never-ending case of PTSD.”

“Your mother’s death.”

“Ding! Ding! Ding!”

“It created your OCPD due to fear of abandonment. It goes hand in hand with obsessive love disorder. The extreme need for control, the stalking, the obsessional jealousy,” she held my gaze, “they’re all so you wouldn’t lose anyone else.”

Except I keep on losing. “Brava. I’d clap if my hand wasn’t tied.”

“Any good doctor can easily tell you those things, and what’s even easier is prescribing a bunch of pills that will numb your urges until your very soul is numb, until you’re no longer you. But that’s only because, like the women that didn’t deserve your love, they fear you. They only see the one side they are trained to see. The faulty one. But have they ever tried to look at the other side? The one that’s incredibly beautiful even in its extremity?”

“Beautiful?”

“Yes, Leo. That’s what you are. Beautiful. That’s how I see you.”

“What do you see?”

Eyes glued on mine, she pushed herself up and sat on the bed. “A person who seeks love and acceptance. The simple rights of any human. The rights he deserves even though life has been so cruel to deny him. I see the pain. It’s weighed down on you, trapped in confusion and endless unanswered

questions.” She scooted closer. “I see love, too. The intense love you’d shower a girl with if it wasn’t for the scars. I see loyalty. I see a protector who would stop at nothing to keep the girl whom he makes his whole world safe.”

Her words fastened around my brain, blending themselves into my own thoughts. I shook my head. “Stay where you are, Ravenna.”

She flung her legs and came even closer. So close I felt her breath on my face. “No.”

“You don’t want anywhere near my darkness.”

“You’re wrong. Your darkness is one part of you. I see it, but I see everything else, too.” She reached a hand for my face and carefully touched me. Her lips trembled. “I see *you*, Leo.”

My eyes fluttered closed, and I took a deep breath, filling my nostrils with the scent of her hair that was now caressing my skin, too. But then I flinched, jerking away from her hand. “You should fear me like everybody else.”

“I’m not afraid of you, Leo.”

“Why?”

She looked like she was about to cry again. “Because you deserve to be saved. And no one is going to save you but someone like you.”

“You’re not like me.”

“Perhaps not the same, but in my own way, I’m broken just like you. So please, let me in. Let me join you in that pain, walk with you, feel the same torture I know you carry. There is so much of your life that is a hell for your soul, and you stay there from strength rather than weakness, I know. So give me a chance to find my feet with you, to stop my own head from spinning so one day we can save each other. Broken people save broken people, Leo.”

My gaze dropped to Ravenna’s mouth. Those little pink lips twitched. Then her tongue peeked out to tease me as she wet them. She stared at my assailed lips, too. Her sigh was

heavy and breathy. It slid over my skin, making the distance between us unbearable.

The memory of Lina's lips flickered across my vision, unbidden. I pushed it down in vain. All the time Ravenna was opening her arms wide, welcoming me in with acceptance and passion, begging for an invitation, willing for what no one else was, one thought hummed in my head. Why didn't Lina do the same? Why wouldn't *she* say those words to me?

It hurt as much as the screams. I didn't want to hear them anymore. But all my senses were trapped by the girl that wouldn't let me go. The girl *I* couldn't let go.

"I don't see you," I confessed in a whisper, which was more of a cry for help. "I only see her. All the time. Just her."

Wincing, she curled her lower lip under her teeth. "I know."

"Then why are you doing this to yourself? You know I'll use you and crush you. Why the torture of offering everything you have to give to someone who will give you nothing but pain?" There was only one acceptable explanation. "What are you guilty of, Ravenna, to be such a glutton for punishment?"

Her face contorted, heartache and loss and shame pouring out of her eyes.

I grabbed her hair and pulled her head down to mine. "Answer me."

CHAPTER 13

Ravenna

My tears seared my flesh and marked his. He demanded my confession. One I couldn't give without losing him forever. I didn't want to lose him. I'd just found him, and we already only had very little time together.

“What are you guilty of, Ravenna?” he repeated harshly, his fist shaking my skull.

I couldn't waste the only chance I had to finally be with him. So I did what I did best. Twisting the truth for the sake of the guilty. “So much. So many sins I lost count.”

His beaten blue eyes pierced me. Could he see it? The truth that disgraced me? The lies I'd told? The pain I'd caused? Could he tell? What would he do to me if he could? My heart thudded as I waited, every moment a death sentence in the making.

“You, too, hear the screams?” he asked.

I sighed in relief, unable to believe I was off the hook for now. “And I want nothing more for them to stop. So I'm here, telling you it's okay if you don't see me yet. If *you* use and crush me, I will take that pain over any other.”

Without letting go of my hair, he brushed his thumb along the line of my cheekbone. I shuddered, my racing breath laced with his scent, his touch powerful enough to take over all my senses. His tongue darted out, wetting his lip. I mimicked him, reflexively, preparing—as if possible—for another fantasy of mine turning reality.

He didn't give me a chance to part my lips or pucker or even bend closer to his mouth. The hot roughness of his split lips took me by surprise, by force, as he'd presumed it was the only way to get anything he wanted.

His mouth seared mine. A cruel caress I welcomed with inexperienced eagerness. His kiss—my first kiss—set every nerve ending in my body aflame. My blood ran hot, and my flesh demanded more. My fingers reached for his bare chest, tracing the crude scars, feeling each one of his aches through me, craving the punishment, letting him know he wasn't alone.

Our chains clicked and rattled with each move. In approval or in protest, I didn't care. In this moment, I was his even if he would never be mine. My ears were deaf, except for his laboring breaths and the wild rhythm of my heart. All I saw was the pleasure he evoked upon every fiber, every cell of mine. His scent was all I could breathe. His masculine taste mixed with wounds and blood filled my mouth. I felt nothing but his maddening kiss, his harsh, arousing touch and the heat they induced, pulsing hard through me.

Drowning.

I was drowning in the ocean of darkness Leo Bellomo was, the dark corners of my mind drawing me into him, and every instinct of mine that was begging me to get myself out before it was too late was thwarted by the intensity of his kiss. I wanted him, and not just because of my guilt.

I wanted him.

Suddenly, cruelly, he stopped. I scowled, beseeching him with my gaze. He smirked as he tipped my chin with his finger. "Breathe," he reminded me. I was too enthralled to even notice I was out of breath. My need for him transcended my need for air.

My chest heaved with a stuttering breath. I might have taken longer than I needed to take one breath so I'd keep my chest inflated, giving him the illusion of relatively more seductive breasts. Then I bit my lip in embarrassment. I was making a fool out of myself. No one liked an insecure, never-been-kissed, geeky girl. I shouldn't have—

His hand crawling under my shirt brought the train of my thoughts to a halt. He palmed my breast, his hand so big on me. My thighs pressed together, applying pressure to the ache throbbing between them. He flicked my protruding nipple, and

then he pinched it so hard I moaned loudly, drenching myself one more time.

“I’m a man controlled by obsession, and you’re a woman infatuated to the point of blindness,” he said.

“A lethal combination.”

He grunted in agreement before he pulled me into him. My arm strained, stretching hard to reach where he wanted me to be, and my hip didn’t cooperate as much as I hoped it would. None of that stopped him as he hiked my shirt up again and held my nipple between his lips. The wet hotness of his tongue captured all my senses. The clutch of his mouth ruled over me, the rattling chains heightening my arousal.

My hand dug in the back of his neck, tugging at his hair, bringing him closer, letting him feast on my sensitive flesh. Then I moved down, feeling more scars on his back, the scar tissue smooth and cruel. Some of them were more recent than others, and the thought of him being tortured ripped me to pieces, demanding more punishment.

His fingers slid down my waist and fondled my hips. I stared down at where he gripped my slacks, bunching the fabric in a fist before he reached my pelvic bone. He opened the button of my pants and unzipped it, rubbing me in the process. Then his palm was on my panties, the heat of his knuckles as they touched my bare thighs, an abrasive and enticing friction. I swallowed. “Leo...”

His teeth grazed my nipple roughly before he intensified the suckling, devouring me. I shut my eyes against the onslaught of emotions—the erotic way his coarse palm and angry mouth grazed my flesh. My need for him raced through me, scorching my veins.

His fingers splayed along the seam of my panties. The flimsy fabric must have exposed my endless shame. Would he call me a little bitch again? I bit my lip at the thought. *His* little bitch.

He dragged his fingers up and down my sex, the pressure tantalizing to the core. A low groan vibrated in his throat.

“You’re so fucking wet. You make me so hard. I want to take you right here. Fuck you until you drop, and then fuck you some more.”

His words echoed through me, every point of impact blowing. Every stroke of his ignited my skin, and all control slipped away. He pushed his hand under my panties, the direct contact stripping me of any power I had left.

When he sank his fingers inside me, I jerked, a shaky hiss escaping me. “No,” I whispered, barely audible, gripping on the last piece of my sanity.

He released my nipple, his lips glistening with saliva. Then his eyes lifted to mine in a dark threat. “Shut the fuck up.” He penetrated me deeper, daring me to object. “I’m inside you now. No matter how hard you beg, I won’t stop until your broken, shattering all over me.”

I didn’t want him to stop. Breaking for him would be another dream coming true for me. “But...please, I—”

He reached the ache deep within me, and all I could do was grasp for his neck and cling to him. “I just want you to know that...” God, the frissons of need engulfing me rendered me incapable of forming a coherent thought.

“What, puttana del cazzo?” He fluttered his fingers inside me. “What do you want me to know other than you’re a dirty little slut who’s been touching herself, thinking about my cock and the filthy things I’d do to her body for years? What else do you have to say after you begged me to use you for my pleasure? After you’ve spread your legs wide open for me? Twice? All you need to do is shut the fuck up and take it however I give it to you. Right now it’s my fingers in your wet, little pussy.” He groaned. “Fuck, you’re so tight.”

Giddy, I was a twisted bundle of need. I needed his degradation as much as I needed his body. It added to my desire, bringing me close to the edge once more. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you,” I said, out of breath. “Mr. Isaac...never did it.”

His hand stilled. His eyes widened despite the injuries with a bright sparkle. “You’re a virgin?”

Trembling, I nodded.

“Cazzo, Doc.” The sparkle turned into flames of arousal accompanied by a predatory, wolfish grin. “Cazzo, Ravenna.”

I hesitated about blurting out what I really wanted to say now, but I said it anyway. “I want you to be the one who takes it.”

He pulled his fingers out and zeroed in on my arousal coating him. My heart went frantic with shame and excitement equally. I’d never let a man this close to my body. To have done this in such a taboo, forbidden encounter, kidnapped and bound with a psychotic murderer whom I was supposed to treat as a doctor, but, like he humiliatingly said, acted like a fucking whore, spreading my legs for him, twice...

Well, I never said I didn’t come with my own list of personality disorders.

He held my gaze and slowly inserted his fingers one by one in his mouth, licking me off him. I forgot to breathe again, even after his tongue swirled around mine, forcing my taste in my mouth. His lips dragged along my jawline and glided up to my earlobe. He bit me, and his hot breath tickled me wet—wetter, much wetter. “No one will take your virginity but me. As long as I’m alive, no one will ever touch you but me, Ravenna. Do you understand? You’re mine now.”

Fluttering, my heart skipped a beat—or two. Had being a virgin changed the dynamics of our relationship? Did I hear him correctly? Did he acknowledge that I was his? Had he just sought an outlet to his possessive needs—or part of them—through me?

It was ill to be ecstatic and completely aroused knowing a seriously troubled killer had laid a claim on you. Dangerous, too. He’d tried to kill his girlfriends before because they betrayed his concept of loyalty and possession. Anything I’d do that came close to that, whether real or only happening in

his head, would result in the same outcome. Leo would try to kill me if he thought for any reason that I betrayed him.

Fuck.

“Do you understand, Ravenna? I need to hear you say it.” He gazed at me. “I need to hear you say you’re mine now.”

I shouldn’t say it. I should drag my ass as far away as possible from him and plan my escape. I should use my training to manipulate those two into letting me go and run for my life. “I’m yours. I’ve always been yours.”

Okay. I officially need professional help.

A vicious smile slanted his mouth as he hiked down my underwear. Then he hauled my leg over his shoulder and took me into his mouth. My back arched, desire burning away all inhibitions, wanting him to take over my body, to master every part of it.

I’d never been this exposed to anyone but never been so elated and aroused. His touch, his hunger, his darkness, all so wild. Dominating. Intoxicating. The carnal pleasure he evoked in me was all I could feel—all I wanted to feel.

Leo Bellomo was my inferno and heaven, my curse and bliss all in one.

I’d been damned for so long, and I’d damned myself even more succumbing in this moment of pure sin. I might have condemned myself to a brutal end eventually, burning for Leo Bellomo. But as he consumed me, burning all my world down for him, giving away my own soul for that kind of sinful, decadent, dark pleasure, seemed like a trivial price to pay.

He wrapped his hand around my throat, choking me and pulling me down. “Look at me as I fuck you with my tongue, Ravenna.”

I did as he ordered, the view of his mouth on me, of his tongue licking and entering me, the feeling of him flicking my clit, made me moan like a real prostitute. But it was the gorgeous view of his now fully naked body—as my jacket must have slid off his body with the movement—and extremely hard cock that ruined me.

His hand closed around my throat as his tongue moved faster. The pending orgasm pulled me under. Then pleasure burst through me, swallowing me, devouring me like a hungry fire. “Leo! Leo, oh God! Leo!” I screamed his name, like a dirty bitch, my flesh, muscles and bones searing with the erotic eruption as I pushed against his mouth, riding the incredible waves of my climax.

My breathing heavy and loud in this forsaken room, I came down from that, realization hitting me hard. What I’d done. What I’d gotten myself into. What I’d destined myself to.

He groaned against my raw flesh, drinking me still, lapping his tongue all over my folds as if he couldn’t get his fill and wanted more.

“Jesus fuck. Your screams made me think he was hurting you. Are you shitting me?”

I gasped, my eyes widening at the room entrance where Nicole stood. My face blazed in embarrassment as sweat covered my body. I was half naked, my legs parted, my pussy in a man’s mouth.

I tried to close my legs, but Leo kept me exactly as I was with his strong grip. He didn’t take his mouth off me and continued to lick me clean. I could die with shame right now. Not only had I indulged in this taboo between us, I was caught red-handed, witnessed as I fell in sin.

Only when he decided he had enough, he lifted his face toward her, my wetness covering his lips and jaw. “If you wanna join, just ask.”

“You’re fucking disgusting,” she told him and then looked at me as if saying, “what the fuck is wrong with you?”

Leo stretched his upper body, reaching for a kiss. Voracious and claiming and raw just like what we’d experienced. Despite my shame and the angry voyeur, our tongues tangled, his taste mixed with mine hypnotic, and my palm rested on his chest, his thunderous heartbeats soothing me like a drug, telling me there was nothing to be ashamed of. He, too, felt me. He, too, desired me.

“At least, spare me the sight of your fucking cock, you asshole. Why did you make me buy you clothes if you’re not gonna touch them?”

He broke the kiss, a taunting smile on his face. “Why didn’t you put them on me if you *don’t* wanna see me naked?”

“Have your new fucktoy do it.”

The smile vanished all of a sudden, and his voice took a harsh edge. “Ravenna is no fucktoy, do you understand?” He gazed at me, that sparkle glowing in his eyes. “She’s mine now.”

I could just melt.

“You’re insane. Both of you.” She stalked in, dropping bags I’d failed to notice had been in her hands all this time. The warm aroma wafted in. It must have been food. My stomach grumbled as if on cue. I hadn’t even realized how starving—for something other than Leo—I was until now. I tightened my thighs closed and brought my panties up as she approached me. She uncuffed me despite her earlier resolution. “Get him dressed and feed him. He needs his strength.” She stalked back to him. “Or have you forgotten what we’re up against? What we must do?”

The shadows that haunted him dimmed his stare. Had I just lost him again? “I haven’t forgotten anything.”

“Then you know we can’t stay here forever. We gotta move and find a way back home before we’re found.”

He nodded, pressing his lips. “”Uncuff me.”

“Only when it’s time to go.”

“Then give me a fucking burner. I can’t do anything just sitting here.”

“Maybe we should use the doctor’s.” She raised a brow at me, and my heart fell. I should have known she’d found that phone, too, in the car when I told her about the suture kit. The one the Lanzas gave me to communicate with them. “Why does a psychiatrist need a burner phone, *Ravenna*?”

CHAPTER 14

Leo

A fake name. Fake age. A burner phone.

Guilt. Shame. Secrets. Lies.

Ravenna was a liar.

From the moment I saw her in the car, I knew. She'd recognized me like I'd recognized her right from the start, but she pretended not to. Who knew how long she'd have tried to deceive me if I hadn't revealed her secrets? Why?

What else are you hiding, my little virgin slut?

Yes, she was still my slut despite her past lies and the ones to come. There was something about her that begged me not to let her go just yet. To own her even if there was no forever. The way she blushed drove me insane. The way she moaned. Her virgin taste. The face she made when she was shattering apart for me and no one else. The sounds she hummed between her screams of my name.

“Answer her, Ravenna,” I demanded. “Who calls you on the burner?”

Ravenna backed away, gulping.

“Get those Goddamn cuffs off me, Nicky.”

Nicky blinked and shook her head, glancing at Ravenna. “Just answer him,” she said, urgency in her voice.

“It's... It's just a patient.”

A lie. “What's their name?”

She pushed her glasses up to where her brows hooked. “I can't tell you that.”

“What's *his* fucking name?”

“Violating patient's confidentiality is betrayal. I can't—”

I pulled at the chain, trying to stand. “Uncuff me, Nicky!”

Ravenna lifted her hands, gesturing for me to stop in panic. “Leo, please. Don’t move. You’ll rip your stitches.”

I ignored her, groaning as I used the wall for support, pulling myself up. Then I twisted my already broken digits and slid my wrist out of the metal, without a single groan. Time to teach them both a lesson.

I am Leo Bellomo. The villain. The monster. The psycho. My father’s son.

Ravenna, despite her fear, gazed at me with admiration. A little girl that had just met a superhero. Nicky, on the other hand, peered at me with her never ending rage. I didn’t blame her. I might have led her to believe she had the upper hand here. She thought she had it all under control, cuffing me, believing I wouldn’t be able to move, feeling safe...ish. Now, she wasn’t, and she’d blame me for it, thinking I’d manipulated her. Another thing we had in common, another quality I admired about her, was that she detested manipulation.

One day she’d understand I was nothing like her husband or my father, and I’d meant her no harm. But she needed to know who really ran this show. *I’m Capo. My law. My orders.*

“For fuck’s sake, just say their name,” Nicky said.

“Safin,” Ravenna whispered. “Viktor Safin.”

Nicky rolled her eyes. “Let me guess, Bratva?”

“Yes,” I answered for Ravenna, pain shooting through me and piling around my leg. I dragged it, nonetheless, testing my speed. It barely gave me four steps before I was drenched in sweat. Cazzo.

Ravenna ran toward me, her arms wide open to help me. Overcompensating for her lies or genuinely concerned? Either way, I let her help me sit on the bed. Let her feel safe for now.

“You know him?” Nicky asked, suspicion dripping off her voice.

I knew whom he was married to as well. But that was a piece of information I'd hold for later. Ravenna was mine to squeeze, not Nicky's. "He's a sleaze bag piece of shit. Not in our turf...or yours."

She easily bought my lie. I'd laced it with enough truths, and she hadn't been married to Domenico long enough to know turfs or connections.

"Let's eat first, Nicky," I said. "Then you give me that phone."

"You eat. I'm not that hungry."

"But you're so pale. You need your strength as much as I do. You never know what might happen."

Her gaze dropped to the bags, and her chin trembled. "How the fuck am I supposed to eat after I..."

I keep forgetting that fucking conscience. "What's done is done, Nicky. You gotta keep going to survive."

"So what? I just put him behind me like you did with Gloria and go find the next one?" She switched her gaze toward Ravenna. "And the next?"

My jaws clenched. "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about. You have no clue what I've been through after Gloria or after your sister. You don't know how I feel."

"Oh, you poor psycho killer," she taunted, but disgust etched her face. Then she held her stomach and ran outside. Violent sounds of vomiting followed right after.

Looked like I did make her sick. Literally.

Ravenna left my side. "I'll go check on her."

I grabbed her wrist, pulling her back down. She gasped, her little tits bouncing under her shirt, nipples hardening. Surely out of fear. Did it make her horny, too? I stared at her, digging out her secrets, demolishing her walls. Her gaze kept escaping mine, dropping down to my naked body. Which part of it was out of temptation and which was out of deception?

"I just want to help," she murmured.

“Help me get dressed first.”

“Sure.” She pulled her wrist out of my grip, and I let her. When she bent to grab the clothes, I got my first thorough look at the curves of her ass. How would my cock feel between these cheeks? How hard would she scream when I ripped her tiny little ass with my long, hard, deep thrusts?

All the time I’d spent with Lina, I’d managed not to violate her with my eyes or hands—not when she was aware I was looking—even though my mind was busy imagining her in every position while we were naked and my cock was inside every one of her holes. In captivity, doggy style was my favorite daydream as I tugged on that beautiful long hair and fucked her tight, virgin pussy hard and fast, as her blood coated me and I slipped from her pussy to her ass to take that virginity, too.

I’d always wanted to know what noises she’d have made for me. How far I could have pushed her. What would an innocent, little girl like her have let me do before breaking? Would she ever have told me no?

But I’d never know. She gave it all to him. She broke for him. She let him take everything from me and left me to rot.

Ravenna started with the shirt, carefully letting my arms inside the sleeves. Her fingers lingered around my neck and on my chest as she fixed the collar and worked the buttons. She would chance a glance at my face every couple of seconds, a shy smile on hers.

I pushed her hair out of her eyes and off her forehead gently. “You like that, don’t you?”

Grinning wide, she nodded. “Dressing you, touching you, taking care of you...it feels as if we were *together*.”

“You want us to be together?”

Her eyes misted as she nodded again. “I know what you’re thinking. The *shrink* is delusional. She needs therapy herself.” She grabbed a pair of boxers, kneeled before me, and slowly slid my ankles in them. “I guess I’ve been living in my head for so long, creating blurred lines between fantasy and reality.”

I fisted her hair, extracting a wild gasp from her, and yanked her neck back, applying enough force to make it hurt. “You’re living the fantasy now, Doc, huh?”

“Leo, what the—”

I grabbed her by the hair and brought her mouth down on my cock. She quivered, staring up at me in shock. She didn’t open her mouth on her own, so I held my cock and shoved it in her mouth and down her throat. “How is that for a fucking fantasy, you little, lying bitch?”

She struggled at the impact of my cock touching her throat, gagging and mumbling. I pulled her off me for a second, yanking at her hair again. “Saying something? Lying again?”

“About what?” Her shock sounded so genuine I almost believed her. “I disrespected all ethics and told you the name of my patient.”

Like I fucking believed *he* gave her that phone. “Who’s Safin married to, Doc?”

Her face turned blank. Not a tick to her jaw, a twitch to her lips or even a blink. I took her stillness as a confirmation of her deceit. “He’s no longer married.”

“You’d better start learning how to suck cock because that’s what you’re gonna do from now on with that lying mouth of yours.” I forced her on me again. This time I wouldn’t allow her off me until she finished the job.

She moaned around me, struggling harder. Then, she mumbled a few pleas, her eyes beseeching me. “Shut the fuck up. Dirty whores like you fill their mouths with cock and shut the fuck up.”

When she must have realized I wasn’t going to go easy on her, she adjusted her lips, hollowing her cheeks to fit me in her mouth. My eyes rolled back as I gave a low groan, getting lost in the pleasure of the wetness of her mouth covering my erection for a moment. “That’s right. You suck, and I’ll do the talking.”

She looked up at me in wonder but also with burning desire. Fear and humiliation made her wet. If I shoved my

fingers inside her, too, I bet she would be drenching her panties all over again. I took her glasses off. I wanted to see her eyes as I abused her, as I fucked her mouth, forcing her to pleasure me.

Cazzo, I could get used to this. Having her all for me. Just the two of us where I called her Sia, where I called her Lina, where I did whatever I'd wanted to do to her and she'd ask for more, where I'd hurt her until she could longer take it and begged me to stop. Every single day.

No. *No*. I couldn't lose control. Not now. Not yet. Not again. Never again.

“Viktor Safin is married to Nina Lanza. You already know that, but you chose to hide it from me. Why?”

She shook her head, mumbling around my cock. More lies I didn't want to listen to. Anger was my vice. I didn't know how long before her lies made me snap. I couldn't let that happen now, so I thrust my hips up and fucked her mouth deeper, silencing her. “I said I'll do the talking. You're only gonna lie again. You'd say you didn't know she was a Lanza. You thought her name was Nina Safina, and you never cared to know her maiden name.”

The guilt darkening her eyes agreed with me. She worked harder with her tongue, using her hand, too, around my balls, and on the base of my shaft. My tongue licked the edges of my teeth as my head tilted back, my hips moving higher in reflex, drool dripping from her mouth on my tightening balls. “Cazzo.”

Her head bobbed up and down my cock as she made wet sounds with her sucking and licking, her gaze, deceptively innocent—at least, in that department—full of guilt, seeking approval and forgiveness, making it impossible for me to last any longer.

“Cazzo!” I groaned as my whole body tensed and my cum shot heavy down her throat, a surge of fury burning through me. I should have never lost control with Ravenna.

Why did I do that? She is not Lina. She'll never be Lina.

I pulled up the boxers, my cum that had filled her mouth dripping down her lower lip. Then I grabbed the jeans Nicky had brought and shoved my unshot leg in them. Ravenna hurried to help me, but I pushed her aside.

I need Lina. Lina is my wife. And he has her. And he fucks her. He had a baby with her. My own brother. Fuck. FUCK! I'm gonna burn him. I'm gonna burn them all.

“Leo, don’t do this, please. I asked for your pain, and I’m taking it, but don’t shut me out. Don’t leave me now. Give me a chance.”

A chance? Both my hands squeezed her neck until her eyes bulged. “You never asked what happened to me, how Nicky and I got here, why we took your car and couldn’t risk letting you go. You never asked anything.”

“We’ve always been taught not to ask,” she choked. “You know how it is in the families. Even at work, it’s no different. Perhaps because you’re a man and an heir things are different, but for us women in the family, we’re not given that much liberty. Our code of silence has always been *stricter*. That’s why I didn’t ask about Safin’s wife, just like I didn’t ask about you.”

“Or you’ve never asked because you don’t need to. Because you already know.”

“Know what?” she rasped.

“Who took me and locked me up in a cage, torturing me for a whole year.”

“What?”

“Stop. Lying.” I dropped her again, letting go of her neck before I choked her to death.

She clutched at her chest, her cough wild. “Why do you keep saying this? Everything I told you is the truth. Nina died last year, I swear. Safin never got married after her.”

My eyes tightened as I registered that new piece of information. “How? How did she die?”

She gulped, and her shoulders slumped. “Killed. He killed her.”

Safin killed a Lanza and still lived?

Like a jigsaw puzzle, pieces moved inside my head, coming together undone, searching for the one missing piece that would make the picture complete.

Until I found it.

“Do you know who Nicky was married to?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t even know she was married.”

“Domenico Lanza.” I dragged my stare back to her lying face. “The fucker who had been torturing me.”

“I didn’t know any of that.” Tears filled her rasps. “Why are you talking about him in past tense?”

“Because he’s dead. His wife killed him when she found out he’d teamed up with my fucking father to use me, to use her.”

All the color left her face even though she was crimson from choking a few seconds ago. “She killed him?”

“Nicole *Lanza* is as dangerous as any of us, Doc. Don’t underestimate what she can do. Especially when she discovers dirty secrets...such as a man using a prisoner like a scarecrow to make her marry him. Such as a girl whose father is drowning in gambling debts and she has to do whatever it takes to pay them. Such as a woman who crossed a certain Don by helping the killer of his cousin, and she had to settle the score to stay alive, so she made it look like she was in the wrong place at the wrong time when she was exactly where she was told to be...”

“No, Leo. There’s a huge misunderstanding here.”

“So if I checked your phones, I wouldn’t find any Lanzas’ numbers in? Better yet, won’t they be chiming in any time soon?”

“No... You got it all wrong.”

I stuffed my other leg in the jeans with a huff. Then, using my rage as fuel, I shot up to my feet, grabbed both cuffs, dragged her by the hair and tossed her on the bed.

“No. No! Leo, no!” She struggled, fighting hard, as I clasped the metal around her wrists, cuffing her to the bed. “You have to listen to me. The Lanzas didn’t send me. I’m here on vacation. My father is coming here in a few days to join me. I went to Taormina early to prepare for things to make the trip as comfortable as possible for him because he’s in a wheelchair. Check my messages. You’ll know everything.”

“I have checked your messages. Nicky used your fingerprint while you passed out to unlock your phone. You know what I found?”

Fear stained her face. “What?”

“You deleted your call and messages log. You have an extra password for your emails. And you never had any record of any flight bookings from America to Italy or a reservation for your stay.”

Her lips parted and pressed several times, and then she just rattled her chains. “I was never sent for you or anybody. Think. Your wound was fresh when we met, which meant you’d just managed to escape. How could they send me just in time to catch you the second you escaped? For God’s sake I was just heading for the farmers market under the church. I didn’t even know you were still alive until I saw you this morning.”

She might have a point, but it didn’t mean she wasn’t hiding so much more than she led on. It didn’t mean she wasn’t lying. It didn’t mean she wasn’t another pawn in the game. “So answer me this. Where have you been staying in Taormina?”

Tears sprang from her eyes as she squeezed them, sobbing. “Bianca Resort.”

“The Lanzas’ resort.”

“They own the city, Leo. Not everyone who stays in their hotels works for them.”

I'd heard enough.

"Please, don't go!" she screamed after me while I dragged my wounds, physical and emotional and went to Nicky.

She was sitting in a corner, knees bent to her chest, a puddle of vomit beside her. Her eyes lifted to me, still full of disdain. "I heard everything."

"Give me the burner. I have a plan."

CHAPTER 15

Ravenna

The morning sun had dimmed, and the winter air bit at my bound body. My stomach convulsed with hunger. My lips begged for water. My fingers and wrists were burning with numbness, and for the first time since they took me I'd felt like a real captive.

They'd left me alone for hours, and if it hadn't been for the occasional humming of their voices, I'd have thought they'd forsaken me altogether. Would he? Leave me just like that after...?

After what? After he used your body like a dirty prostitute to substitute for the urges he has for another woman?

My heart squeezed and then jerked when footsteps approached the room. "Leo?"

"It's just me." Nicole entered, a scowl on her face.

"Where's he?"

She picked up the food bags and put them next to me on the bed. "In case you get hungry before your *employers* find you."

Panic surged through me. "What?"

"This's where it ends. We're leaving, Doctor. But I'll give them your location when we go back to Chicago to come get you.

"Leaving?" And he wouldn't even come and say goodbye?
"Where's Leo?"

She rolled her eyes and snorted, heading for the door.

No, no, no. This can't be happening. "You have to listen to me. You're making a mistake. You think he won't hurt your sister? You think he's over her and all he cares about is revenge?"

She stopped, facing the door, but didn't turn. This was my only chance to get to her.

"Whatever he's told you, he's lying," I said. "When he speaks about her, when he mentions what he feels for her, he uses present tense. With his kind of psychosis, Leo will never stop fixating on your sister until he believes she's dead."

She glanced at me over her shoulder, her chest heaving. Then she swirled and stalked back to me. "Do you think I'm an idiot to trust someone like Leo Bellomo?"

"You trusted him over your husband."

She scoffed. "I trust no one in this whole world but my sister. I care about no one but her and my nephew." She leaned in to whisper in my ear. "You think I don't know what he's planning after he shoots Tino? He keeps saying he's a dead man, and he'll be shot on sight right after, but I know he thinks he can use my sister as leverage to save his life and then kidnap her."

"Then why are you helping him?"

"Because I won't let Leo Bellomo anywhere near Lina ever again. Once he kills Tino, I will make sure of it."

My eyes bulged, and a terrible cold shiver took over me. Even if he managed to off his father and get away with it, Nicole was going to kill Leo herself. "Leo! Leo!"

She giggled, almost as manically as Leo. "Scream for him all you want. He's not coming. He doesn't give a shit about you, Ravenna. He doesn't give a shit about anyone. He only cares about himself and getting his fucking sick needs taken care of." Her face darkened. "Just like all of them."

I pulled hard at the cuffs, writhing for a way out. "Leo!"

"I'd save my energy if I were you. You don't know how long you're gonna be staying here all alone in the cold before they come for you. But as a courtesy, even though you don't deserve it, I'll help you pee before I go. Sleeping in your own piss would be very unpleasant."

Shit. I couldn't let her abandon me in this condition. I wouldn't let her lead Leo to his death, either. I couldn't. No matter the price I had to pay. "Your hatred is blinding you from the truth. Don Bellomo isn't the enemy, Nicole. He isn't the one who used you. He isn't the one who told your husband to imprison Leo."

Her big, blue eyes squinted at me. "What?"

"You're hating the wrong person, Nicole. You're having your revenge on the wrong Mafioso."

"Do you know who did it?"

I swallowed. I was playing a dangerous game, and the risks were lethal, but I had no other choice. "Yes."

"Who the fuck is it?"

"I'll only tell Leo."

Deep lines appeared between her eyebrows. "You're unbelievable. Are you that weak, that pathetic? How could you feel any kind of affection for someone like him?"

"How could your sister? For him and his father?" I looked her in the eye. "How could you for Domenico Lanza?"

Jaws clenched, she seethed. "They're all mistakes. Ones I'll make right once and for all. But, at least, those men wanted us. Leo... He didn't even bother to come over and show you any sign of respect, any gesture that you meant anything to him, that you even existed. He hasn't even come to say goodbye before he leaves forever."

I writhed again, ablaze, needing to punch this bitch silent. "Leo!" *Why the fuck isn't he answering me? Why hasn't he come?* My mind screamed with the answer as I kept screaming for him. *Because everything Nicole has said is true.* "Leo! Your father didn't put you in that cage! I know who did! I know it for a fact just like I know Lina is never going to love you! She never has. Never will."

Never like I do. Tears streamed down my face as for the first time in my life I acknowledged my true feelings for him. I'd deluded myself for years, convincing myself he was

nothing but a fantasy and a crutch to avoid relationships, but it was never true. I'd been irretrievably in love with him. The psychopath who had always been madly in love with some other girl but me. The monster who murdered the objects of his obsessions when they no longer served his delusions. The man I'd betrayed and sentenced to a destiny worse than death.

I was a psychiatrist, and I'd fallen in love with a vicious made man who was criminally insane. My most forbidden fantasy and worst nightmare. I'd fallen in love with Leo Bellomo.

"You know what she must be doing right now?" I continued my hopeless shouts. "She must be in your father's arms, begging him to kill you so her beloved husband, the father of her child would be safe. So they'd all be safe. Her real family that never included you!"

"What the fuck are you doing?" Nicole yelled at me.

Using her bitch psychology technique against her. "She must be so scared, and your father has to be comforting her... in his bed, never leaving her side, doing all kinds of—"

His face popped at the entrance. The sound of his huffs reached me from here, silencing me. It wasn't my intention to wound him. I only wanted to anger him enough to lure him back to me.

He limped in until he was close enough for me to see him clearly; he'd never put my glasses back on my face. My heart thumped, and my breath snagged in my chest as he just stood there, staring at me, as I knew the state of his anger was a danger to all of us, himself included.

Suddenly, he pounced on me despite his injuries, choking me with his grip. "How do you know it's not my father who told the Lanzas' dog to torture me?"

I'd grown to like the feeling. A counter defensive emotion to fear that turned the hazard of asphyxiation into something erotic rather than painful.

"Answer me!"

My lips curled in a smile. "And if I don't?"

His dark notes colored him from head to toe. “I’ll fucking make you.”

“Leo, c’mon,” Nicole said, a hint of panic in her voice. “She’s just stalling. She knows shit. Of course it’s Tino who played that game with Dom. Who else?”

“Are you willing to take that risk?” I provoked him. “Knowing that there might be another enemy out there, the one you should be killing for causing you all that pain?”

“You’re lying,” he said. “Again.”

“Am I? Well, I have one word for you.” I gathered all my shattered courage, knowing there was no turning back once I said it. “Filicudi.”

He snarled at me. Then he glanced at Nicole over his shoulder. “Leave us.”

Her eyes darted between us. “Why?”

“Because you’re not gonna like to watch what I’m about to do.”

Despite my attempt of staying in control, I shuddered. Would my game backfire?

“Which is what?!” she yelled.

His hand slid to the top of my shirt and his other hand joined it. Then he ripped my shirt off me, exposing my naked breasts. “This.”

I gasped, my eyes wide, quivering, fighting desperately to control my tears. Was he really going to do this? Humiliate me that much? Scar my sanity for life like that?

“What the fuck? Are you crazy?” She lunged forward. “I can’t let you rape her, you fuck.”

“Rape?” He chuckled, running the back of his hand on my breast, which sickeningly and confusingly sent a throb between my legs, as if my body refused to understand what was happening, as if it already surrendered to the fact that it truly belonged to him even without my consent. “I’m just keeping my promise.”

I dragged my gaze to his, part of me angry at his dark interpretation of what I'd perceived as the most delightful promise I'd ever been made, another part, the dark part that had always connected with and craved his, tingling in anticipation. "It's all right." I tried to say without crying, but it came out as a sob. "Just go."

"No," Nicole urged. "You can't let him do this to you."

"It's not really any of your business. You're not the only kinky person here, Nicole. Some girls like it rough." I did my best to sound convincing despite the shaking, swallowing my fear. "So go. Give us some space. Unless voyeurism is another one of your kinks. Or perhaps you're just curious about how Leo fucks and want to watch. In that case, you're welcome to stay."

She seemed like she was about to vomit one more time. "You are as sick as he is. Fuck you."

She stormed out, and I was glad she bought my lie. Public humiliation had always been a trigger for me. Most likely for all nerds.

"Now what?" I managed to gaze at him. "You'll show me irrefutable evidence of your brutality and sadistic disorders? You'll rape me for information?"

"Again with that word." His breath tickled my ear. "Didn't we just agree I'm only keeping my promise to you? I promised no one would take your virginity but me. I'm keeping my word." Simultaneously, he bit my earlobe and pinched my nipple. "Little bitch."

"Not like this. Please, not like this."

"Why now, Doc, isn't it how you always imagined it?" He bit me harder down my neck, twisting my nipple until I screamed. "When you lie, manipulate and betray, you don't get a say in when or how you're fucked."

This was my punishment. Having all what was left of my dignity stripped off me. Having all my dreams turning into nightmares coming true. Having any kind of pleasure turning into pain.

His hands came to the waistband of my slacks, and a terrible chill assaulted me. I'd never thought there would be a moment when Leo's touch could become cringe worthy.

“What do you know about Filicudi?” he asked.

When I didn't answer right away, he snapped open the button and roughly snatched my pants off me, pulling them down mid thighs. “Who told you about Filicudi and why?”

My tongue tied into a knot. Out of fear and regret, but also out of wanting to buy as much time as I could with him. Perhaps I could establish a bond that wasn't easily broken. Perhaps I could change his mind and talk him out of his morbid plan.

He yanked my pants all the way down, leaving me in only my panties. His eyes feasted on my vulnerable body with predatory hunger. Something primal and real, not just for intimidation. This was my opening. “Is that what you fantasized about doing to her? Tie her to your bed and show her what it's like to be helpless in front of a man, to be dominated? Is that how you planned to have her on your wedding night, to be the first man inside her and paint the sheets and your cock with her virginal blood?”

His chest heaved with labored breaths. The hunger in his gaze flicked into depraved starvation. A bulge formed in his jeans. He ran a finger from the hollow of my throat, slowly, blazingly, down to my navel, and then it lingered farther down, even slower, as it continued its path along my mound and slit. I throbbed with fear and arousal, all lines blurred, and he smirked playfully. Was he picturing the scenario I proposed he'd have had with Lina? Or was he picturing whatever pain he'd planned to inflict on me next?

When he cupped my pussy, squeezing, and then swatted me hard enough to extract a moan from my throat, I knew the answer. “This's the last I'm asking with words, Ravenna. What the fuck do you know about Filicudi?”

“I know your father wanted to send you there.”

“But then he changed his fucking mind and sent me to Il Coyote instead.”

I shook my head.

“Then who the fuck did it? And how did they manage to fool Don Bellomo all this time?”

Because I was too good at my job. Tears fled my burning gaze.

With a groan, he wrapped his fingers around the elastic of my panties and almost ripped them as he pulled them down my ankles. I tightened my legs together as a last means of defense. He snorted as he parted my feet and removed my underwear. “I should go ask Nicky if she has more cuffs for your ankles, little slut.”

I’d never felt more vulnerable in my life, not even when I had a gun to my head. There was something more humiliating and disturbing about being bound to a bed, all naked without permission, stripped bare for a merciless monster to do with you as he pleased. To hurt you. To fuck you.

The threat disarmed you, stole away all the shields you might have had, all control. Your mind got crippled with fear and false defense mechanisms that urged you to submit instead of fight.

In this case, it was way worse. While I was forced into this dark game, my body, driven by my forbidden fantasies, *wanted* to submit to the darkness, to be swallowed in his bottomless abyss.

He sniffed my panties and gave a low groan, the bulge in his pants now a defined outline of his erection. “So fucking dirty.” He sniffed the scent of my desire again, the depraved yet intimate act tantalizing me. “Like you. How many times have I made you come so far?”

“T-twice.”

“Such a slut.” He inhaled my scent one more time, and my nipples hardened. His gaze zeroed in on them, and he smirked, shoving my panties in the pocket of his jeans. A souvenir? I bit my lip, a stupid erotic sensation rippling through me at the

evidence. Leo might have been trying to show me I'd meant absolutely nothing to him, but there he was, taking my panties as a souvenir to revisit our time together. "I bet you're gonna come for me one more time when I do this."

He unzipped his pants slowly, savoring the fear he instigated in my eyes. Then he took his time removing them and his boxers, freeing his enormous erection he'd forced me to touch and taste. Now he'd force it inside of me, brutally and cruelly taking a piece of me.

His hands crawled from my ankles up my legs, feeling me up, until he reached my inner thighs. Then he spread me apart with enough force that hurt my muscles and faulty hip.

"No." I'd given myself the delusion that I could do this. That I had it all under my control. But the second I was forcibly sprawled before him, ripe for the taking of a beast, bound and helpless with nowhere to escape, I shuddered, shattering. "Please, Leo. Don't do it like this."

He inserted his fingers inside of me, pushing the lips apart, sinking in my dripping wetness. It was nothing like the first time he did it. An unwelcome intrusion. A taking without giving. An act of dominance seeking nothing but painful submission.

I squirmed at the violation, and he laughed. "It's the only way you deserve. This's how I make you pay, you little bitch." He sat beside me, his fingers crawling inside my pussy, and circled his tongue around my nipple and then trailed up to my jaw. "*My* little, lying bitch."

Why was he saying that right before he intended to literally fuck me over and leave? Why was he making me his if he'd determined to ruin everything that might have been nice between us? Leo had been the man of my dreams, the love of my life, but after what he was about to do, what he was about to take from me, he'd be the man who scarred and ruined me for life.

"You're confusing me," I murmured, desperate.

“There’s nothing to be confused about.” He dangled his injured leg down the bed and bent the other under him. Then he cupped my butt and lifted me so that my hips were high enough for him to penetrate me, my pussy an offering to the devil. “I am fucking you, Ravenna, and you’re gonna take every inch of my cock until you bleed.”

“No!” My lips trembled and so did my heart as I kicked at him, floundering like a fish out of water. “You can’t do this to me. No!” *I love you.*

He gripped me tight despite his body state, the thick crown of his cock at my entrance. I had no clue where he got his physical strength. He’d been tortured for a year, his bones were fucking broken and his leg was shot for God’s sake. How could he hold me immobile?

He dragged my legs and put my ankles on his shoulders, and then he locked his hands around my hips. “Stop lying. Don’t pretend you don’t fucking want it, little slut, because you do. You want my cock ripping you to pieces, punishing you, fucking you harder than you can ever take. Don’t pretend you’re not gonna like it because your pussy is already dripping in need for my dark violence, and your screams that are gonna fill the room will tell exactly how much.”

Tearing away my own breath from my chest, he pushed the tip of his cock inside me. “Who gave the order, Ravenna?”

His thickness stretched me immediately, hard and rough, my wetness treacherously aiding the intrusive head. I couldn’t speak. I could only quake with sobs.

He thrust until the whole crown was inside, his face turning red, sweat beading his forehead. “Mmm. You know, Sia was so tight, too. And that time when I tied her to the bed and punished her for days the same way I’m punishing you, she kept asking me to stop, sobbing just like you.”

More of him violated me, marking me with his evil, as his eyes rolled back, and he seemed to be remembering the details of his first crime and victim. “Cazzo. How much I loved her pussy. So tight, clenching around my cock so hard right after every time she protested and screamed. Every fucking time.”

Tears rolled down my cheeks as he pulled a little out of me and thrust harder, piercing me, the penetration and stretching searing.

“You’re no different.” He groaned. “Soon, you’ll be doing the same, and you’ll crave the way I fill you, the way I stretch you, the way I fuck you until you scream, for the rest of your life.”

And no one else would fill the sick, twisted void he’d create in me. First, he’d darkly mark me his, and then he’d abandon me to be tortured with emptiness for as long as I lived.

Anger kicked in as I gripped on the shreds of control I might have had left. “Do you think...she felt the same way for your father...when he raped her?”

“Shut. Up.”

“You’re so much alike you and Don Bellomo. He, too, snatched Lina away, to punish her for her betrayal, just like you did with Sia, just like you’re doing with me.”

He made me scream with his next thrust, splitting me in half. “I said shut up. I’m nothing like him.”

“You’re everything like him. That’s why she thought you could replace him, but all she truly wanted was your father. A little girl looking for a daddy. So why settle for the son, the replacement, the second choice, when she could have it all with your more powerful, more mature, more dominant father?”

He grumbled like an angry animal, pushing himself all the way inside me, tearing up my barrier. “Fuck you. And fuck her. I’m not like him, and I’m nobody’s replacement. I am me!”

A painful scream erupted out of me as I felt a sticky warmth around where he hurt me. That must have been my virginal blood. Leo Bellomo had taken my virginity as he promised.

I wept at the loss, at the ache, at the darkness he was filling me with, at the urges that would haunt me forever, at the mark

that I'd always carry with me.

"I own you now, Ravenna," he declared before he put his hand on my head and pushed me down on his cock, forcing himself deeper inside me. "So why don't you just tell me that last secret you're hiding from me?"

"Yes, Leo. You own me. Remember that. You never owned her, but you own me. Whatever happens, there's a part of me that you took and will always be with you. Our bond is stronger than your obsession. If you choose to live, and you should, you'll always be looking for me to fill that missing part of the bond. No matter what you try to convince yourself, leaving me will create a void for you, too, only I can fill, not some fantasy you conjure. Only me, Leo, because what we have has happened in reality."

A wicked sparkle glimmered in his eyes as he stared at me, as if he'd just realized a truth of which he wasn't aware. Our unholy, dark bond was real, and he now knew it.

Anger surged through his next strokes, our eyes tangled against their will, like our bodies, and my screams filled the room as he anticipated. Pain and pleasure. Humiliation and joy. Predator and prey. Interchangeably.

My muscles clenched around him through the tears, through the bleeding of our union. I wouldn't dare say my body was betraying me because it wasn't. My consent might have been dubious, but my desire and need for him were never coerced or confused.

I wanted his pain. His darkness. His degradation. And he delivered.

Could you really blame a monster for being what he was? Leo Bellomo was just keeping his devilish promise to me as he fucked me into oblivion, demanding I take every inch of his cock, calling me his little bitch, stretching me in a way I hadn't thought physically possible.

In those torturous and most pleasurable moments of my first *real* orgasm, I screamed, knowing that I owned him as much as he owned me. He saw me, not Lina. No matter how

hard he denied it, he was punishing me, fucking me, not anybody else. That alone meant one thing.

He was mine. And I, too, fought for what was mine.

CHAPTER 16

Leo

I was played. Again.

She'd posed as a victim. Helpless prey in the jaws of the psycho. But she was nothing but a huntress using her most fatal weapons against me to lure me into her web of deceit.

The illusion of her innocence.

She thought it was the only way to own me, and for a moment there I believed she won.

Just for a moment.

My engorged cock covered in her blood and orgasm about to explode inside her while she screamed for me didn't mean she owned me like I owned her. Didn't mean anything at all.

It wasn't like I'd memorized every curve of her body by now. I didn't take notice of the way she undulated around me when she came. Of how her little tits glistened with sweat and the exact shade of red her skin became when she was like a bitch in heat. I'd never recall the view of her pointy nipples or how they felt between my lips. The shaking of her fingers as she wrapped them around my cock. The scent of her arousal that wafted through her luscious hair. The way she blinked without her glasses. How her right frontal tooth appeared a little bigger when she bit her lip. The sound of her moans and screams, both of pleasure and pain.

I'd never need any of that any time soon. Ever. I'd have no urges around her to even revisit it in my head. To prove it, I'd show her she was still nothing but the liar I wanted to punish.

I slipped out of her even though my balls, painfully heavy, cursed at me, screaming for release. She stared at me with confusion. She thought she was in control and didn't expect me to take it back.

When my gaze lowered to her pussy and the evidence of her innocence wrapped around my hardness, I'd almost lost what I'd just gained. The sight of her vulnerability, the proof of my dominance over her, the primal scent of her blood and cum... Fuck, I wanted to lick it off her and myself. In this moment, I did want to carry that part of her with me forever.

Lick it. Taste the innocence you took. Devour the pain you caused. You need it. Lick it. It's yours. She's yours. Take it. Take her.

If I did, she'd think she had some sort of hold on me. I couldn't do that. I couldn't let her see that.

Look at that color. There is nothing sexier than virgin blood on a man's cock. You have to lick it. You must know how hers taste.

She's yours. Don't you wanna know if she tastes better than Sia? She has to be better. Can't you see? She must be better than Lina would have ever tasted, too.

No. No one was better than Lina. Lina was my wife. He took her from me. I couldn't let her go. I'd never let her go.

“Did you hear me, Leo?” Ravenna stared at me, her face a pink mess of tears and sweat, her pussy stained with my doing, a perfection I wanted to dive back in. The blood. The fucking beautiful blood. “Our bond is stronger than your obsession, so don't stop now. Seal it. Mark me some more. Dominate me. Finish inside me and fill me with your seed. I know you want to, and I'll take it like everything you dish out at me.”

My cock pulsed, and my tongue swiped along my teeth in hunger. I wanted to lick every drop of her innocence and then fill her with my cum and keep it inside as much as possible even though I knew it'd spill from her tight little pussy. *Cazzo. The images. The fucking images.*

No. No. She doesn't own me. Lina is not an obsession. She's my wife. All I need to do is save her from him, and she'll love me again. But first...

I found my jeans and shoved my fist in the pocket to get out the keys to the cuffs. I freed one of her wrists, her

astonished eyes following me. If she thought I was done here, she'd better think again.

To my surprise, she didn't squirm as I flipped her over so that she was on all fours and put the cuffs back on. She knew this wasn't over. "Lina isn't an obsession, and you're nothing."

Nothing you're wiping her blood off your cock and sucking it off your fingers when she isn't looking.

"Stop lying to yourself. I'm not nothing to you."

Nothing you're dying to drink every drop of her innocence from her pussy and watch her face while you do even if it means she'll know how much power she's gaining over you.

Fuck this shit. "Yeah? Well, you asked me how I've been wanting to fuck my wife on our wedding night. I'll show you because that's the only way I can come with you. Thinking about *her*, fucking *her* in my head while my cock is inside *you*. That's how I've been coming today even when it was your hand or your mouth on me. That's how nothing you are to me."

"I..." She sobbed. "I don't believe you."

Because she was smart enough to know I was lying. To know even if I hadn't seen her earlier when she was right in front of me, it was her face I was seeing now even though it was no longer in my sight. To know that when her skin touched mine and the warmth of her mouth wrapped around me, Lina's image blurred and faded, her eyes morphing grayish green. To know that when I was inside her, lines were no longer blurred. It was her that I'd felt bleed and clench on me, not anyone else.

To know I was only protecting myself with my lies. Maybe even protecting her.

"Believe this, little bitch." I wrapped her long hair around my fist and yanked her head back hard. Her moan of pain throbbed in my cock. I slapped her ass as I slammed into her with one move, savoring her moans and her lingering taste on my lips. "I only want her." I smacked her ass again to yell over my lie. "When you moan and scream, I only hear her." *Smack!*

“And when I fill your pussy with my cum, it’ll be her name I’m shouting.” *Smack! Smack! Smack!*

“No, Leo. No. It’s me.” She said between moans, my fingers leaving a red imprint on her scarred skin. The long mark on her back took me by surprise, her scar and those of mine another bond in the making despite ourselves. Who the fuck did this to her? “You’re coming inside me. You’re marking me. You’re punishing me. You’re coming for *me*.”

As if her words commanded me, the heaviness in my balls threatened to explode. *What the fuck is she doing to me?*

“Who gave the order not to send me to Filicudi, Ravenna?” I only asked as a distraction. I already knew the answer.

“What would you do if I told you?”

I spanked her and dug my fingers in her sore flesh. “Stop stalling and tell me.”

She screamed, throbbing and clenching around me. *Bitch. She’s gonna milk me before I get it out of her.* “Say it, and I’ll tell you. Say it’s me you’re fucking, Leo, not Lina. Say it and I’ll tell you everything.”

I gave her another spank, twisting her nipple, thrusting into her as deep as I could, giving her every inch of me, hitting the womb, as her yelps and purrs drove me out of my fucking mind.

The words jumped on the tip of my tongue, my release imminent. That fucking bond she kept talking about tying around me like a rope, as if I could physically feel it. “No!” I shouted, snapping out of it, but my body screamed differently, calling me out on my lies, as I thrust and thrust and exploded inside her pussy, giving her a part of me she gladly took, swallowing it whole with her own orgasm, milking me to the last drop. “No.”

“Yes, Leo. Yes.”

My catching breath fell heavy on her back while I recovered—if I could ever recover from this. “You little bitch.”

“Your little bitch.”

Yes! She is mine. Lina was mine. Ravenna is mine. I have to kill him. I have to save Lina. Lina is my wife. He took her from me. He killed my mother. I killed my mother. Sia, too. He saved Sia. I killed Sia. He saved Lina. I killed Lina. I have to kill him. I have to save her. She deserves to die. She's the mother of my brother. He deserves a better father. I have to save him. They have to die. It's not over. It's never over. One of us has to die.

“Don't listen to the screams,” she whispered as if she could hear my mind. “Stay here with me.”

Split in two between the twisted peace along the unexpected beautiful chaos staying tangled inside her had brought me and the voices that would never leave me be, I grumbled.

“Fight them, Leo.”

“I can't.”

“I can help you.”

“No.” I let go of her hair and pulled out, knowing either way I'd lost. “No.”

Her hair whipped around her face as she tilted as far as she could to look at me. My cum mixed with her blood formed a disturbing shade as it slowly pooled out of her. The color of our bond mesmerized me, drawing me in an endless loop of need, as she begged me to stay.

I stepped back and grabbed my clothes. “I have to go.”

“Please, Leo,” she whimpered. “Even if you kill him and take her, she'll reject you. Again. She'll never love you, Leo. But I do.” She broke. “I love you.”

I froze for a moment. Then wrath burned under my skin and through my veins. I dropped everything and faced her. My pulse throbbed in my skull. My hand squeezed around her neck. I'd never wanted to hurt her more than I did now. “When do your lies end?”

“I'm...not...lying,” she choked. “Not...now.”

That was far more disturbing than all her lies together. One truth I should have never learned. It was dangerous, and more if I believed it. “You love me? You love a psychopath who in your definition has no empathy, incapable of love, only obsession, *delusions?*”

She struggled, her face all red, her wrists rattling the cuffs, her fingers clawing up. “It’s what I was taught but never what I believed.” She wheezed. “I believe what I feel.” Her gasps for air grew weak. “I believe what I see, Leo, and I see you.”

That’s why I have to leave her behind. She sees me. Her own darkness that twisted her makes her see me. Makes her mine. Makes her love me. Makes me—

“Le-o,” she rattled, turning purple, her eyes rolling back. “S-s-top. Le—”

I stared at her, rage coursing through me like my own blood, listening to her wheezing breath and pleas, watching the life leaving her face. Then, as if suddenly out of a trance, I released her before I crushed her windpipe.

I had to get out of here.

“Goodbye, Ravenna.” The whisper flowed out of my mouth without thinking. She probably couldn’t hear me with all her coughing and wild gasps. I grabbed my clothes and turned my back at her.

CHAPTER 17

Ravenna

I'd confessed my love to the man who shattered my last piece of innocence, to the psycho monster that threatened everything. My freedom. My sanity. My soul. My whole life. And he was walking away from me, leaving me in the most humiliating and disgraceful condition, restrained to a dingy bed in an abandoned house, his seed and cruelty staining my flesh. Dirty. A piece of garbage he wouldn't even bother putting aside.

"I still haven't told you who put you in that cage!" I yelled after him, biding my time, willing him to stay. How pathetic was that?

He didn't stop. "I already know."

"I swear to you it wasn't Don Bellomo. He wouldn't let them kill you. He insisted they send you to Filicudi in exile. You have to forgive him. You can't punish him forever. He, too, lost your mother, that day. He's been suffering just like you."

He banged his fist on the wall. "Not another word."

"Lina is *his* lifeline. He saved her because he needed to save someone innocent like your mother and unborn sister. He couldn't save his own so he saved her." I understood Don Bellomo's actions toward Lina more than anyone. The need to save someone, anyone, when you couldn't save your own family. That was why I was desperate to save Leo. I couldn't save my brother, and my whole family fell apart. Saving Leo, saving someone I loved, could be my absolution. *My* lifeline.

"I'll rip your tongue out of your mouth if you don't shut up."

"I don't care. You have to listen. You have to let go. It's the only way. You have to stop blaming him for something that was neither his fault...nor yours."

He whirled and marched toward me. “I didn’t kill my mother. Do you hear me? *He* killed her with his greed and thirst for power. He killed his own family when he became fucking Capo. He doesn’t get to have another family or live happily with another wife and son. *My* wife and the son that should have been *mine*.” Murder flashed in his gaze. “Sebastiano Bellomo doesn’t get to live. Not anymore.”

“Where were you the day of your mother’s murder, Leo?”

He stilled, horror paling his face. “It’s getting dark. I have to be on the move.”

“You weren’t at the mansion when they came for her. Neither was he. Why?”

He started putting on his clothes. “Nicky!”

“You were with him, weren’t you? He took you somewhere?”

“Nicole! It’s time to go.”

“The Seppis hit in order to wipe out all the Bellomos. Your father was on the top of their list. He was supposed to be at the mansion. So were you. It had to be an emergency that made him take you and go, leaving your pregnant mother alone.”

“I was sick, all right?” he hissed. “I was sick, and the doctor couldn’t come to the house so my father took me there. She was supposed to take me, but he wouldn’t let her. That’s why she died.”

“Why didn’t he let her take you?”

“He was trying to...” He growled, his eyes bloodshot. “He was trying to take care of her,” his voice cracked with tears, “let her rest because of the baby.”

“He was taking care of her. He was taking care of you. It wasn’t his fault any more that it was yours. But you can’t help it. You have to blame someone, but deep down, you only blame yourself.” I burst into tears myself. “You blame yourself, too, for your mother’s death. Just like I blame myself for my brother’s.”

His gaze returned to me, a question he wouldn't allow on his tongue. He wanted to know my story, but that meant he'd have to stay and listen and perhaps even care. "Nicole!"

"Don Bellomo had to hold on to Lina to stop his screams, Leo. Let me be the one who stops yours."

"Did you know how I got the scars on my back and my thighs? Domenico used a nine tail flogger with fucking nails on the ends. With every flog, he took pieces of my flesh, and then he'd just watch as I bled. After that, he would dig his fingernails in the festering wounds and pull my back into his front, physically making me feel how big his motherfucking hard-on was to my torture, telling me how much he'd enjoy fucking me in the ass and then feed me his cum right before he killed me."

My heart shrank. Even my tears were ashamed of falling. "I'm so s—"

"Nope!" He lifted a warning finger at me, shaking his head rapidly. "Uh-uh. You don't get to apologize. I haven't told you the best part yet. When he went on with that routine which was at least once a week, I'd tell him to fucking go on with it, and he'd say yes, making me believe today was the day he finally carried out his threat. Today was the day I'd get fucked in the ass before I died." He mused. There was no imagination vivid enough to capture what he must have been seeing in his head or feeling right now. "But he wouldn't. He'd bend me over and just laugh. Then he'd jack off and come all over my wounds right before he'd take a bucket of my piss and pour it over me, only to leave me to relive that horror for another day, every week, for a whole fucking year."

A heated moan blew out of me, and my head lowered in defeat. There was nothing left to say. No matter what I did, how right I tried to do by him, I'd always be the one who facilitated his torture. That horrific kind of torture that would never leave him. That would always remain between us.

"Do you know how I survived this long, Ravenna? What kept me motivated to stay alive?"

"Lina," I whispered, my heart in pieces.

“Yes, but not just her. Beside my wild fantasies of reclaiming her, there was another fantasy even wilder.”

“What is it?”

“Revenge.”

My head jerked up, and our gaze locked. The darkness in his eyes exuded horror. A raging fire that would destroy without mercy and abandon everything black and gray like this house.

“On every single person who had a hand in having me locked up in a fucking cage with that fucker.” He approached me and bent his head to my level, piercing me with his stare. “The things that I’d do to them...”

My breath quivered in my constricted chest. Suddenly, even though I’d been naked for a while, I felt cold now. “I guess it wouldn’t be a few spanks and a fucking, right?”

He shook his head slowly. “Do you still want me to stay, Doc?”

How demented and sick would it be if I said yes? After all what I and he had done. After the pain we’d both caused each other. After the stains of shame and the imprints of hatred. After I had no doubt he knew for certain I was one of those people he’d like to have his revenge on. “I did what I had to do to save my family, Leo. You of all people should understand. I didn’t know they’d hurt you like that.”

“And if you’d known, would you have made another choice?”

I gulped. I’d traded his freedom for mine, his safety for my family’s, but what other choice had I had? “Would you?”

His still gaze taunted me for a while, and then he smirked and found my jacket and the cuff keys. He adjusted my restraints to make it possible for him to put the jacket on me and zip it. “I don’t want Enzo or any of his men to see your body.” He tossed the keys to the cuffs on the floor. The back of his hand traveled to my face, a gentle caress on my cheek. Then his lips found mine. A closure that pained me more than

abandonment. A goodbye. A revenge worse than death. “Tell him I’ll see him soon.”

CHAPTER 18

Leo

Nicky kept shaking her head in disbelief and scoffing as she drove us to Catania, where one of my old contacts would arrange for the boat I'd called and asked her for. Bila. She was from Catania but didn't belong to any of the families that mattered. I'd met her in college, and she'd had something for me since the day I saved her from her piece of shit boyfriend who was trying to roofoy her. She was more than eager to help when I called tonight.

"I don't understand. Enzo and Tino have business together and are best friends. They're practically family. They took you in while you were grieving your mother. You were gonna marry a Lanza for fuck's sake. How could Enzo betray Tino like that?" Nicky asked.

I'd thought the same thing. Until I met Ravenna. It turned out I was wrong right from the start. Nicky's assumption that she now was having a hard time to believe turned out to be right after all. "What did you expect? He killed his own brother. How hard could it be to fuck his *friend* over?"

"It doesn't make any sense. She must be lying. What exactly did she tell you?"

"She didn't tell me anything, but it wasn't hard to put two and two together. Chernov's debts had landed with the wrong crowd a few years ago. The Bratva made her pay. I didn't know for sure, but she must have had something to do with saving Safin's ass after killing Nina Lanza. Enzo goes to make her pay for it. He threatens her family. She begs. He demands a favor to spare them. Same old game. What favor can a mafia shrink grant?"

"Covering up for a patient in a mafia nuthouse," she mumbled.

"Brava." I applauded her. "You get a golden star."

She rolled her eyes at me. “I still can’t wrap my head around it. Tino is the fucking devil. He’s the mastermind behind every evil, conniving scheme on the planet. How can he be in the dark when it comes to his own son? What if Tino asked Enzo to do it because...you know...he couldn’t bring himself to do it?”

“Because he’s fucking father of the year?”

Her shoulder lifted in a shrug as her lips pursed. “I hate him to death, but, in that department, as much it pains me to admit it, he’s a good father, even by Mob standards. I mean, you fucking tried to kill him, and he still wouldn’t touch you.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that, but I’ll take that golden star back. If what you’re saying is true, why cook the books at Filicudi? To make the Bellomo household believe I was there? He could have just lied to you and Lina about it. Neither of you would have checked at the actual institution. I’m telling you, Tino knows nothing about my captivity.” That kind of torture was never his style. He was more cutthroat and loved to show off his victories. If he’d intended to torture me, he’d have done it in front of the whole world, made an example of me, just like he did with the Seppis and the Romanovs.

“But don’t worry,” I added, admiring the feeling of shoes on my feet; I hadn’t had any on for a whole year. “Whether he knew or not, I’m still gonna kill him.”

“I’m not worried.”

“Good, because for a second there I thought you were starting to feel guilty about Don Bellomo, too.”

“Fuck no. He sold me to Dom, and he didn’t take my sister just from you. He took her from me, too. Nothing has changed.” She let out a deep breath, shaking her head, still incredulous. “Could this be true, though? Enzo betraying Tino? Why? It can’t be just to grant his cousin a favor.”

“It’s about Claudia, Nicky. Those ancient rules about honor we have outweigh any friendship or business. They always come first. I pissed on them when I broke the engagement just

to marry someone else. I disgraced them. Money was never gonna cut it. Only blood.”

“Then they should have fucking killed you, not accept your father’s money and then go behind his back and torture his son for a whole year. That’s coldblooded backstabbing here. And what they did to me...” Her voice wavered. “What kind of honor is in that?”

“Maybe killing me was Enzo’s plan, but then Domenico thought about dragging it to get the *best* out of it.”

The sound of her teeth clenching was so loud they must have hurt. “You should have heard the way he talked about honor and loyalty.” She snorted. “I actually believed him.”

Like I believed Lina when she promised me forever. “Love isn’t just blind. It’s deaf, too. When you love someone, you want to believe everything they say.”

She glanced at me, compassion in her eyes for the briefest moment, before she averted them back on the road. “So what do you think was the Lanzas’ fucking plan with you after feeding us the lie that you’ve escaped?”

I had a feeling she was only asking as a diversion from what she really wanted to say. “I think they would have released me eventually.” Only to get me killed.

“They’d have chosen just the right moment, when they’d filled Tino with enough poison against you to feel that much threatened by you, to have no other choice but to kill you to protect my sister and nephew, and they’d have been prepared, knowing exactly where you’d have been. They might have even pretended to have captured you before you’d have attacked and killed you themselves. They’d have silenced you before you had a chance to out them, covered up for their shitty treason and become the heroes. The Bellomos and the Lanzas, two peas in a pod again.”

“Two asses in one pair of underwear,” I mumbled.

She blinked at the expression, but then she nodded. “Because they’re both shitty as fuck.”

I chuckled, and a smile twitched on her lips. Had this just happened? Nicky finding humor in something I'd said and actually showed it?

"You should take your antibiotics and something for the pain. Everything is in the doctor's bag in the back," she said.

"Reminding me of my meds, too? What's next? Give me a hug?"

"The fuck? Fuck you."

I laughed. "That's more like it."

I stretched to get the meds, pain shooting through me. My ass plopped back down on the front seat. "I need a little help."

She moaned under her breath.

"Davvero? If I rip my stitches, I'll slow us the fuck down."

"I'm not refusing to help, Leo. It's that fucking nausea again. Maybe I should stop for a sec. I haven't been able to keep anything down all day."

"After all you've learned about your motherfucking husband, you're still feeling guilty about him?"

She shook her head slowly, rolling her eyes. "I won't even bother. Someone like you won't understand."

"Someone like me? You mean the *psycho killer*?"

"Sick fuck, yeah." She moaned again. "Shit." The tires screeched as she stopped to a halt. She tried to rush out of the car a second too late. The sounds and smell of her barfing filled the car.

Shouldn't you hold her hair back for her or pat her back or something?

I shook my head at the ridiculous question. Why would I even think that?

When she was done—she took a long time I started to worry we'd be spotted—she cursed at the mess.

"We should ditch this car anyway," I said.

Her head whipped toward me as she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “I’m not gonna kidnap another person. It’s enough what you’ve done to the last one.”

I cocked a brow at her. “You of all people should be happy to know I slept with someone else.”

“*Slept with her? Is that what you call it?*”

It was a touchy subject for the Baldi sisters, especially Nicky. “It wasn’t like that. Ravenna has feelings for me.”

“Feelings for you?”

She said she loved me. But I wouldn’t utter it. I wouldn’t remember it. I wouldn’t even mention it to myself ever again. “I made her come four fucking times. That says something.”

“Right. So what? You have the same glorious feelings for the nerd who’s been crushing on you since junior high, whom, by the way, you just kidnapped, bound, fucked and ditched?”

The way Ravenna numbed my pain away with her body invaded me. The way she saw me, the way she begged me, every cell of her screaming, “I’m here with you.”

My vile soul she explored, and it excited her rather than bringing her to her knees in fear. The hand she stretched out for me as she begged me to reach out and hold on while she pulled me into a world that was designed only for the two of us, where we ruled it without guilt or fear or shame of who and what we were or had done.

Do I have feelings for Ravenna?

You didn’t kill her, and you kept her panties.

“How stupid do you think I am?” Nicole snatched me out before I fell in the vortex I should never revisit. “You think I don’t know what’s going on in your sick mind?”

I knew that for a fact. She didn’t and couldn’t know. “What are you talking about?”

“Your plan for my sister,” she said angrily. “Don’t think for a second that I bought what you said earlier about not trying to pursue or hurt her.”

I squinted at her. “Then why did you free me if you think I’m still a threat to her?”

“Because I don’t think you’re a threat to her at all, not when I’m here.”

Laughing internally, I stared at her for a second, and then I swooped down on her in one swift move and snatched the gun out of her pants. She threw a fist at my face and tried to knee me in the balls, her other hand reaching for the gun. The car was too confined for her to fight properly, not with my size pinning her to the back of the seat, barely letting her move. I unlocked the gun and put it to her temple.

Her angry breaths—smelled like vomit yet better than many days I’d spent in Domenico’s cage—seared the little air between us, her breasts grazing my chest, her heart banging against mine.

I smirked at her blanching face, at her lips that were twisting and twitching with all the curses she wanted to throw at me. “Now, what would a psycho killer sick fuck do in a situation like this beautiful one?”

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“Yes, you are. I could just kill you right now and then go kill Tino and take your sister. When you opened that cage, you unleashed a monster, Nicky, and you know it. You deluded yourself that you have it all under your control, but you know you have none.”

“Do it. What are you waiting for?”

“Maybe I should.”

“We both know you won’t. You’re keeping me alive because you need me to get you home.” She stared right into my eyes. “And to impress Lina. To show her that you saved her sister while her husband had no problem selling or killing her.”

I glided the muzzle down her face, along her neck and the line between her breasts. “Or maybe I want to have some fun first.”

Her nostrils flared, and her eyes moistened most likely against her will. “If you think for one second that you can touch me, you sick bastard—”

“Your mouth is too pretty for swearing, Nicky.” Every single part of her was pretty. Tempting the demons in any man to come out and play. No wonder Domenico went through all that trouble to have her. She was a beauty to kill and torture and betray for.

“Get. Off. Me.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Try anything and you’ll see.”

I chuckled, the fire in her adding to my admiration. Then, after taking one more gaze at her perfect body, I put down the gun I’d never intended to use on her and shuffled back to my seat. “I’d never hurt you, Nicky, and not just because of Lina.” I handed her the gun by the grip. “I was just showing you how wrong you are. The psycho killer sick fuck could have killed you any time he liked, but he’s choosing not to, even though you’re helpless against him and might be a potential threat in the future.”

She yanked the gun out of my fingers and secured it back in her pants, huffing. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not stupid either. I know you’ve already planned to use that gun on me as soon as Tino is dead. You won’t even wait for his men to finish the job.”

Surprise flashed in her eyes for a second followed by flaming rage. “But now you spared me, and I should feel obligated to do the same.”

“Do you?”

Her lips curled in a low snarl, but then the remainder of color in her face faded, and her eyes rolled back. Abruptly, her head fell on the wheel.

“Cazzo. Nicky?” I shook her. Her face was cold as fuck. “Nicky! What the fuck happened to you?!”

CHAPTER 19

Ravenna

Covered in snot and sweat, I twisted my ankles and toes and heels and every movable muscle and bone I had to reach the damn keys and failed. It was as though Leo had made expert calculations of where exactly to throw the keys so I wouldn't reach them. I had no other option but to sit and wait until someone came for me.

I was grateful for the food and water they'd left me, even if I had to open the bags with my feet and eat and drink like a dog. I was grateful for the jacket, too. The cold wind in this house was blowing in with abundance.

My mind raced through the events of the day, the unforgettable, altering moments that had redefined my life. Today, I was kidnapped. By the one man I'd wanted more than any. He was a psychotic murderer that I'd fallen in love with. He viciously and dubiously took my virginity as punishment and revenge not love. Then he abandoned me in confusion, granting me what could have easily been the most twisted, beautiful jealous, possessive gesture I'd ever received in my life—sheltering my body from the eyes of other men as if I was truly only his—yet leaving to avenge the wife he'd lost to another man. The woman he couldn't take out of his mind even though I was offering him everything I had to give. Even though he would die in his quest of avenging and reclaiming her.

Tears pierced me every time I reached that part. Then I consolidated myself with the vivid memories of his touch. I could still feel him on me, inside me. His skin, his scars, his scent, his voice, his brutal masculinity...all over me. At least, we had that.

What else could I have possibly gotten?

Not only had I betrayed him, but I was, no matter how hard I denied or tried to hide it, part Seppi. A secret I couldn't reveal to him. Even if he seemed to have punished me enough to forgive me for Filicudi and spare my life, knowing I remotely belonged to the family that killed his mother would have turned the brief course of our reunion fatal.

In a way I was glad he'd left before he knew. I had to accept the fact that Leo and I could never meet again or be anything more than what we had today.

Part of me, though, couldn't stop wondering if he could have forgiven me for that, too. Did he not fall for Anastasia and save her even if she was a Romanov? Perhaps he'd have, eventually, after a multitude of punishments that I was more than willing to accept, felt the same way about me.

Greedy. Until yesterday, I had no daring dreams of ever seeing him again. Today, I was confessing my love for him after I was no longer a virgin by his undutiful, unruly, dominant, sickly, beautiful doing.

I had to let him go. I should focus on getting out of here, what I was going to say to the Lanzas when they came—not that they cared about saving me but they'd need intel—and my parents. That was the right thing to do. The only thing to do.

You couldn't save your brother. You couldn't save the man you loved. What makes you think you can save your parents?

I wept, pain and guilt tarring me forever. My own self-destructive thoughts and urges banging my skull. My chest tightened with the despair. When did it end? When would it all end?

You can always end it yourself. Any time. Now. No one is going to miss you. Everyone is better off without you anyway.

A shudder took over me as I snapped my eyes closed. I didn't want to listen.

I didn't pull the trigger. I didn't put Leo in the cage. I didn't pull the trigger. I didn't put Leo in the cage. “I didn't pull the trigger. I didn't put Leo in the cage. I didn't pull the trigger. I

didn't put Leo in the cage. I didn't pull the trigger! I didn't put ___”

A thud disrupted me, yanking my heart out of my ribs. I stilled, listening with all my senses. There was another thud, and then heavy steps shuffled in the dark, approaching the house.

Fuck. This couldn't be the Lanzas. Nicole said she'd only tell them when she was on her way to Chicago. They couldn't have known what had happened or where I was on their own, could they?

Oh my God. Leo. If the Lanzas were here, it meant they were on to him, and he wouldn't make it to Chicago. Oh my God. No. Please.

But no. They had no way to track me or them. If they'd been following me, they'd have been here way earlier. This couldn't be the Lanzas. What if it was some alcoholic thug or a drug addict coming to the abandoned house to use? If they saw me, in this vulnerable state, cuffed and half naked... Oh my God.

I held my breath, racking my brain to find anything I could defend myself with and found none. Shit.

My heart hammered with every approaching step. *Please don't come to this room. Please don't see me. Please don't—*

“Doc!”

I flinched and jumped at the voice I thought I'd never hear again, questioning my sanity. Was I hallucinating?

Shadows danced at the entrance and then a tall frame blocked the very little light coming from the moon and streetlights. “It's me, Ravenna. I had to come back.”

“Leo?” I whispered. “Is that really you?” Or was I imagining the whole thing? *Because that's exactly what I wish he'd say if he ever came back. That he couldn't leave me behind and had to come back for me.*

He shuffled in, and I noticed he was holding Nicole, who seemed to be unconscious. “I need your help. Nicky keeps

passing out. I don't know what to do.”

Of course. Why else would he return? It was never for me. I'd never be important enough for him to take any risks or change his plans.

He laid her down next to me on the bed and turned on a flashlight, focusing it on my face. “Is she still in shock or something? Some sort of PTSD after her husband's death?”

I winced, annoyed by the light outburst and his insensitive, infuriating behavior. He didn't even bother to check on me. And why the fuck would he think I had to help just because he said so?

“Ravenna, are you listening to anything I'm saying?”

“You left me behind, all alone, fucking bound with only a jacket barely covering my naked body, without any kind of weapon I could use to protect myself, any means of communication to reach out for help, and you just expect me to answer every one of your demands just so you can leave me behind again once I do.”

He chuckled bitterly. “How easily they forget.” He bent, staring at me angrily. “After what you've done, you're lucky I left you breathing.” The gun shone in his hand, now visible in the bright light. “Don't make me regret my decision.”

I swallowed, nodding, fear and guilt snatching my breath. He was right. He'd have killed me, but he didn't for reasons still unknown. I shouldn't be complaining. “I'm sorry.”

“Fuck your apology. I don't need it. What I need is for you to fix her so I can never see your fucking face again.”

I fought my tears, pain squeezing my heart, as he scoured for the keys. He freed one of my wrists and gestured at Nicole. “Help her.”

I checked her pulse, breathing and temperature. She was cold, her heartbeat rate lower than normal. “Has she been drinking water or eating anything?”

“She's been vomiting nonstop. Is it food poisoning, bad nerves, what?”

It could be a response to the trauma, but I believed the reason was much simpler and more obvious. “Do you know how long she’d been married?”

“A couple of months. Who the fuck cares? Can you help her or not?”

“Leo... I don’t think Nicole’s symptoms are psychological at all.”

“Then what is it? Speak, Ravenna. I don’t have all day.”

“I think she’s pregnant.”

CHAPTER 20

Ravenna

I punched a pregnant woman.

Of all the atrocious, horrendous things I'd done, punching a pregnant woman felt the worst. The urge to apologize bounced on my tongue, but it seemed mentioning the topic even remotely right now could lead Nicole to a psychotic break. She was on the verge of one when she regained consciousness and faced my assumption.

She swore at me at first, questioning my medical knowledge, but then she did the math and realized I might be right. The rage feat she exhibited made me worry about her—and I didn't even like her.

The selfish part of me was grateful for what she'd perceived as a calamity; Leo didn't trust Nicole's ability to drive in her condition, neither did he trust his ability to take care of her during their escape, which meant I had to accompany them until further notice.

Under Leo's captivating gaze—he'd devoured my body as I cleaned up the evidence of his *crime* off my flesh with my torn shirt and some water, licking his lip in arousal—I reclaimed my slacks and glasses. Then I was free...sort of. I was still cuffed in the backseat of the car.

We stopped at the drugstore so she could buy a pregnancy test. I suggested getting something for the nausea and morning sickness as well, but she, in denial, refused. Apparently, she believed the test would be negative evidence not a confirmation of the pregnancy.

"I'm fully capable of driving, by the way," I said just to start a conversation. Leo hadn't said anything to me since his return, and now that we were both alone in the car, it was a good opportunity to initiate contact. Any kind.

He just glanced at me over his shoulder, his concentration divided between me and the drugstore.

“Neither you nor her is in good condition to drive,” I continued. “I’ll be happy to help.”

“I’m not in the mood to chase when you run, Doc,” he mumbled.

Run? Who said I wished to run? He had no idea how happy I was to have the pleasure of his company again, even if it was as twisted and dangerous as it was now, even if it was going to break my heart and threaten my life. Again. “I have no intention of running from you, Leo.”

His gaze returned fully on me. “That makes you an idiot.”

My lips pursed. “I’m aware. Apparently, book smart doesn’t seem to erase that quality.”

He rolled his eyes, and his mouth gave a slight twitch that could be a stifled smile. Or simple scorn. “How did you cook the books in Filicudi? You work there?”

And we’re back to that. “Actually, I run the institution. That was the arrangement. In exchange for my *service*, I was given the position and was released from my former *responsibilities* toward the Mob.”

“Hard to pass,” he mocked.

I leaned as forward as the cuffs allowed me. “I said no, Leo. I swear I told him anyone but you, but he threatened my mother, who has been in Filicudi since my brother was killed because of my refusal to help the Mob in the first place.” Tears jumped out of my eyes. “Enzio came to my house and threatened my father. Papa kept begging me to take his offer. What was I supposed to do?”

“Why didn’t you go to Tino to ask for help?”

Holy Mother of God. How deviously smart was he to ask me that? I might as well be dead now. “T-T-Tino?”

“You’re a Bellomo kid, Ravenna. My father has a direct line to each and every one of the students. He’s always helped them with anything they needed, and you know by now he has

a thing for *saving* little girls, so why the fuck didn't you go and tell him how his *friend* was going to betray him? In his own fucking son?"

I tried to swallow, but my throat had turned into a rock. "I should have. I know that now. But I was afraid."

"Afraid of the Lanzas but not the Bellomos? You never thought about what was gonna happen to you when my father or I knew?"

The Lanzas promised our arrangement would never be exposed neither would my secret. If I'd gone to Don Bellomo, the Lanzas would have revealed my mother's real last name. Don Bellomo could have burned me and my mother alive. The Lanzas were the less hazardous option. "Considering the relationship between Don Lanza and your father, I was afraid that Don Bellomo might call me a liar or favor his friend over me eventually. The Lanzas could have twisted everything and convinced your father they were innocent," I lied, even though with Leo's intelligence, he could have easily figured it out.

He was about to speak, but Nicky emerged from the drugstore and headed back to the car. Thankfully. I wasn't ready for any more questions. I hated to lie to him, and my guilt, shame and self-destructive urges were bellowing at me to confess the last of my sins and get it all over with.

She climbed in and slammed the door. "Drive."

"Did you find out?" he asked her, starting the car.

Her head shook once. "The bathroom is broken."

That was the last thing any of us said until we reached a fisherman's cottage in Catania. I wasn't filled in on the details, but the man Leo was talking to in the dark by the beach while Nicole and I remained in the car was obviously playing a role in their escape which involved a boat.

Leo limped back toward us and popped his head inside from Nicole's window, while the man disappeared. "He gave me the keys. The cottage is ours for the night until our boat is ready."

"I thought we could go now," she said.

“We should have but...”

“But what?”

“I just wanna make sure you can handle it first.”

“I can fucking handle a Goddamn boat ride.”

“Boats aren’t safe for pregnant women in their first trimester,” I jumped into the conversation.

She darted a glare at me. “I’m not pregnant. I can’t be. I’ve been on the pill since puberty. This is just distress which will go away once everything is over.” She glanced back at Leo. “We have to go now so it will *be over*.”

“Let’s be sure first, okay?” he said. “If you’re not, we’ll go right away.”

“And if I am?”

He paused for a moment. “We’ll figure something out, but I won’t be responsible for putting an unborn baby in danger, Nicky.”

A warm feeling tickled my heart, and I caught myself smiling. The psycho monster everybody was afraid of, everybody wanted to kill, had a tender, protective side that made my heart melt. God, I loved him. Every part of him, the dark before the sweet.

She gripped the car door handle. “Fine. I’ll take the fucking test right now just to prove you wrong and we can get on the fucking boat.” She pushed Leo out of the way and marched down to the cottage.

Leo’s gaze followed her until she got inside. Then he sighed, distraught darkening his face.

“Perhaps we should go in with her. She will need the support,” I said.

“I think she needs privacy, and you’re not her friend.”

“Neither are you. But right now, we’re all she’s got. The three of us are all *we* got.”

He sighed again. “Cazzo, I hate shrinks.” He opened my door and linked arms with me, dragging me out. Then we walked to the cottage.

“Another thing I’d never imagined it’d be like this,” I scoffed.

“What?”

“Our first stroll on the beach.”

He rolled his eyes. “I guess it’s safe to say nothing about me is like what you imagined.”

“Well...you definitely exceeded my imagination. Some parts more than others.”

He laughed. “Slut.”

“Your slut.”

He stopped to look at me, his laugh fading. “How bad did I hurt you?”

I was so sore I might be still bleeding, yet I disturbingly cherished every ache he inflicted on my body and soul that would never be forgotten. “It’s nothing compared to what I’d done to you.” I burst into tears against my will. I hated my weakness.

He swirled me and pulled me into him. “Stop crying.” His arms folded around me in an embrace. Was I dreaming? Was he really hugging me after all the horrible things he’d been telling me since his return? I cried harder. “Hey,” he bent his head to my ear, “I bet the parts of me that exceeded your imagination filling your tight little fucking hot part that exceeded *my* imagination would make you stop crying.”

Heat flooded my body. Did he call my pussy hot and suggested to be inside me again?

“Looks like just the mention of it does the trick,” he said.

I drew back. “So you were just saying it to make me stop?”

He tucked my hair behind my ear. “I want to be with you one more time, Ravenna, but not in the same way I first had you. I want to show you what making love is before I go.”

“That would be so beautiful, but I bet it’d rip my heart even more than all of the things you’ve done to me.” Tears spilled from my eyes again. “Is that the rest of your punishment and revenge?” It was the only explanation.

“Do I look like a *kill them with kindness* kinda guy? I just wanna get you out of my system so I’d never look back. I should’ve killed you for what you’d done. You betrayed me just like all of them.”

“Why didn’t you?”

Words and conflicted emotions swirled in his gaze, but he wouldn’t speak.

“Don’t go, Leo. I’m begging you. Keep me in your system. Let’s just forget about everything and run away where no one could find us. The man who tortured you is dead. That’s enough revenge. You don’t have to kill your father or Enzo. Let them go with their ugly world of blood and hate and betrayal. You don’t have to die for it. I want you to live, Leo. You deserve to live.”

His brows hooked. “You don’t understand. Those men took everything from me.”

“You can have everything again. You can rebuild your life away from them with a woman that really understands and loves you. I know you don’t feel the same way for me. I mean, how could you after what I’d done? So it doesn’t have to be me. If you don’t want me, it’s fine. One day, you’ll find someone else, one that will make you forget all about Anastasia and Lina and fill the void with true love, but only if you live. If you die, and you will die if you go back to Chicago, you’ll never have that chance.”

He shook his head, resisting me, resisting every word I said. But then he winced, tangling his fingers in my hair, pulling me into his body, his breath searing my face.

My lips parted on their own accord, reaching for his, begging for a kiss. He closed the distance between us, and just as his flesh touched mine, Nicole wailed.

I jumped while he closed his eyes, his jaw flexing.
“Cazzo.”

I nodded at the cottage. “We should...”

“Yeah.”

We hurried in. Nicole was standing in the middle of the place, the stick in her hand, her chest heaving, her eyes bulging, looking like a patient that had been deliberately hiding their pills instead of swallowing them and about to tear the place down. Except this was no psychiatric hospital. There were no nurses with sedatives, the doctor was the one in restraints, and the agitated patient was the only one with a gun.

Shit.

“The son of a bitch switched them,” she grated.

“You mean your birth control pills?” I asked.

“Yes! He said he wanted me off the pill, but I said no. It didn’t matter what I said, though, because he’d already switched them. He knew I’d say no, so he fucking switched them... All this time... How could he fucking do this to me? He never thought about me or what I wanted. He just took, took, *took*. He wanted me, he took me. He tortured another man to make me marry him. He wanted a baby, he switched my fucking pills so I could give him a baby. What the fuck? What the actual fuck?”

“Hey, Nicky, I know you’re in so much pain right now, but please try to calm down,” I said.

“Don’t tell me to calm down.” She paced the cottage. “And don’t bother telling me it’s gonna be okay because it’s never gonna be okay. Nothing about this is okay.”

Leo stepped toward her with confidence, not minding her agitation or her demands of distance. He just went in there and folded his arms around her shoulder.

“Don’t touch me. Don’t fucking touch me!”

“No. I’m right here, and I’m not going anywhere.” He held her tighter. “I know you’re scared, but you’re strong, Nicky.

The strongest girl I've ever met. You'll get through this, just like you've gotten through everything else."

"I killed my baby's father, Leo," she said in panic. "I killed my baby's father."

"You of all people know that some men should never be fathers, and their children will be better off without them. Frank Baldi. Domenico Lanza. Tino Bellomo."

She repeated the three names after him as if she was hypnotized.

"Don't be afraid. Two down. One more to go," he said.

"No one can know. Enzo can't know, Leo, or he'll take my baby. He'll come after me and take my baby."

"No one will touch your baby, Nicky. I'll take care of Enzo, too. You have my word," he vowed. "No one will ever hurt you or Lina or your babies ever again."

"How?" she moaned, crying for the first time before me. "You have one shot at taking Tino down. We both know you're not getting out of there alive. You can't kill Enzo, Leo. You won't have a chance, and he'll take my baby."

"I said no! I'll protect you." His arms folded around her belly instead. "No matter what it costs."

The view of him, of them together, wrapped around each other in vows and pleas amazed me and ripped at my heart at the same time. That cruel man giving the enemy that threatened to take his life a hug when she needed it, promising her protection because of the innocent life growing inside her. I knew it wasn't time to be jealous or for my insecurities to settle in, but I couldn't deny what I could clearly see. What Nicole and Leo hadn't even realized.

Could it be true?

Was Leo Bellomo in love with Nicole Lanza?

CHAPTER 21

Ravenna

I should run. The door was open. They weren't paying attention to me. This was my chance to escape, to run as fast as I could and never look back. That was what I should have done right from the start. What was I thinking staying, hoping against all hope, that I got a shot at pleasure in this world that had done nothing but destroy me?

And why was I upset at the potential of him and Nicole? He'd never exhibited any affection or professed any intimate emotions toward me, and I'd literally just told him it was all right if he found love with someone else but me. Why was I afflicted to the point of risking everything? Why could I not stand the sight of them together to the point I wasn't only considering escaping but also betraying him again?

Don't do it. There's no coming back from there.

But I wasn't that strong to be the bigger person. The virtue of sanity had left me when I became madly in love.

You're going to lose him.

I'd lost him already the second that pregnancy test showed two lines. I'd always thought if I stayed, I had a chance at owning him like he owned me. I believed, with time, I could have stopped his screams if he'd let me. I could have been everything he needed had he wanted me.

I'd have done anything to make him stay. I'd have fought for what was mine.

But now...

Leo's fixation had always been centered on saving an innocent girl. At first, I thought he was displacing his feelings for his mother and her gruesome death, but I understood now. The rape of his mother that led to the death of his unborn sister was the core of his complex. That was why the object of his

obsession was always a young, virgin girl. That was why once she was defiled, he'd have to kill her so he wouldn't relive the pain of his failure to protect.

Now, his fixation would subconsciously fall on Nicole and her baby. The need to save an actual unborn baby would draw him to her despite the hate, the taboo or any previous emotions he'd attached to her sister.

All the elements were there, not just a replacement innocent girl. The pregnant Mafia wife that could fall a victim just because of the ties to the family she'd never wanted in the first place. Manifested in Nicole, his mother and unborn sister were right there, a Mafia family threatening them, and he believed he could actually save them this time.

As his forehead touched hers, I could see it, the alternate reality that was far from the truth he was building around her and her baby, just like the ones he'd built around Anastasia and Lina to cope with the trauma.

You should help him, not run.

I can't help him. I've never helped anyone in my life, especially the ones I loved. My feet tiptoed backward. The coldness of the sea wind lashed at my back. I stretched my wrists on my behind as far as possible so the chains wouldn't rattle and sprinted out as fast as I could.

"Shit! She's running!" Nicole yelled.

My hair whipped at my cheeks as I dashed away, maneuvering my way among the boats on the sand. Leo and Nicole's curses and feet echoed in the background, but I wouldn't stop. I could outrun an injured man and a pregnant lady.

Bang!

"Nicky, no!" Leo shouted as my eyes widened at the splinters flying in the air from the boat next to me. The bitch had shot at me, and the bullet landed in the boat body instead, missing me by a few inches.

I swirled, gasping. She was about ten feet behind me, and Leo was catching up. "You fucking missed!" I flew off the

sand, fueled by rage and adrenaline.

“Next time, I won’t!” she yelled back, but I kept running. Who cared about living anymore? I never did.

Suddenly, I could no longer hear their footsteps or huffs and swears. The boats vanished behind me, and the dark surrounded me everywhere as I passed the moonlight range.

Despite the fear and the fatigue stiffening my muscles, I darted through the darkness, gasping and sniffing my tears, my mind spiraling like I was. What the fuck was I thinking, giving myself away to such a troubled man, allowing myself to fall for a person that belonged in a psych ward? I should have never indulged in my silly fantasies. I should have run the second I laid my eyes on him. Where the hell was my mind? Why did I do that to my—?

Something hit me in the temple. My skull banged, and before I regained balance, I was tumbled down on the sand in the dark.

I yelled, but the familiar sound of a gun click silenced me. “I should have let him kill you right from the start,” Nicole said. I could make out her voice and her knees that were pinning me down to the ground.

“What are you waiting for? Do it now. Because if you recapture me, there’s no way I’ll stop trying to escape anymore. And when I do, I will tell the Lanzas everything. The only way to protect your baby is by killing me, Nicole. So do it. Pull the fucking trigger.” *End my misery for good.*

The cold muzzle pierced my forehead. “Once a traitor always a traitor,” she murmured.

My breath shook against hers, eager for the finale of my pathetic life even if she wasn’t ready to take it; the tremors of her hand were hard to miss. “Once a killer, always a killer,” I provoked her for encouragement. “C’mon now. You offed your husband because he was a traitor. It won’t be so hard to do the same to me.”

“It was an accident. I never meant to kill him.” She took a deep breath and exhaled roughly. “But I will kill you and

anyone who will jeopardize the lives of my family.” She steadied her grip. “I’m sorry, Doctor. I can’t let you tell Enzo about my baby.”

I closed my eyes, a million regrets flashing by, yet peace finally looming toward me. No more guilt or shame or jealousy. No more searching for redemption or love. I never deserved either. “You’ll be better for him than I ever will. I hope he finally finds peace with you like I’ll find mine now.”

“No! Nicky, no!” Leo’s voice echoed distantly like a daydream. It was my mind playing a trick on me, a defense mechanism to keep me calm, because there was no chance Leo would come to rescue me. I’d just betrayed him by trying to run. If he was here, he’d be pulling the gun from her hand to kill me himself.

“She has to die. She was going to the Lanzas,” Nicole hissed.

“I said no!” His growl came closer, and suddenly Nicole’s weight and the gun lifted off me.

My eyes snapped open to see shadows in a warrior dance, huffing and puffing. I scampered to my knees and rose with difficulty, those stupid cuffs hindering my movement. I didn’t take two steps until strong arms yanked me off the ground and held tight. “Stop running,” Leo commanded. “And you, put the fucking gun down.”

“Step away from the doctor, Leo, or I’ll shoot you, too,” Nicole threatened.

“No one is shooting no one. And if you pull that shit one more time, you’ll never hold that gun again,” he said, dragging me back in the cottage direction, unbothered by the possibility of her shooting us in the back.

I squirmed, trying to break his hold on me. “Let me go. I don’t want to stay with you anymore. Let her kill me. I don’t care.”

“I do.”

My heart thudded in my chest. Why would he say that? Why would he lie to me like that? How could two simple

words evoke so much anger and pain and confusion and desperation in one person? “No, you don’t. You never will.”

He continued, saying nothing. A confirmation or simple nonchalance?

“Please, Leo. Just let me go. I can’t take this anymore.”

He didn’t utter a word until he hauled my ass back to the cottage, and Nicole never fired that gun.

He threw himself on the one couch that was there and brought me down with him. Then he cupped my jaw roughly, forcing me to look at him.

“Stop hurting me,” I protested. “I’m done.”

His fingers dug in my skin. “Oh, I haven’t even started, little bitch. You’re not done until I say you are. Which part of you’re mine do you not understand?”

“Yours? I thought if I let you punish me even for the sins I haven’t committed, if I let you take it all out on me, if you saw what I was willing to do for you, *yours* would eventually mean something, eventually make you mine, too, even for the briefest of moments. But I don’t stand a chance, Leo, not any more. Why the fuck did you not kill me earlier? Why the fuck did you save me now? And don’t dare say you care about me or my life because you don’t.”

“Because I’m incapable?”

“Because I’m not good enough!” I snapped. “I’m everything you hate. I’m no innocent you can protect. Fuck, you took that last piece of innocence I had left to make sure of it. I’ve betrayed more people than I can remember, betrayal is running in my veins now like my own blood. You can never trust me. And let’s face it, I’m ugly. I’m not someone to compromise principles for, let alone break an obsession.”

His eyes bored into me. Then his fingers softened, turning into a caress. I squeezed my eyes shut, that caress hurting more than his roughness. “No. Look at me,” he commanded.

I obeyed. It seemed it was all I could do when it came to him. Tears stabbed me, showing him my weakness once more.

“I do care about you. I don’t know why, but I do. You might not be that innocent, and I can never fully trust you, but I don’t want you to die, Ravenna. Every time I was about to snap, like always, and end your life, I stop. I don’t know how or why, but it’s happening. Maybe because I know all the things that you’ve done were only to protect your family or maybe it’s because of the scars you bear.”

Two reasons he could relate to.

The back of his hand brushed my cheek and my chin. “And you’re not ugly.”

My heart squeezed. “But I’ll never be as pretty as she. I can never compete.”

“Who?”

“The perfect blonde with a baby in her belly.”

His hand dropped. “Nicole?”

“Please, don’t pretend you’re not already fixating on her. You can’t help it.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? Is this what it’s all about? You were gonna betray me again because you were jealous? Because I want to protect her baby?”

“Need, Leo. Not want, need. Before you know it, you won’t be able to get her out of your mind. She’ll be your substitution for Anastasia and Lina. You’ll need Nicole, like you needed them. Like you need your mother.”

“My mother?” he snarled. “You sick bitch.”

“I don’t mean sexually.” It was reckless of me to mention his mother or hint at his Oedipus complex in the current state with no means of monitoring or controlling the environment, but I had enough. I wasn’t just a psychiatrist now. I was a woman who was hurt and desperate. If he dashed to get the gun from Nicole and killed me himself, I wouldn’t be surprised. “It’s much more complicated than that. But it’s not only the loss and abandonment that you’re trying to compensate for. You needed to protect your mother from your father. That’s what you’re trying to recreate all the time. I

think subconsciously you chose Anastasia because she was the daughter of your father's enemy. You were trying to protect her from him. You chose Lina because on some level you suspected your father took interest in her. Again, you were trying to get to her first to protect her from him. And now there's Nicole. A reincarnation of your mother's situation, who's been hurt by Sebastiano Bellomo as much as the Lanzas. It's only a matter of time before she becomes your whole life."

Fury put a deep shadow on his face, and if I had any doubt or hope I was wrong, it was destroyed. But then his hand lifted back to my face, tracing my lips. "And that makes you run, idiota?"

I wished I could have stopped the shuddering the simplest of his touches induced in me. "What do you expect me to do?"

"Stay. Protect your territory."

"What?"

"I get it, Ravenna. Jealousy makes you do the worst. I've been there. But destroying everything has never been the answer. Look what that got me. What you should do is stay, Ravenna, and never let that shit happen. You're a doctor. You can keep me in check. Stop me before I get lost again. It's only for a little while anyway."

I gasped at the hope he was viciously planting back in me, and my heart contracted at the cruel possibility of having it yanked out of me later. "What about Lina? You're not over her, Leo. Even if I managed to keep Nicole out of your head, Lina can't just go away. We both know it'll never end until blood is spilled."

"Don't you say my feelings for her are illusions?"

"Not to you. As much as it hurts to say it, I have to admit for Lina to no longer become the object of your obsession, someone else has to fill the void, someone that comes with the elements of *your* fixation, only bigger. The only one that can make you forget Lina is her sister, Leo." Or the blood of his father. The core of all his issues.

Blood. My gaze dropped to the floor. There was a crimson trail that started from the door to the couch. To his jeans. “Leo, your leg. You’re bleeding again.”

“Cazzo. I must have ripped the stitches in your stupid catfight. What the fuck were you thinking running away? And where the hell is Nicole? Nicky?!”

“I’ll go find her and get the kit to stitch you back up.” Perhaps she’d finally finish the job.

“Sit your ass down. You’re going nowhere out of my sight. Nicky!”

She appeared at the door as pale as the moon. “I’m here.”

“Where the fuck were you?” he asked.

“Barfing up my guts. Again. What are you hollering for? Don’t you have your treacherous bitch safe and sound next to you?”

He swore at her, attempting to rise. I stopped him immediately. “Hey, it’s okay. It’s nothing. Please don’t move until I treat your wound.” Despite my pain, I couldn’t watch him hurting.

He jabbed a finger in the air in her direction. “I warned you. Don’t talk to her like that.”

“She was going to the Lanzas.” She clenched her teeth. “That’s the least I could do. And have no delusions, asshole, if she does as much as set one foot out of this cottage, I’ll shoot her dead. I don’t care what you say or do.” She glanced at his bleeding calf. “I’ll go get the shit from the car myself.”

After I took care of his wound, Nicole guarding me like a hawk, we ate the food the owner of the cottage had kindly left us in the kitchen. We all needed our strength. But with food in my system, the need to use the bathroom emerged. The angry mother wouldn’t take my cuffs off for any reason, though.

“I’ll help you.” Leo smirked.

My cheeks warmed. “Uh...no thanks.”

“Easy, tiger. I’m going with her,” Nicole said. As much as I loathed her company, I didn’t mind. I’d die of embarrassment if he had to help me in the bathroom.

She lowered my pants quickly without attempting at anything insulting, humiliating or aggressive. Then she took the toilet paper, cut some and dapped it in water from the sink. “In Taormina, there was a water spray attached to the toilet. It makes the job much easier and cleaner. It’s not exactly the same, but the water will help you wipe better with your tied hands because I’m not gonna do that for you.”

“Thank you...I guess.” I cleared my throat, hesitant to sit on the toilet while she was still there.

“I’ll wait outside. Holler when you’re done.”

I appreciated the privacy as well, but it came with a cost. The eternal guilt that wouldn’t leave me be. What was I thinking letting jealousy blind me to the point of putting a woman and her child in danger? Even if I wasn’t going to the Lanzas—that was never my intention. I only lied to her so she’d kill me—even if I no longer cared if I died and was only going to take Leo’s advice and tell Tino the truth so he could save his son and end this madness, it’d still put her in danger. No matter how much I didn’t like her, my choice was selfish and unjustifiable. Nicole Lanza didn’t do anything wrong. Leo’s issues weren’t her fault. I threatened her family’s life. She had every right to want to kill me.

I cleaned myself up to the best of my abilities back and front—the bleeding seemed to have stopped—washed my hands acrobatically and called for her. She fixed my pants back up and led me outside.

“I’m sorry, Nicky,” I had to say.

She didn’t answer.

“Do you ever miss him?” She must have. I saw the mist in her gaze when she mentioned her house.

“Who?”

“Your husband. Taormina must be where you lived. You’re obviously still attached to your dwelling there...with him.”

She gave me a look that beat any book about loss, betrayal and tormented love. The conflict she must have been struggling with was eating her up. She'd been in love with him. She was in love with him still. "Go to your boyfriend, Doctor. Enjoy your night together. It'll be the last."

CHAPTER 22

Ravenna

“Get some sleep,” Nicole said. “I’ll call your guy to tell him we’re moving as soon as he can get the boat ready.”

Leo propped himself on his elbows and sat up. “You sure you can handle it?”

“Yes. No more delays. I’ll go grab some meds for the nausea quick, and I’ll be fine. Didn’t you say I’m the strongest woman you’ve ever known?”

His face didn’t seem to agree now. “You should get some rest, too.”

She nodded, glancing between us. “Try to do the same.”

He snorted while I blushed like a teenage girl. When she closed the door and left, I let out a troubled sigh.

“Did she do something to you?” he asked.

“Just reminding me that even when dreams come true they only last for one day.”

His warrior hand took mine, rough and calloused and fractured, his touch a forceful contrast with its tenderness, and then he pulled me down to him on the little bed on the floor he’d made for himself. For us? His eyes held mine, and his lips feathered over my skin. “Let’s make it count.”

Trembling, losing my line of thought, I closed my eyes. “You should rest.”

“I will.” His teeth grazed my earlobe. “With you on top of me.”

A gasp stuttered on my lips as he unzipped my jacket. “Leo...”

He kissed under my ear and left a trail of little kisses along my jaw. “Yeah, baby?”

I love you. Don't leave me. You ruined my life. Fuck me. Please. Did I mention that I love you? His lips took mine in a scorching kiss, killing all my words I couldn't bring myself to voice, killing me.

I needed to taste his lips again, to carve it in my memory, to let it disturb my dreams and torment my thoughts for as long as I lived, knowing I could never sate my desire for him ever again.

His fingers fondled my body, exploring, stripping, teasing, owning. He took off my pants only and left the jacket because of the cuffs he wouldn't remove. He liked the sight of me restrained, unable to touch while he had all the power. I loved it, too. Submitting to Leo beat all my sexual fantasies. But I needed to touch him, too. "Please, just take them off now and put them back when we're done."

He chuckled. "No way. But I'll teach you a little trick." He grabbed my arms and brought them closer under me. Then he bent my knees and told me to slide my arms in his direction to my feet. I followed the instructions and managed to bring my hands in front of me and settle them in my lap. He drew zigzags on my skin down from the line between my breasts to my mound. "Now you can touch me all you want."

I crushed my body against his, feeling his erection growing under me. His lips claimed me with enough passion that made me smudge his jeans with my wetness. Quickly, I unbuttoned them and slid them down.

My mumbled voice vibrated against his mouth as my eyes fell on his freed hardness. He slid his hands into my hair, fisting two handfuls as he ground his cock into my pelvis, eliciting a whimper from me. I clasped my hands around his neck and clawed at his back, at the scars I'd helped create, without remorse. His pain was going to end soon, but mine would last a lifetime.

Unbothered, he guided my movement, molding my body against his. A soft purr escaped me. I couldn't get close enough. I wanted to fuse into him, melt until he absorbed every last drop.

Our tongues danced in a battle of lust, pain and rage. My weakness for him infuriated me. I should hate him for everything he was and represented, but his fire that smoldered and devoured me was making it impossible to resist or have a chance at fighting. I'd once thought I fell for him for his charms and breathtaking masculinity, but it was his darkness that brought me to my knees, a slave never to be freed.

I pulled back, out of breath, and glared down into the pools of blue that held me captive, dark desire pouring from them, sucking me into their whirlwinds. I embraced it alongside with my stupidity. He was the monster that would always threaten me and the man who was about to break my heart beyond repair, yet I couldn't help but falling deeper and deeper into his wreckage.

His hands explored the bruises he'd left on my body during our last encounter. His marks I wore with shame and pride concomitantly. The sight of them made him harder, and I was gushing and throbbing atop of him, ready for my breaking one last time before I was damaged for life.

Firmly, he squeezed my buttocks. "I wanna split you in half, once when I'm up in your little pussy and another up your tight virginal ass, you little bitch."

I could only gasp to his dirty words and crude needs, while my body blistered with the urge to satisfy them.

He smacked my ass and lifted my hips. "Look at me when I push inside you and never take your eyes off me as you take every inch of my cock."

As he positioned me on his erection, I opened up despite the burning pain. He thrust his hips up and entered me. I was so wet he slipped the tip in easily, but after that he strained, stretching me to accommodate his thick shaft.

"Those little gasps you make every time I'm near you drive me insane, make me even harder for you," he said gruffly.

My eyes fluttered as my gasps flew moaning.

He took off my glasses. "Don't close your eyes. Look at me. I want *your* eyes to haunt me for the rest of the time I have

left.”

I moaned harder at the words that were crushing and melting me, at the sensation of him filling me to the core. “Leo...” I rolled my eyes open, biting my lip as I pushed myself down. His gaze pierced me with intensity so raw it astounded me. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I lied when I told you I was thinking about her while I was inside you.” He groaned, thrusting up deeper, his hands squeezing around my hips. “I wasn’t. For the first time since I met her, I didn’t think about her. It was only you I saw. When I took that piece of you, it was only *you* I felt. Only *you* I wanted.”

I stopped moving for a second, my breath catching. “What are you saying?”

“You stop the screams, Ravenna, even hers.”

My lips parted with bellowing silence, with all the emotions I couldn’t find the words to verbalize. All I could do was bend forward and kiss him. His lips clashed with mine, hard and merciless, his teeth nipping at my bottom lip, his cock slamming into me.

“Yes-s-s,” I stuttered. “Take me, Leo. Make me yours. Make me forget. Make me feel something other than the hollowness inside. I need you.”

He hissed, one hand cupping my breast while the other slipping a thumb to my clit. He circled my bundle of nerves as he thrust into me. I bounced, needing the friction to ease the throbbing ache, my walls clenching hungrily around him.

The pressure of his touch and strokes was perfect, as if he’d been studying my body for years, not just a few hours, to know exactly how to rip me in pieces with pleasure. The fingers on my breast pinched my nipple, intensifying the pleasure. I lost myself to the force of darkness and domination he was, so powerful it took possession of my body and mind with no intention of ever giving them back.

My needy moans, loud and shameless, bounced off the cottage fragile walls. My hands touched him everywhere they

could, learning the contours of his muscles and scars by heart. I took him, long and thick, all of him, the build intensifying, the flutter in my lower stomach, the pulsing pressure desperate for relief.

“Show me how much you want me.” His low growl rumbled into my ear.

I moved up and down with the rhythm my limited experience allowed. My walls grabbed greedily at him, the friction from everything now too much. My back arched as my whole body cried out with an orgasm like I’d never experienced before, not even with him, destroying every nerve in its path and leaving swirling tremors in its wake.

The gushes of my cum coated him as I rode out every shudder, every break. His groans thundered as his seed mingled with my wetness, shooting warm and thick, filling me whole, too much but not enough. Never enough.

He stared infinitely at me, eyes too probing. I fumbled to untangle myself from him before I showed him I was one of those women who cried after sex. I stood, but he brought me back to his embrace and his lips collided angrily with mine.

I nestled into him, my tears ruining everything. “I begged you before, and I’ll beg again. Don’t go. Let’s run away from here. I can hide you, you know. Just like Nicole’s husband hid you in plain sight, in his own house where he got married, I can hide you in Filicudi. It’ll be the last place they expect to find you.”

“They won’t let us be. I can’t live like that. I can’t be a threat to you like that. They have to die so we can have a chance at living.”

“Your father won’t kill you. So why don’t you tell him about the Lanzas’ betrayal? That’s what I was going to do when I tried to run. He will take care of them for you and Nicole.”

“They’ve already told him I’m coming after him and Lina. He won’t listen. He’s prepared to kill me.”

“But if you go through with the mayhem you’re planning, you won’t stand a chance. How do you even know how to come near your father without getting shot to death, let alone kill him, let alone kill the Lanzas?”

“I have a plan.”

“It won’t work.”

“How do you know that? I haven’t told you what it is.”

“Because I’ve run all the possibilities in my head, and no matter who you successfully murder, you still end up dead. While that’s an acceptable outcome for you, for me...it’s losing everything.”

“Hey,” he brushed a thumb over my cheek, “you don’t know they’re gonna get to me for sure. I’ve survived this long when I should’ve been dead already. Who knows what the future holds? You’ll be surprised at the things I manage to pull off.”

Psychotic delusions. “At least, let me come with you.”

“You know I can’t do that. It’s too risky. But I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you think of a place where we can go to, just the two of us, when all of this is over? A place where we can live far away and never to be found? It’ll be our little piece of paradise.”

“Don’t let me dream the impossible, Leo. It hurts.”

“Humor me, baby. If you were to spend the rest of your life in one place, what would it be?”

I sighed, fighting more tears. “The Canaries. I’ve never been, but I’ve always wanted to go to Tenerife. Papa’s always said La Palma was much more beautiful, though. Greener. Quieter.”

“We’ll go island hopping then. The one you fall in love with will be our new home.”

I buried my tears in his chest, the hope unbearable. “I love you, Leo. I love you so much it hurts.”

His lips touched the top of my head as he breathed me in. “Remember when I told you Lina’s face was what kept me alive in the cage?”

“How can I forget? What are you doing? Trying to hurt me before you leave again?”

“No, idiota. I’m telling you that like she helped me survive the hardest year of my life, *you* will help me stay alive while I kill my enemies once and for all.” He embraced me, kissing my forehead, and then my lips. “The hope of seeing you again will keep me going, will make me try my best to stay alive and come back for you. You are worth living for, Ravenna.”

That was the last thing he said before we made love again. We fell asleep into each other’s arms, our hearts hugging. In the morning, I woke up all alone.

CHAPTER 23

Leo

I didn't want to go. I didn't want to leave her. She made me see things I'd never seen before. A window into my soul I knew it'd be shut sealed once I left her side. But it had to be done. She thought I was throwing myself into another chasm of obsession with Nicky. She might be right, and without her help, I might fall again. But staying with Ravenna was far more dangerous. The way she silenced the screams punched a need for her inside me like no other. One I had to run away from because for the first time of my life, I felt—

“Look at you sitting on the beach without a care in the world like you're on a Goddamn picnic. Where's the boat? What's taking so long?” Nicole interrupted my track of thoughts. She could be really annoying sometimes.

“If you've been living in a fucking cage for a year, you'd know how I feel.” I stretched my leg as she sat on the chair next to mine and put Ravenna's bag of meds and cash on the sand, waiting for our ride of freedom. “He's getting the boat ready with supplies. Water, food, extra gas, emergency kits, heavy clothes, you know...or you don't. Have you ever been on a boat?”

She shrugged, her gaze at the cracking dawn. “There's always a first for everything. Kidnap a girl, steal a car, kill a man...getting on a boat won't be so hard.”

Cazzo. “You know it's not too late to change your mind. It's winter, and the sea isn't always a best friend. There's nothing wrong with knowing exactly what you can and can't do. The safety of your baby—”

“The last time I checked I'm the mother of said baby, and you attempted murder on his aunt. Keep your precious advice to yourself. I think I know what's best for his safety, which is going now, together because there's no way I'm gonna let you

near my sister alone, to kill the bad guys that threaten him and the rest of my family.”

I filled my lungs with the fresh sea breeze, my chest feeling better. Antibiotics and fresh air could do wonders. “How do you know it’s a he?”

She shrugged again. “It’s just a feeling.”

“Have you named him already?”

Her lips twisted, a slight twitch to her head. “Maybe.”

That put a smile on my face. “I know what you should name him. Leo.”

“The fuck? There’s no way in hell I’m naming my baby after you.”

“How ungrateful. I’m giving away my life for you and him. That’s the least you can do.”

She snorted. “Oh so you’re selflessly doing this for us now, and not because you want to have revenge on the people who fucked you over?”

“Well...that too. There’s nothing wrong with killing two birds with one stone.”

Eye rolling, she chuckled. “You *are* Tino’s son.”

Maybe, but I wasn’t him. “Would you believe me if I said I was doing this to protect you more than I was doing it for revenge?”

She stared at me incredulously. “No.”

“But it’s the truth.”

“So if I wasn’t here, pregnant, you wouldn’t get on that boat?”

“Until last night, there was nothing on my mind but killing those motherfuckers.” And taking back my wife.

“And then?”

My gaze stretched back to the locked cottage where I was leaving Ravenna.

“If you truly like her that much, why didn’t you tell me to fuck off and stayed with her? You have no obligation toward me or my baby, and you’re not a good guy, Leo, to be making noble, selfless sacrifices.”

“I know I’m not a good guy, and maybe I wasn’t obligated to help you. You’re not my family, and you hate my guts. But I need to save you, Nicky.”

“Why?”

“You won’t understand.” Ravenna did. She understood me better than I understood myself. That was why I had to go when I wanted nothing more than to stay. To save her, too, from myself before anyone else. “Just promise me, when the time comes, you won’t hesitate to put that bullet in my head you’ve been dying to put for so long.” It was the only way everyone I cared about would be safe.

The fisherman came back with the boat. I thanked him and offered him some cash, but he wouldn’t take it. He was the brother of that girl from college, and he said what he was doing for me was the least he could do to repay me for saving his sister that day. I took one last gaze at the cottage, telling him to burn the car and release Ravenna once I texted him from Palermo. Our first stop where we’d stay at a bed and breakfast owned by his cousin until we got another boat to Napoli. There we’d be smuggled on a cargo ship going to New York. I couldn’t risk going back to America from Palermo or any port in Sicily. Don Bellomo and the Lanzas must be watching those like hawks.

He helped Nicky and me on the boat and wished us a safe trip. I glanced at her face. “There’s no going back now. Are you ready?”

When she nodded, there was something different other than fury and hate under her frown when she gazed at me. Something I couldn’t decipher. All I knew it wasn’t good.

CHAPTER 24

Leo

“What should I do with the doctor’s phone? Her father keeps calling and texting. I ran out of ideas to stall him. Maybe I should throw it in the sea. It’s old and doesn’t have a Find My Phone or a GPS, but it’s better safe than sorry.” Nicky yelled over the motor as we cruised the Sicilian coast.

“Give it to me. We might still need it. The burner, too.”

“Why the burner?”

I squinted at her. “Why not? Expecting a call you don’t wanna miss?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean give it to me. Now.”

She cocked a brow and got the phones out of the bag. “There. Happy?”

I scrolled through them, and she snorted. “What the fuck? You think I called someone behind your back?”

“It’s better safe than sorry.” I threw back at her. “Besides, I have to text the fisherman to release Ravenna once we get off this boat.”

“What? I thought you’d keep her until we were in Chicago. What if she ratted us out?”

“She doesn’t know where we’re going.”

“Even so...” she glanced around the open sea, “wait a minute. This isn’t West. Where are you taking us? This isn’t the way to Palermo.”

“And you know this because you have better sailing skills or know Italy better than I do?”

She jumped to her feet and pulled out the gun, fear sinking her eyes in their sockets. “Cut the crap, asshole. Where are

you taking me?”

I rolled my eyes. “That fucking gun again. Could you sit? Standing in a boat isn’t the safest thing to do.”

“You sick son of a bitch. You think you can just fucking kidnap me? Pull over.”

“And they call *me* crazy. This isn’t a car, Nicky. If I stop the boat, what are you gonna do? Jump in the freezing water and swim for miles to shore or push me in the water and navigate the boat yourself in a foreign country when you don’t have a GPS or even a fucking map?”

Her eyes darted around before she grumbled. She must have realized her demand was ridiculous. “I’m such an idiot. I should’ve never taken you out of that cage. That has been your fucking plan all along. I thought you were going to use Lina, but you’ve been planning on using me. You were never gonna go with me to Tino.”

“Why enter the lion’s lair when you can bring him out in the open to play?”

She ground her teeth with a hiss. “And you think he’ll come to you to save *me*?”

“No.”

“Then what... Oh my God. You were going to reach out to Lina. Tell her to come to you to save me.”

“It crossed my mind, but it’s farfetched. I know Don Bellomo more than anyone. He’d never leave her out of his sight. She wouldn’t be able to run even if she wanted to.”

“But if you blackmailed Tino he’d never agree to let her come to you, either, even if she insisted on saving me.”

I knew that. How delusional did she think I was?

“Oh no.” The way she blanched hinted she might have finally figured it out. Or her morning sickness was back. “It’s not Tino. It’s never been Tino you were going to do the trade with.” She plopped down on her butt. “Oh my God, you’re going to give me to Enzo, aren’t you? He’s the only one who can kidnap Lina for you. Tino won’t see it coming because he

trusts him. Enzo could cover his tracks later, and Tino would never know it was him. Enzo gives you my sister in exchange for your silence and me. You kidnap Lina and escape. Enzo gets me under his mercy and I won't be able to say a word because of my baby. Fuck. *Fuck.*”

“C'mon, Nicky. Per favore, don't be so dramatic. Why do you always have to make me the bad guy here?”

“Because YOU ARE—”

“Doing the exact same thing you were planning to do to me.”

“What?”

I laughed. “You always blame me for trying to protect myself or take back what's mine. Same like with Lina. *She* betrayed me, and *he* took her from me. Why was I to blame for trying to save my wife or taking her back? And this time, the second you opened that cage, you had a backup plan in mind. It involved trading me for Lina, too. You were going to trade with Tino first, hoping he'd agree. You get your sister, and Tino and I fight to death. At least, you get rid of one of us. But if that didn't work, you wouldn't have hesitated to give me to Enzo in exchange for your sister for the same reasons I'd have given you to him. So why are you blaming me for looking out for myself? Weren't you the one who said I had no obligation toward you or your baby, and I wasn't a good guy to be making noble, selfless sacrifices?”

“I'd have never—”

“Don't. It's not like you to lie and betray, Nicky. One of the many things I like about you. Don't ruin it any more than it already is.”

She glared at me, cursing, but then she looked away, as if she couldn't stand to look me in the eye after I exposed her intentions. “How did you know?”

“I had my doubts from the beginning, more last night after you went bonkers on Ravenna, but the look you gave me right before we got on the boat told me everything. That conscience of yours always gives you away.”

“You sounded so sincere when you said you’d protect me from Enzo, and what you said before we took off... I can’t believe I felt guilty about you when you were gonna screw me over all along.”

“You were gonna screw me over first. Why, Nicky?”

“It was just a backup plan. The main reason I got you out has always been to kill Tino. I want him dead more than anything or anyone, even more than I want *you* dead.” She darted a glare at me. “But you’ve just changed that for me.”

“Then why don’t you shoot me? I’m unarmed and there’s no one else here.” I left the helm and captured the gun between my palms, pushing the muzzle on to my forehead. “Go ahead.”

She shook, her nostrils flaring, her eyes bulging at me. “You’re insane.”

“Remember what I said. I told you don’t hesitate. This is the time. Kill me, Nicky. Then trick Enzo to bring you Lina, and then run for your life because this is the only chance you’re gonna get.”

A deep scowl knotted her face as her fingers trembled around the trigger. I looked her in the eye, daring her to take that final leap. The first time she thought she took a life, it was an accident. The second time she was about to, I stopped her. Now, what was it going to be?

Time froze between the two of us. Even the wind seemed to have stopped blowing to stare and witness. I waited, holding my breath that might be the last.

She screamed in my face, but it didn’t turn off the constant voices that welcomed this moment more than any. “I can’t,” she cracked in tears. “I fucking can’t. How could you do it? How can anybody just take a life? If I could, I would have taken Frank Baldi’s. I would take Tino’s. I’d have taken yours, but I just fucking can’t.”

I stepped away and returned to steer the boat. “Liar. If it were Tino standing here, and you knew Lina wouldn’t know it was you who was holding the gun, you’d do it. That’s why you wouldn’t kill me. You still hope I’ll do it for you so she won’t

hate you. You still want Tino dead more than anybody that you'd betray your own self and take his life. You know why?"

When she didn't answer, I answered for her. "Because you tried everything, and no matter what you do or who you betray, you can't get to him. He still has the upper hand, and it makes you feel like a fucking failure. Like nothing!" Just like he made me feel. "That plan of ours, you knew it couldn't be done the second you answered that call."

"What call?" she whispered without looking at me.

"It wasn't Tino who was calling Domenico after you hit him." The screams blared in my head and echoed in my chest instead of my own breaths. "It wasn't Enzo either."

She froze in place, but her tears exploded. "There was... When I answered, no one spoke."

"But someone was there. You heard the sound of their breath. A sound I bet you'd recognize anywhere."

Her head lowered, her tears falling on her hands. "I didn't know for sure until last night."

"After your fight with Ravenna, you didn't come back right away. You said you were sick, but you weren't barfing."

"The burner rang. I recognized the number."

"The Lanzas."

She nodded. "Obviously, the doctor was lying about the phone belonging to her Russian patient. I answered... and he told me everything," her eyes squeezed shut while she let out a hurting sigh, "offering a deal."

"You couldn't say no because it was more of a threat. If you choose to take the Lanzas down, they won't go down alone. So you stab me in the back and give me back to them."

"I didn't believe him." More tears dropped on her skin. "I didn't want to believe him."

"You went to get the meds, but the main reason you went out there was to call her."

"I had to know for sure. I had to hear it from her."

“She told you? She told you that all this time...” My own tears threatened to spill, but I held them. I wouldn’t cry over her anymore. “All this fucking time, it was Lina who put me in that cage.”

I’d defied everything to be with her. I gave her my heart and my future and would have given her my own life if she’d asked for it. My wife that I’d almost killed my father for. “The reason I fucking survived in that shithole turns out to be the reason I was there in the first place.”

“It’s because of Tino. It’s always Tino.”

“Don’t!” My fingers clawed at her, but I retracted them forcing my rage down before I unleashed it on the wrong person. “Don’t make excuses for her. She did this on her own. I could see it as if I were there, the whole arrangement she made with the Lanzas.”

It must have been after I shot my father and they sent me to the Lanzas until my fate was decided. Did she initiate the meet herself or did they come to her? It didn’t matter. What mattered was what she asked them to do.

They must have told her my father wouldn’t have killed me and he’d have sent me to Filicudi. She didn’t like it. I was too much of a threat to her and her beloved husband; a mental institution might have been not enough to hold me back. But she didn’t want me dead either. She said it to me. She wanted me to suffer.

What would she do? Ask the fuckers who hated me more than anyone, who wanted their fucking revenge for their precious cousin, to bury me in a fucking cage where I’d never see the light again.

Enzio must have hesitated. The consequences if his best friend had found out would have been lethal. But his dog must have peed in his ears because he was drooling over the woman he couldn’t have. Domenico said he’d do it, he’d be my jailer and torturer, if Lina gave him her sister.

And she said yes.

“How could she do it to you?” She lied to me when she vowed to be mine, so it wasn’t the biggest of shocks if she betrayed me like that. But her own sister? “How could she sell *you* out like this?”

“My sister loves me, Leo.”

“But she fucking loves him more.”

“No! It’s not like that. She thought Dom was right for me. She thought he was the only one who could have made me happy so she told him she’d just help him get closer to me. She gave him tips about what I like and helped keep Tino in the dark when it came to you and how Dom used you to marry me. But she swore to me she told Dom if I didn’t want him, she’d call it off. And she did. She’d even tried to get me out of the mansion when she knew for sure I didn’t want to marry him. I almost made it out, but I got caught last minute. She’d lied to Tino to save me then, and I should’ve known... I should’ve seen it coming... There was nothing else she could’ve done without risking her own life.”

“The little, innocent girl that played her violin at night like an angel played us all like one of her songs and turned out to be worse than the devil.” I groaned and laughed and quaked, drowning in an endlessly bellowing whirlpool of shit. “I think it’s time we both accepted Sebastiano and Angelina Bellomo belonged together. There could have never been a more fitting unholy match like theirs.” I lifted my head to the sky, seeing everything blazing red. “They deserve each other. May they rot in hell together.”

Nicole abandoned all her pride and begged me with her tears. “If Tino knows, he’ll hurt her. He might even...” She couldn’t say it. “I can’t lose her, Leo.”

“You don’t have a choice in anything anymore, Nicole.”

“I won’t let you hurt her, Leo. No matter what happens, no matter the price, I won’t let you or anybody hurt her.”

Slowly, menacingly, I turned my head toward her. “Stop wasting your breath. Not for her. She doesn’t deserve you, Nicky.”

“What do you mean? What are you gonna do?”

“What I’ve been planning to do since I knew it was Enzo and not Don Bellomo who played that dirty game with Dom. Since I put two and two together and realized your sister was the only one who could have called Domenico that night because she was the only one who knew you were down there.” I grabbed a fistful of her hair and poured my pain into the fiercest yet beautiful eyes I’d ever seen. “I’ll make each and every one of you pay. I’ll have my revenge, Nicky, my way.”

CHAPTER 25

Leo

I cuffed Nicole on the boat. I couldn't risk it. She wouldn't fight me off while we were at sea, but once we reached the shore, she might pull off something crazy. With my physical condition and her strength, I wouldn't be able to chase or incapacitate her on my own.

I took the gun, too, and she snorted. "Would you really stoop that low and shoot a pregnant woman?"

Not in a million years. "You're giving me a whiplash. One minute you're describing me as the devil himself, ready to do all kinds of shit, and the next you're appealing to my supposedly *good* side that knows compassion and mercy and decency, which you believe I don't have. Pick one."

Her jaw twisted as she spat a curse. "Fine. You're still the devil."

"The prince of hell, fallen from grace, only capable of evil with no chance at redemption."

"Actually, I believe anybody, even the devil, can have a chance at redemption. But the question is, are you looking for it?"

Did I want to be redeemed? Did I give a shit about salvation?

"Whether it's a yes or no, I don't care, but I know you won't shoot me, Leo, not because I believe you have a good side. You just need me to execute whatever fucked up revenge you have in mind."

"And what do you think that would be?"

"Something vile enough to force the Dons of the hell to come down from their thrones."

“You’re absolutely right.” I sped, Cavallino’s shore in the horizon. It wouldn’t be long now to reach our destination. The place that started it all.

As the sun began to dip west, the island that crushed my future appeared. This was where history about to be repeated. “We’re here.”

“What is this place?” she asked as I stopped the boat by the half-destroyed dock.

“This is where my beloved father kidnapped my bride and convinced us both it was the Lanzas who did it while he kept her *protected* for the both of us.”

Her eyes widened at the island where screams died and so much blood was shed. “This is where it happened?” Then she glared at me. “This is where you tried to kill my sister?”

“This is where Sebastiano Bellomo took what didn’t belong to him. This is where he should have died.” The aches swarming through my body echoed the endless hurt in my soul. “This is where I lost everything.”

“Why did you bring me here?”

“You’ll see.” I tied the boat and shuffled out. Then I helped her on the dock.

“Is there anybody here? Guards?”

I got the gun ready. “A couple.” I’d heard Domenico say Tino no longer used the island after what happened. He only left a couple of guards here to maintain territory so no rivals could use it for storage or gaining turf.

“What?”

The suits emerged from around the house. They weren’t shooting, though.

“Are you completely out of your mind? They’re gonna capture us and tell Tino,” she shouted.

“Oh, I’m counting on it. The telling Tino part.” I pushed her in front of me, gun in hand, while they carefully approached, yelling in Italian for me to stop moving.

“Please, don’t shoot,” Nicky gasped, the sound of her fear new to me and unpleasant. I thought she was tougher than that, but having a baby changed you. Losing one changed you more. The sacrifices you’d be willing to make in order for that not to happen, the humiliation, the risks. I knew there was nothing I wouldn’t have given for my mamma and my baby sister to stay alive.

The black suits reached the dock, pointing their guns at me, prowling slowly, yelling for me to drop the gun and surrender. *Not today, boys.*

I bent my head, my mouth to Nicky’s ear. “Count to three and then duck.”

She gasped again, and I fired the gun, landing a bullet in the chest of the soldier on the right. Nicky didn’t argue and ducked, and I fired the second bullet at the other soldier a split-second before he pulled his trigger.

I shot them both again in the head just to be sure and collected their guns through Nicky’s flaring swears. Then she started crying.

I pushed the bodies in the sea. “Is this your new hormones doing? I’m not used to your crying.”

“You fucking killed them in cold blood!”

“Would you rather they killed us?”

“They wouldn’t have. Tino wouldn’t have let them.”

“But they would have captured us and wait for him to come and do it himself, duh.” I pushed her in front of me again, heading for the house.

“It doesn’t make killing them any less brutal. You must have known these guys for years. Don’t you feel any kind of remorse? How could you just murder them and dump them in the sea?”

“Didn’t you shoot Domenico’s men when we ran?”

“I was only trying to stop them and protect us. I didn’t kill them.”

“You should have. These are soldiers. Dying in a *brutal* murder is part of the job. Besides, killing isn’t as hard as you think, Nicole. It’s stopping yourself from taking a life that needs real willpower and control.” One Don Bellomo had learned to master, and I had yet to learn. That was why he was always winning, and I was damned. “Andiamo. We don’t have much time.”

I texted the fisherman to release Ravenna as we entered the house. My chest hurt as if a hand punched through my ribs and squeezed my heart when I stood in the place where my own wife told me she didn’t want me. The memory was so vivid I could hear her pleas to save him and smell the blood oozing out of his chest.

My gaze lifted upstairs, to where my father’s bedroom was located, where he must have—

Wrath simmered my blood, and I needed to hurt someone, anyone. *Kill her. Kill Nicky. It’s the perfect payback. Everybody will know the Lanzas couldn’t protect their own. Lina would never forgive your father if her sister died. You’ll win. You’ll finally win against them all. Do it. Kill Nicky. Kill her.*

“Why are you looking at me like that? Leo...”

Kill her. It’s so easy. So perfect. Kill Nicky now.

She stared at the gun that I just realized I was pointing at her. “On the boat, I thought your plan was threatening to rape me if the Lanzas didn’t bring Lina to you.”

That’s not enough. That would never be enough. Kill. Her. Now.

“But you want to hurt Lina now, too. You want to ruin her more than you want her. This is your revenge. You’re gonna kill me and rub it in all their faces.” A sob escaped her. “But it’s not just me you’re killing, Leo.”

My gaze dropped to her belly. Right where she stood, Lina told me the same thing, except she wasn’t trying to save her life or knock some sense into my head. She was telling me to

kill her so I'd live with the pain of knowing I murdered my baby brother just like Seppi killed my unborn sister.

"She didn't know she was pregnant," I mused.

"What?"

"Lina...she couldn't have known she was pregnant and said what she'd said. No mother would have."

She gulped. "You still didn't kill her when she told you, even though you knew she might be lying."

But you're gonna do it now because fuck them all. They all betrayed you. Each and every single one of them. None of them deserved to live a single moment without pain that would last a lifetime.

"But you know I'm pregnant, Leo. I've never begged anyone in my life since Frank Baldi, with whom I learned begging didn't do you any good, but I'm begging you, *you* of all people, Leo. I'm begging you not to kill my baby."

"You...you were gonna betray me like the rest of them."

"I know. And I'm sorry."

"No, you're not." I lowered the gun despite the shrieking voices. "But you don't need to beg me to spare your baby, Nicky. I'd never kill a child. No matter who its parents are or what they did."

Her eyes fluttered closed as she let out a long sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"Begging, a fake apology and a thank you. It's nice to see you grovel. Do you think your sister would do the same?"

Her face changed in a second, humility replaced by resent. "Do you want me to beg and grovel for my sister, Leo? Because I'll do it as much as you like until you're satisfied and let her go."

A loud snort burst out of me. "Aren't you tired of taking the heat for everything she fucks up?"

"She's my little sister."

“Then I guess you won’t mind doing this. Strip.”

Resent turned into fury. “Go fuck yourself.”

“Would you rather *I* did it?”

“Give it your best shot, you piece of shit, and see if you get to keep your hand.”

“I’d like to keep my hand, so I either uncuff you so you can strip by yourself or I can cuff you to a table, where the best you can do is spit at me, and do the honors”

“I’m not gonna get naked for you, you sick fuck.”

“For fuck’s sake, you think because I won’t kill you I won’t be able to bring you to your knees. I wasn’t asking, Nicole.”

“I’m not gonna do it, and I’m not gonna stay another second here. You’re gonna give me those Goddamn keys now and let me go or I’ll—”

“You’ll what? You think you can say no, fight me off and run? Do it.” I cleared the way for her, grabbed the first chair I found and sat. Fuck I was beat. Time for another one of Ravenna’s magic pills.

“I will. Toss me the keys.”

I did it, and she managed with her teeth and deft fingers to set her wrists free. The metal clinked on the floor, and she started for the front door.

“But the second Enzo is here, I’m gonna tell him you’re pregnant. And when Don Bellomo arrives, I’ll tell him how his dear Angel has been playing behind his back.”

She stopped in her tracks and spun, furious.

“So you either get your pretty ass back in here, do whatever the fuck I say or put everyone you love in danger.”

CHAPTER 26

Leo

Cazzo, she was hot. I couldn't lift my eyes off her as she stripped and cuffed herself back in the bedroom downstairs. Was she always that pretty or was it the pregnancy halo? Did Lina look that beautiful when she was pregnant with the son that should have been mine? Would Ravenna's body be that sexy if I put a baby in her?

A smile triumphed over me at the thought. The smell of her hair popped into my nostrils. The grayish green of her eyes invaded my vision as I pictured her begging for my cock, taking my seed, binding us beyond separation. My hand rubbed at the pocket of my jeans, reflexively, where her panties dug a hole in them. I needed to smell them now.

"Stop leering, you sicko!" Nicky's protest was so loud it snatched me out of my fantasy. She must have thought I was enjoying the sight of her nakedness too much.

I brought out Ravenna's phone and turned on the camera. I dragged my feet toward the bed where she'd pulled her hair down and bent her knees to shelter her body from me as much as possible. "Be a good girl and put your hair to the side and stretch your legs. I want them to get the whole *experience*. Fuck, I wish I could see the look on their faces when they get the video. Don't forget to smile, *baby girl*."

She did spit in my face like I'd anticipated, but when my hand yanked at her hair in front of the camera, her tits perked up, showing nicely in the frame, and I got the perfect view for my video. "I know it's you, your dog and my *faithful* wife that put me in that cage to rot. You know what I want. Get me my wife and brother, and you'll get my silence and your dog's woman back. Vieni presto, Enzo." I licked Nicky's cheek. "I won't be able to hold back for long."

She snapped at me as I turned off the camera, swearing and drawing back, wiping her cheek with her shoulder.

Laughing, I sent the video to the Lanza Capo, wishing I could have sent it to Domenico instead. *Take that, Domenico fuck. I've seen your fucking wife naked, tasted her skin, had her cuffed under my mercy.* “May he writhe in hell.” I turned off the phone. Enzo already had the burner number. Ravenna never fooled me when she said it was Safin’s. I knew it was Enzo who gave it to her. It was a good thing neither of Ravenna’s phones nor the car could be tracked or the Lanzas would have found us. My only concern now was Ravenna’s safety.

She’s a smart girl. She’d know what to do.

Or a traitor that will screw me over again.

Only time will tell.

I got the bag of meds and turned around the bed. Then I lay next to her. She cringed but not enough to be barfing. “Nausea pills do wonders, huh?”

Bending her knees to her chest again, staying as far away from me as possible, she squinted at me in confusion.

“You’re not vomiting anymore.” I popped a couple of painkillers and the antibiotics. There was cream to apply, too, but that would be tricky to do on my own.

“I guess they do,” she whispered.

“Or...you’re not that turned off by—”

“No! No. Never again.”

“If you say so, *baby girl.*”

“Fuck you!”

I fucking loved to tease her. “This’s fun, you know. I love hanging out with you.”

“You’re insane, like literally mentally ill. I don’t know if you’ve been like that all the time or it’s the captivity and torture that made you even sicker and more delusional.”

My gaze locked on hers for a second before my fist locked around her neck. “You wanna see sick, Nicky? Sick is having the wife of the monster that has been breaking my bones, slicing my skin, showering me with my own piss and his filthy cum, threatening to fuck me to death, under me while I did the same things to her over and over and over. Sick is raping a pregnant woman until she bled out her baby and then slitting her throat with a fucking sated smile and sending the picture to her family. Sick is—”

“Enough.” Her eyes glistened with tears. “Please.”

I gave her neck a squeeze and then I let it go. “I need your help with the cream and bandages.”

She nodded.

I took off the jacket the fisherman had left for me on the boat and freed one of her hands. Then I put the jacket on her. “It’ll take a few hours before they arrive. It’s cold in here.”

“Thank you.”

I took off my shirt and jeans and sat. Giving her the cream and my back, I waited. She stirred behind me, and then her touch and the cold cream on my wounds made me hiss.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not. What he did to you... There’s no excuse. Even if he’s suffered torture and abuse himself, it doesn’t give him the right to do this to you. I’m truly sorry, Leo, for what Dom did to you and for what Seppi did to your mother.”

“Neither is your fault.”

When I got used to the pressure of her touch and the temperature and stopped hissing, she came closer, tilting to do my chest. Unlike Ravenna, she didn’t shake. God, I missed her.

“Why didn’t you?” Nicky asked.

“Why didn’t I what?”

“Do all those things to me. That time in the car, you saved me because of my sister. Now, you want to hurt her as much as you want to hurt everybody else. Many men, sane or not, would have had their vengeance in the most vicious ways. *Made men* would have never passed the chance.”

“Would you believe me if I told you?”

She nodded without hesitation, as if she could finally trust me.

“Every time I said I’d never hurt you, I meant every word. It was never just because of your sister or the innocent life inside you. It’s because I truly like you, and if the circumstances of how we met or what we’ve been through had been different, we’d have made great friends.”

Her throat bobbed with a swallow. “Are you trying to mess with my head?”

I chuckled. “To what end? Everything is about to be over, and you already think I’m worse than the devil himself. Why would I mess with you?”

“To get me to think...maybe...you’re not worse than your father after all.”

“Is it working?”

“Since everything is about to over, I have to say that...I was wrong, and not just about you.”

“Who else?”

“Are you gonna snap if I say that maybe Tino isn’t the worst either?”

I blinked, the screams raging. How could she say that? I tried my best not to break something or a bone. “Have you forgotten what he’s done?”

“No. But I’ve also chosen to ignore many things about my sister because I don’t want to believe they’re true. I’ve hated Tino for his manipulation, thinking he brainwashed Lina and tricked her into loving him, thinking he was using Dom and you to trap me forever. But the truth is, Lina loved Tino before she even met him face to face, the vigilante that saved her, the

stalker she knew was watching every step she took while I refused to believe it as much as I refused to believe the little signs of her own darkness. Like how much she wanted the stalker to be out there, watching, or how upset she got whenever I mentioned him, calling him anything bad.

“Then when we lived at the mansion...she was fucking happy. Regardless of all the atrocious things he’s done then and later and after they got married, she’s always seen him as her protector.” Emotion triumphed over her control. “And that made me hate him more than I should because it’s me who...”

“It’s you who have been protecting her. It’s you who sacrificed everything to keep her safe.” I knew the feeling like the back of my hand. I, too, sacrificed everything to keep Lina safe. We both paid heavily for our love for Lina, but, at least, Lina loved Nicky, and Nicky would get to keep her soul. I, soon, would die for the love I’d never got to have.

“I just needed someone to blame. I wanted to convince myself it was he who corrupted her, but it’s not true. She had a chance to leave this island when you’d arrived, but she didn’t. Then he was fucking dying, and all she was doing was praying, staying by his side at the hospital and plotting with the Lanzas to keep him safe. He wasn’t there to tell her what to do. It was all her doing, all her choices.” She shook her head, moaning, as if it hurt her to admit what she’d just said. “You have to start understanding he didn’t take her from you, Leo, because she was never yours. No matter how much you try to convince yourself it was he who took her from you, it doesn’t change the truth. Lina has always been Tino’s. She’s always loved him, and like he’d do anything for her, she’d do anything for him.”

Pressure banged my skull, and I began to shake. The voices in my head gnashed at me like a rabid animal, mixed with Lina’s music—which now sounded like agony—and Nicky’s words. I didn’t want to listen. I didn’t want to hear this shit anymore. It had to end. I couldn’t take it anymore. It had to fucking end.

The burner roared in response. Enzo answered my demand.

“Is that the Lanzas?” she gasped.

I nodded once. “Enzio will bring them here in eight hours.”

Taken aback, she stared at me. “That’s too easy and fast. He didn’t threaten anything or even negotiate. How do you know he’ll do it for sure? How do you know it’s not a trap?”

“I don’t, but it doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t matter? Leo, he could send his men here to kill you and take me, men who are in Italy that can get here in no time.”

“Let them come. They won’t find you.”

“What? How? I’m right here.”

“Not for long. I’m taking you somewhere else. Somewhere safe. I just needed to make sure the video showed you were here.”

“So when he sends his men and they don’t find me, they’ll have to keep you alive to tell them where I am.”

I smirked. “Then he’ll have to come down here with Lina and my brother.”

“Then what?”

I didn’t answer. Wouldn’t. She’d just have to wait and see for herself.

“Leo, do you still love my sister?”

That was a plea, not a question. She wanted to appeal to my feelings for Lina to spare the guilty sister. Like love had anything to do with punishment. Parents punished their beloved children as much as enemies punished each other.

“Don’t hurt her. I’m begging you, Leo, don’t hurt her.” She broke, repeating her pleas like a mantra.

I didn’t like it when she begged. I didn’t want to see her break. The things we’d lost to people who didn’t deserve us hurt, and her humiliation reflected mine. My arms folded around her shoulders and brought her to my chest in a gentle embrace.

She didn't reject my touch, and her tears stained me. With a frown, she lifted her head, slowly, reluctantly, and her eyes roamed my face. Then, without introduction, they settled on my lips as she shrugged off the jacket.

I frowned back at her, noticing the rush in her breath, and the allure of her naked breasts while they heaved with it. Without taking her gaze off my lips, she parted hers and touched mine.

For a split-second, raw, animalistic desire of a man being kissed by a beautiful, naked woman, fogged my mind. But it didn't take long for me to snap out of it. I pulled her by the hair and got her off my mouth. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Punish her through me," she whispered, "and let me punish Dom through you."

Do it. Do it. Fucking Nicky will be like fucking Lina, Dom, Enzo and Tino in the ass. Do it. They'll never recover from it. Do it.

"No. No. Fuck no."

"Are you rejecting me?"

"No, Nicky. I'm saving you."

"That's not your job."

"Well, someone has to do it. You gotta stop shattering yourself to pieces every time to protect her. Someone has to start protecting *you*."

Quivering, she shook her head, as if she didn't want to listen. "I'm not just doing it for her."

I didn't believe her. "Nicky, listen to me. This whole thing I'm doing is just to bring them to their knees. I was never going to touch you, so don't..."

"You're not raping me. I want this. I want you to do this for me. It's the only way I can punish him. The only way I can save myself from him. Let us both punish him for what he did to you and me."

I held her face between my hands and wiped under her eyes with my thumbs. “Not like this. You have a conscience that will torment you more than you can take. I know a lot about guilt.” Even if she didn’t believe I was capable of feeling it. “It ate you from the inside out until your soul is black and nothing is left but destruction. Your guilt will destroy you, Nicky. I can’t do this to you. I meant every word when I said I’d protect you and your baby at all costs. Even from yourself.”

“I can’t believe this. I can’t believe I’m hearing this from *you*. You’re making me the bad guy here.”

“You’re not bad. You’re beautiful.”

She gazed at me as if she was seeing me for the first time. Then she laughed under her breath. “You really love her, don’t you?”

I’d learned in the past couple of days that what I felt for Lina was a chaotic disaster. “Love isn’t a word to describe how I feel about Lina.”

“I meant the doctor.”

I opened my mouth to say no, but the word froze on my tongue. If I could deny it, my body wouldn’t. All the time Nicky was naked in front of me, I was thinking about Ravenna’s body. All the time the voices were scratching my brain bloody, urging me to violate Nicky for revenge, I had one thought that was booming over them all. How Ravenna would be proud of me if I could smother the raging compulsions, how much it’d make her happy if I didn’t get obsessed with Nicky as she said I’d need to, how hot our love making would be when she realized I hadn’t touched—didn’t want to touch—another woman while she was away. For her. Because of her.

My hand itched for my jeans where a physical piece of our time together lay safe and hidden. Time I had no idea if we could relive.

“Then you should run.” Resolve laced Nicky’s voice.
“When they ask me what you’ve done to me, I won’t tell them.

Let them imagine the worst. Let them deal with the shame.
And you go get Ravenna and disappear. Live.”

“I wish it were that easy.” I couldn’t truly be with Ravenna if I didn’t deal with all my past issues. I couldn’t protect her either if the people who wanted me dead were alive.

“It is. Revenge is sweet but only if you live to remember it. Otherwise, it’s not worth the loss.”

“Nicky—”

“Dom is alive.”

I scoffed.

“Did you hear me? Dom didn’t die. He was the one calling the burner last night. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I was looking out for myself. I didn’t know you weren’t going to hurt me. But if it’s any consolation, I made sure he didn’t know where we were last night so he wouldn’t hurt the doctor whom he must have known she helped us when I answered her burner. I only told him about Palermo, where *he* was supposed to take you,” she confessed in panic. “Enzio isn’t coming with Lina, Leo. It’s Dom that’s coming here to kill you. Very fucking soon.”

Like I didn’t know that? She’d been talking about him in present tense since last night without realizing it, and that moment when she offered me herself gave it all away. She must have thought her husband knowing for sure I was inside her would make him let her go. *The only way she can save herself from him.* Because after everything that had been said and done, she still couldn’t bring herself to leave him on her own.

Because she still loved him.

I felt sorry for her. She deserved better. *But the heart wants what it wants. You can never control it. I of all people know how it feels.* “Should I act surprised to make you feel better?”

“You knew?”

“And I can’t wait to see him down on his knees, rubbing his nose in the mud, kissing my feet to tell him where you

are.”

CHAPTER 27

Leo

Freedom.

A luxury I didn't appreciate enough a year ago. One I'd given up on having back that even now, with twinkling stars and moonlight surrounding me instead of no bars and infinite darkness, with the fresh wind filling my nostrils instead of my own piss and shit, I wasn't doing anything to regain it. My mind was fucked enough to believe death was my only freedom left, and fuck me, *that* I was sparing nothing to achieve.

Pissing all over the Lanzas and the Bellomos would surely put a bullet in my head. Fuck, if it wasn't worth it. I'd happily give my life, knowing I ruined theirs forever.

Except...

A slow sigh seeped out of me as I closed my eyes, tilting my head back, resting under the boat tent a few miles from the island. The face that had managed to put a smile on my face at my darkest hours appeared behind my eyelids. I brought out Ravenna's panties and smelled them. The scent of her arousal mingled with the blowing wind, giving me a new meaning of what freedom meant to be. Of what was worth seeking another chance at living.

But how could I start a new life when my old one was wrapped around me like a thick snake, paralyzing, threatening to bite and poison me and everyone around with its venom at any second? How could I protect the woman that said she loved my darkness before my light when I'd failed to protect anyone I'd ever loved?

I groaned at the pain of loss and hope. Fucking treacherous hope. I couldn't let it mess with my mind now.

The burner rang, saving me. I answered.

“I’m gonna hang you like a fucking road kill and flay your skin alive.” The filthy hiss poisoned the blood in my veins and then simmered it. I didn’t think just hearing someone’s voice could make me want to commit murder until I heard Domenico Lanza’s. “Where the fuck is my wife?”

“The wife that almost killed you? Your beautiful wife I’ve been spending every single minute of the day and the night with...mmm...for...how long now?”

He swore infinitely, his wrath and helplessness music to my ears. “Where the fuck are you keeping her, you motherfucker?”

“I take it you searched the island and couldn’t find her?”

“I will find her, Leo, and I will torture you to death, if it’s the last thing I get to do on this earth.”

“Keep that attitude and you’ll never know where I’m keeping her, and better yet, Tino Bellomo will know exactly how you screwed him over and come kill you himself. Then your wife will be mine to fuck every night while you rot in hell.”

More swearing. It took all my willpower not to laugh. “If you lay a hand on—”

“What makes you think I haven’t laid a hand on Nicky already, or a cock?”

“You’re dead,” he seethed. “Where the fuck is she?”

“Where the fuck is mine? You give me my wife, I give you yours. That’s the deal I have with your capo. To think that after all you’ve done, you’d be jumping on my generous offer that covers your fucking treason with no questions asked, but no. The Lanzas’ fucking arrogant asses think they can fuck *me* over. Have you forgotten who I am, you sons of bitches? Bring me my wife and my brother before midnight, and you’ll have Nicky back...with a sweet kiss.”

His curses flared again. I rolled my eyes and hung up.

While I waited, I opened Ravenna’s phone I was saving its battery and scrolled Ravenna’s photos for what must be the

hundredth time. She only had three of them. One with both her parents in what seemed to be their house. One when she was in high school, holding a little boy, who must have been her brother. Another with only her father in a wheelchair, but they were smiling.

Would I ever see her again? Would life allow us a photo worth saving?

Enzio was the one calling now. I pressed the green button. “Nice trick.”

“We’re on the plane, Leo. Your package will arrive on time. I trust ours will, too?”

Lina was with Enzio now. I could talk to her. I could listen to her voice after an entire year of missing it. But I shouldn’t. I didn’t trust my mind or what I’d feel if I did. “Put her on the phone.” Cazzo.

There was a pause. “It’s... Leo, it’s me.”

My body shook with rage, my fist almost crumbling the phone.

“I know I hurt you, and maybe I deserve whatever pain you want to cause me,” she said. “But Nicky doesn’t deserve any more pain...and neither does my son...your baby brother...” She burst into tears.

For countless hours, I’d imagined the things I’d have said if I’d ever spoken to her again. The hurt I’d have showed, the kind that was only induced by love. The apologies I’d have demanded only so I could have forgiven her, only so I could have made her love me again. But here I was, listening to her pathetic words, feeling nothing but fury and sadness, feeling like an idiot, wishing I’d never laid eyes on the girl I’d once thought was my lifesaver.

I wanted to say so much, but all the words tasted bland and meaningless on my tongue. “Put Enzio back on the phone.”

“Leo—”

“Enzio!” I couldn’t stand that voice of hers anymore. I didn’t want to listen to it ever again.

“Like I said, we’ll be there on time,” he said.

“Send a picture with them on the island, and then we’ll talk.”

CHAPTER 28

Leo

The yelling and cursing that flew in the air as I arrived on the island fell on my ears like background noise. My entire focus was on her. Surrounded by guns and the faces that betrayed me, I saw her. I saw Lina for the first time in over a year.

She was sitting inside the house, in the same spot I'd spilled my father's blood. Enzo and Dom were flanking her, their soldiers and guards cramming the place, pointing their guns at me, breathing down my neck. She looked exactly the same but ever so different. She was wearing an off-white cashmere suit, her long, brown hair tucked safely in a low braided bun, very light makeup on her face. Exactly how *he* liked it.

Her eyes swept over me, wide and sunken. Shocked by what they'd done to me or scared of what I'd do to her because of it? She gulped, and then her jaws parted with a quivering exhale. "I'm here, Leo." Her efforts to keep her voice steady weren't enough.

Eyes pinned to her face, I sat across from her and grabbed another chair to keep my leg levitated, every move of mine bringing the men to an edge. They'd taken my gun, but I could smell their fear and reveled in the joy their helplessness brought as I knew they couldn't kill me. Not yet.

"I've done everything you asked for," she said. "Where's my sister?"

I stretched my leg so that my shoe was practically in Enzo's face. "Did you know Mamma used to have the same exact suit you're wearing? Even the hair, he always made her do her hair up."

"He's the father of my child, Leo. You have to understand that nothing you're going to say or do will ever change that or how I feel about him."

She doesn't deserve to live. You should have killed them both that day.

“For a whole year, I’ve been blaming myself for hurting you. I was totally convinced it was the worst mistake I’d ever made. The only thought I was obsessed with as much as I was obsessed with you was how to correct my mistake if I ever got out, how to save you, how to protect the wife I’ve failed to protect the first time.” I leaned forward. “Now, I see I’ve never been more fucking wrong in my life. That innocent girl I thought I loved and should have saved, that girl that stood next to me in white like a fucking angel never existed. It was all in my head.” I stared at her with all my might because in my mind I was murdering her. “You should have died that day. I should have pulled that fucking trigger again.”

Silent tears fell down her cheeks. In my peripheral vision, the Lanza dog was pouncing toward me. I headbutted him in the abdomen, and my knee smacked his balls. He barreled backward for a moment before he lunged at me one more time. He was notorious for his pain intolerance, but I wasn’t afraid to go the extra mile when it came to this motherfucker. I kneed him twice more. Three times in the balls would bring any man, no matter how tough he was, to his knees. As he bent in pain, I headbutted him again, in his injured head this time.

“Enough!” Enzo growled.

“Get your dog back to his place if you want to keep him.” I ground the words under my teeth. *I won't let this fucker come anywhere near me ever again.*

“Get back here, Dom. Remember what we’re here for.”

“Where is my wife, you son of a bitch?” Domenico bellowed.

With a smirk, I looked him in the eye. “Bitch? My mom wasn’t the one who got knocked up by a guy who let his brother marry her for him.”

His face puffed in flames as his fist swooped toward my jaw. I ducked, Enzo flying off his chair, grabbing Domenico and dragging him away.

“I’ll kill him! I’ll fucking kill him!” Domenico yapped.

“Get him out of here,” Enzo ordered his men.

“I’m not leaving until I know where the fuck my wife is.”

“I’ll take care of it. Get the fuck out. Now.”

Domenico spat another threat at me as the men held him by the arms and pulled him away. I waved goodbye and blew him a kiss on his way out.

“This child’s play ends now,” Enzo said.

“Everything ends when *I* say it ends. You don’t have the upper hand here, Enzo,” I said.

“Where. Is. Nicole?”

“Where. Is. My. Brother?”

Lina sighed heavily. “You can’t possibly expect that I’d put my son in danger and just—”

“When capos speak, you shut the fuck up,” I interrupted. I literally couldn’t stand hearing her voice ever again that I was seriously considering cutting her tongue out. “Or hasn’t yours taught you that?”

She glared at me and then at Enzo. He nodded at one of his men. The guy lowered his gun and went upstairs. Then he came back with a baby. *My* baby brother.

My heart sped as I got to my feet. The seconds until the man reached the last step seemed like forever. I shuffled toward him, but two other soldiers blocked me.

“That’s close enough,” Enzo said.

I shot a dirty glance at him. “That’s *my* brother right there. You won’t care about him more than I do.”

“You tried to kill both his parents. What makes you think we can trust you with him?”

“I’d never hurt a baby, and you know that.” I switched my glare toward Lina. “*You* know that.”

Her eyes glistened as she studied my face for a few moments. Then she rose to her feet and took the baby. He

cooed in her arms, and I almost cried at the sight of them both. This should have been my life. This was what I gave up everything for only to never have it.

How was I supposed to control the rage boiling under my skin when I came face to face to everything I'd ever wanted and lost? How was I supposed to fucking move on and live or let them live?

Before I knew for sure Lina was the one behind my misery, before Ravenna carved a place for her inside my soul, I'd planned to get Lina and my brother, kill everybody else and run away with them, where I could finally live with the people I loved. Now, the plan was almost the same, except Lina's forehead would be the first to have a hole in it.

Carefully, she walked past the guards and approached me. She lifted the baby and cradled him in her arms in a position that allowed me to see his face.

My heart skipped a beat as his clueless, big eyes fell on mine. My tears dropped and a smile stretched my lips at the same time. He captured my soul as if he were my own. "He has your eyes." I'd always thought if Lina and I had a baby, it'd have her eyes. "He's so beautiful."

"His name is Niccolino. I named him after my sister," she said.

"Yes. She told me," I sniffled, reaching my arms out. I wanted to hold him.

She stepped away, shaking her head. "Not before I see Nicky."

I could just jump one of these suckers and take their gun, shoot the fuck out of everybody and take the boy.

What the fuck are you waiting for? Do it. We need some blood in here.

I could easily picture it. Ravenna and I, on the island she'd choose, raising Niccolino as our own. A beautiful dream that could come true with bloodshed I yearned for.

But it was my dream, not his.

When he'd grow up and realize I took him from his parents, killed his own mother and snatched him from her arms... I couldn't risk it. I filled my eyes with his innocence. I wouldn't put him in such pain. I wouldn't destroy him like I was destroyed. "You don't get to make fucking demands. Not after what you've done. Don't forget that Tino is always one phone call away from killing you."

"What makes you think he would?" Enzo stood, buttoning his suit jacket. "What makes you think he would believe anything *you* say? After all, you're a crazy, sick boy, who's been locked up in a mental institution, which we have proof you were in. You escaped and attacked Dom and his wife at their villa. Hit Dom in the head and kidnapped his wife. Then you threatened you were going to rape and kill her if Angelina didn't come here and bring you your brother, without mentioning a word to Tino, of course. Angelina had to save her sister, and I had to protect my own. Nicole is a Lanza after all. We had no choice but to give you what you want to save her."

Motherfucker. "Marvelous story. But didn't your fucking dog tell him I already left Italy so he could bring Nicky to his house where he'd fuck her mind and her ass every day until she had no choice but to become his?" I smirked at Lina. "I loved listening to their sex torture sessions. He did it in the room next to my cage. You should've listened to the way she screamed and cried and broke. Good job, Lina, choosing the right fucker to sell your sister to. Did you know he made her call him Daddy, just like—"

"If you don't shut the fuck up now, I'll be the one calling Tino, and you'll be silenced forever," Enzo threatened as Lina sobbed. "No matter what you say, he'll always believe us over you."

I sat and stretched my leg, making myself comfortable. "Be my guest. I was gonna pay him a visit anyway. You'd save me the trip."

Snarling, he got his knife out and his fingers curled around my throat. "Listen, you piece of shit, I don't have the patience for whatever fucking game you think you're playing. You're

going to tell me where Nicole is now or you can kiss your dick goodbye.”

I gurgled a laugh, spitting all over his face. “Seriously, Enzo? You think torture is gonna get me to speak?” I snapped open my jacket and ripped the buttons of my shirt to show them my body. “Look at me.” My teeth clenched at him and then at her. “Take a good fucking look at what *you* have done,” I waited until she averted her gaze while her tears flowed and then I stared back at him, “and tell me if a fucking knife is gonna make you win.”

“What do you want, Leo?” Lina cracked. “Whatever you want, just take it and bring me back my sister.”

“What do I want? You can’t give me anything I want. Not anymore.” I zipped my jacket up as Enzo had to let go of my neck. “But if you want your sister, why don’t you put that baby in my lap so you and that Domenico fuck can get on your fucking knees and start begging me to bring you Nicky.” I glanced at Enzo. “You too.”

He grunted, nodding. “Or...” His chin tilted up toward another one of his men, who climbed up the stairs like the one before him. What did they have up there that they thought they could have any power over me?

“Oooh suspense.” I snorted a laugh, following the path the soldier was taking with my gaze.

“Si, si,” Enzo said, so sure of himself. “Angelina, go back to your seat and enjoy the show quietly, would ya?”

I was going to tell him to go fuck himself and tell Lina to stay put because *I* gave the orders here, but I glimpsed the soldier coming out of the master bedroom, and I froze.

A feeling I was basking in for long months hour by hour, minute by minute, second by second, until I was so numb to I forgot what it meant snuck under my skin and settled in my heart.

Fear.

For the first time in what seemed to have been forever, I was afraid. The man coming down the stairs wasn’t alone. He

had Ravenna. Bound and gagged.

My fists clenched so hard I felt as if I was breaking my own bones more than they'd already been broken. The screams blared louder than ever, threatening to give me away. I needed to stay calm. I needed to show them I didn't care. If I made them believe she meant nothing to me, they couldn't use her against me. They wouldn't hurt her to make me speak.

But she meant everything to me. Every fucking thing.

Look away. Stay calm. She's not here. She's not here. How the fuck did they find her? The phones couldn't be tracked, and Nicky said she didn't tell Domenico where she was. Ravenna couldn't have been that stupid to go back to Taormina. I'd told the fisherman to burn the car and take her himself to Palermo, where I told Nicky we were supposed to stay. How the fuck did the Lanzas get to her?

The Lanzas having Ravenna hostage was the only thing I didn't anticipate in my plan, and it was about to ruin everything. The one thing that could bring me to my knees and let my enemies win.

I wiped my forehead with the heels of my palms and took deep breaths, my mind spiraling. Boiling, low growls leaked out of my throat. Nothing could contain the roaming chaos inside.

I'm fucked. We're fucked.

Once our eyes met, I had to hold on to the edges of the chair so I wouldn't just jump and snatch her out of the guy's grip. He forced her down on a chair and lowered her gag.

"Look who we've picked up on the way to this beautiful island. Doctor Berlusconi herself," Enzo mocked.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she whimpered.

Why was she apologizing? What did she do? "For what? What did you do, Doc?" *What did you do, Ravenna?*

"They had my father. I had to do what they said. I'm sorry."

What the fuck did you do, Ravenna? How could you? How could you?

I dragged my gaze back to Enzo, taunting triumph painting his fucking face. “So you got the bitch that helped you betray your friend and imprison his son, what’s that got to do with me?”

He laughed under his breath. “Don’t bother, Leo. We know what happened, how she helped you, and the crush that has been rekindled. *She* told us everything.”

“I had no choice. They were going to kill him. I’m so sorry,” she sniffled.

I couldn’t look at her. If I did, I’d lose it and risk everything. I’d lose everything, including the lives of the only people I cared about in this world. “It’s not my problem if the ugly bitch has had a fucking crush on me since junior high. I fucked her for what she did, and now she thinks we’re in love? The bitch is crazy. My cock wouldn’t move out of its socket for her. I had to flip her over and think about the gorgeous blonde tagging along to get it up. I don’t give a shit about your doctor or what you or anybody do to her. She fucking deserves it.” I could feel my heart shattering at the words alone. I hoped my hints were enough for her to know I was lying. But Ravenna was insecure enough to believe the shit I was only saying to protect her.

“Leo...please.” Her sob stabbed me.

“I see.” Enzo moved to her side, his knife in hand. “So you wouldn’t mind if I just do this?” He pointed the tip of the blade to her throat and slid it down her shirt along the line between her breasts, and then with one snatch he ripped the fabric with the knife, exposing her chest.

I shot to my feet, roaring. Instantly, the grips of his men held me in place. *I can’t. I fucking can’t. I’m gonna kill him. I don’t give a shit. I’m gonna fucking kill him for laying his fucking filthy hand on her.*

“That’s what I thought.” He smirked. “Dom! Get back inside. He’s gonna talk now.” He winked at me. “And if he

doesn't, you can have your way with his girl, just like he thought he can have his way with yours."

"You son of a fucking bitch!" I charged at him, but his men punched me in the jaw and guts and then gripped my shoulders, forcing me down on the chair. I jerked out of their hold, elbowing them in the ribs, but more of them grabbed me tighter, rendering me almost immobile.

Domenico strutted back in and bent down next to Ravenna. Then he smirked at me and licked her cheek.

Fire and blood. The Lanzas would be dancing in fire and blood. "Touch her again, and I'll rip your body to pieces they won't even know how to fucking bury you."

"Where is Nicole, you piece of shit? I won't ask again," Enzo said.

My gaze locked on Ravenna's, tears blurring both our visions, and a thickness blocked my throat. Defeated, I nodded once. I'd tell them where Nicky was. I had no other choice if I wanted to protect Ravenna. I couldn't let them hurt her. I had to protect her. She was mine. I had to protect what was mine. "Let Ravenna go, and I'll tell you where Nicky is."

Ravenna shook her head. "No, Leo. Listen to me. I'm not afraid of them. When you left, I wasn't afraid. I wasn't afraid anymore. I did what I had to do. What I should have done." Her gaze froze on mine. "Do you understand me? I'm no longer afraid."

I understood one thing. Ravenna had to be safe. Whatever mistakes she'd made, it was all for her family. She didn't need to suffer for them anymore. Neither did Nicky or the innocent life inside her. I had to protect her, too, and Niccolino, the innocent baby that all his fault was being the son of Sebastiano Bellomo and Lina Baldi. My girl, my friend and my brother deserved to live without fear or suffering. No more pain. Only love.

"Let her go," I demanded.

They untied her, and I took her in my arms, filling my nostrils with her scent. Then I devoured her lips with all the

yearning and passion I had for her. “I love you,” I confessed. “I’m saying it to *you* right in front of *her*, only to you, Ravenna. I love you.”

Her tears streamed nonstop, and she moaned. “I love you, too.”

“Do you hear this? Do you hear it, baby?”

She looked around her, searching for a sound in confusion. Then her head stopped moving, and she seemed to have heard it, too. The sound we both had been waiting for.

“I do. I hear it.” She smiled.

“You did what you should’ve done.”

“I did what I should’ve done.”

“Che cazzo?” Domenico barked. “You tell me where Nicky is right now or I—”

The sound of a plane landing on the island cut him off. He exchanged a glance with his capo I knew too well. I watched Lina’s sunken face. She had that look, too, but more prominent. That look that said, “We’re fucked.”

I smirked. Sebastiano Bellomo had arrived.

CHAPTER 29

Leo

I pushed Ravenna under my chair and limped up, snatching a gun from the nearest soldier as fast as I could.

“You motherfucker!” Dom pointed his gun at me, all the other dogs gathering on me.

I dragged Ravenna and ran to stand behind Lina and Niccolino before they could catch us, shooting the one guard next to them, ripping my fucking stitches, but I didn’t give a shit. “If you shoot me, you’ll never know where Nicky is. If you touch Ravenna, I’ll shoot everybody here, starting with Lina. You go explain that to Il Lupo.”

“Enzio, Dom, please, don’t shoot him,” Lina said, holding my brother tight. “Tino will never forgive you if either of us is dead.”

Gunfire roared outside. My father’s crew must have been clashing with the Lanzas’. That was hopeful.

“Che cazzo succede?” Enzio barged outside. “Nobody shoot! Che cazzo, Tino?!”

Silence rang among us, except for the sounds of my heart—and surely that of everyone in the room—and the distant talk outside the house. We were all staring at each other with anticipation and alarm, no one daring move.

My father was here. Whose team was he going to be on? Who was he going to believe? And what was he going to do to whomever he believed betrayed him?

Footsteps echoed closer, and Ravenna held on to me like a scared, little girl and I was the only man who could protect her. I’d protect her with everything I had. I was already prepared to die, and I’d die for her. What was a better way to go than saving the woman you loved?

My father's face appeared at the entrance, a grim reaper coming to take damned souls. I couldn't explain the way I felt when I laid eyes on him after all this time, after he took my own wife from me, after I watched him bleed in this very place. Hate didn't even begin to explain it, but there was something else beside the rage and the loathing and the grudge. Something I couldn't find the word to it, but it hurt more than all of the other vile feelings combined.

I wasn't prepared for that kind of pain. I'd always thought if I saw him again, I'd kill him and end him along with everything he'd ever put me through once and for all. Here we were, face to face, our gazes piercing each other, our guns pointed at each other, fingers on the triggers, but no one was pulling them.

Why wasn't he pulling the trigger when I could see the lies the Lanzas had poisoned him with etched on his face and I was standing, a living breathing threat to the family he betrayed his own blood to have?

Why wasn't I pulling the trigger when this man took everything from me and left me to burn and rot? When every time I saw him I felt nothing but loss and ache and betrayal? When he was everything I loathed in a man, yet everything I had to become? The fucking monster that destroyed his own family instead of protecting it. A fucking selfish coward that didn't deserve the air he breathed.

Why? Why could I not shoot him before and shot Lina instead? Why could I not shoot him now? Fucking why did I feel like throwing myself in his arms instead, asking him to stop this shit and be my fucking father again?

Was it too much to ask for a father's love and protection? Was it too much to seek acceptance in his arms?

"Put your gun down," he said, approaching quietly. "Angel, take Nicco and go upstairs."

My fist tightened around the gun. "Not before she confesses in front of you. You have to know the truth."

“I won’t listen to a single word when you’re pointing a gun at my wife and son. Now, put the gun down and let them go. Your beef is with me and me alone. We’ll settle this the way men do.”

“If I gave a shit about her anymore, she wouldn’t be alive now. And your *son* is *my* brother. I’d never hurt him.”

“Then put the gun down, Leo.”

“She has to tell you what she’s done. They all have to tell you what they’ve done. To me! I’m your fucking son, too! You should have loved me more than you loved her. You should have embraced me, not pushed me away. You should have helped me heal after our loss and used *my* love to heal you, not searched for consolation somewhere else. You should have been there for me, not fucking replaced me. You should have been *my* hero instead of playing that role with strangers. You should have seen *me*. You should have saved *me*.”

Ravenna was crying behind me, and Lina was joining the pity party, sobbing for me. The prodigal son that had never returned. The failure that destroyed those whom he dared care about because he knew deep down he was not worthy of their love. The psycho fuck that even his monstrous father couldn’t accept.

They said to look in the eyes of the wolf was to see your own soul. As I looked into Il Lupo’s bottomless blues, it was as if I was looking at myself in the mirror. I did see my soul. The darkness we shared. The pain we hid. But did he see me? Would he ever?

The wolf’s eyes glistened yet had never been darker. “I see you, Son. I see you.”

He reached for my gun, and I knew this was the end. Should I give it one last fight? Should I burn everything down with me? Should I destroy the ones I loved, punishing them for ever feeling anything for me I never deserved?

The screams were screeching as always, the urges flaring. My gaze yearned for one last glance at Ravenna and Niccolino. I shouldn’t leave them in this world alone. They

shouldn't be under the mercy of these monsters. I took a step back and aimed at Don Bellomo's head. "No. No, you don't. They deserve better. They deserve better than us. All of us."

"Don't do anything stupid, Leo. It doesn't have to end this way."

"It's the only way it can end."

"No, Leo, please," Ravenna gasped. "Please give him the gun."

"Just give me the fucking gun," my father said, and then he mouthed, "trust me."

"Tino, you can't kill him. He has to tell me where my wife is first," Domenico shouted.

I'm gonna silence this motherfucker forever. I aimed at him, but before I fired, a bullet that didn't come from my gun landed in his chest and sent him tumbling on the floor.

I looked for the smoke trail. It was coming from my father's gun. Il Lupo had shot Il Coyote.

CHAPTER 30

Ravenna

Twelve Hours Earlier

The idea that I wouldn't see Leo again shouldn't have been so hard to accept. Since graduation, seeing him again alone was a dream. But I didn't only see him. I touched him and I loved him. That should have been enough. I should have wrapped the past couple of days in a blanket, put them away and locked the memory up for good. I should have been grateful for the moments we stole from time. I should have been grateful for my safety and that I got out of this experience alive. I should move on and focused on rebuilding my family like I was supposed to do.

But I couldn't stop my tears all the way to Palermo. I couldn't convince myself to forget. How could I ever forget? How could I ever let go?

The love of my life was set on a destructive path because of what I'd done. I couldn't let him pay for my mistakes. He needed help. My help. Even if it meant I'd pay the price with my own soul.

He was worth it.

I asked the fisherman as he dropped me at the bed and breakfast if I could have a phone. He said no. Leo didn't give him permission to allow me one. I tried to reason with him and convince him it was for saving Leo's life, but he wouldn't listen.

I didn't blame him. He was loyal to the man who saved his sister, and I was an untrustworthy captive. I'd tried to run before that Nicky had to shoot at me to stop me.

"How long do I have to stay here?" I asked him.

“He said it’s not safe for you to leave before it’s all over. You’ll know when it is really over.”

When Leo was dead. When my heart was ripped to pieces with him gone forever.

I wept so hard the man had to hug me. He was so kind that he didn’t notice when I stole his phone from his pocket and slid it in my boot. One day, he’d have to understand I did it to save the man he was grateful to.

I simply couldn’t let Leo die.

The family that ran the bed and breakfast was very kind, too. They gave me a comfortable room, clothes and food, and said I could stay as long as I needed. I was surprised they didn’t lock me in. Leo was doing this solely for my safety. I was no longer a captive.

He trusted me now. He set me free. The feeling warmed my heart and encouraged me more to go ahead and do what I should do to save him. What I should have done a year ago.

I locked myself in the bathroom, called Don Bellomo and told him everything.

He FaceTimed me immediately, apparently to assess my body language to validate the credibility of my words. I told him the whole story again.

His face curdled the blood in my veins. The amount of malice and fury he harbored were undeniable and utterly scary. “If you’re lying, you’ll pay heavily.”

“I have no reason to lie. The truth grants my death, too, but I accept it. I accept all consequences, Don Bellomo. The only thing I beg for is to keep my family unharmed. The Lanzas are going to retaliate, and I know you want to do the same, but I’m begging you. My mother, she had nothing to do with what happened to your family. She changed her name a long time ago even before the gruesome murder. She wanted nothing to do with the Seppis. Please. She’s suffered enough.”

Without losing his scary face, he tightened his jaws, his eyes turning red. “I’ll send some men to Highland Park and Filicudi. Pray the Lanzas haven’t reached them already.”

A heavy sob escaped me. “Please, Don Bellomo. Don’t let them kill my parents.”

“You should have come to me a year ago. I could have protected you all then, but I realize I might have left you no choice. We’re all paying for our mistakes. You’re paying for yours, and I’m paying for mine. Text me your location. I’m picking you up before we go to my son.”

When the call ended, I cried my eyes out. Painful grief struck me as hard as it did when I’d lost my brother. I prayed and prayed, wishing on some miracle Don Bellomo could reach them in time and keep them safe. My life didn’t mean anything anymore. Death would be my salvation. But knowing that I’d doomed my parents, too, hurt like hell.

I dialed my father’s number. At least, I could warn him and say goodbye. “Papa.”

He opened the camera, a petrified scowl on his face. “Malyska...you shouldn’t have called. You should have run.”

My heart dipped as the screen went black for a second. Then when the light came back on, it was Enzo’s face that was filling it. “Buongiorno, Doctor.”

“No,” I said in defeat. “*No.*”

“Listen to me carefully because I have no time to waste. Nicole Lanza isn’t like Nina. If anything happens to her, I will avenge her. I won’t settle just for your soul. Each and every member of your beloved family will be on a long red trip with Il Coyote himself and then will be chopped to pieces with my own knife.”

“Why are you punishing us for your doing? I’ve done everything you asked of me and doomed myself forever because of it.”

“You helped Leo kidnap Nicole and put us all in danger.”

What the fuck was he saying? What twisted kind of story he’d invented now? Nicole and Leo kidnapped me. She was helping him, and they were going to kill Don Bellomo and then Don Lanza.

Or were they not?

Of course. Leo's mind was more complex to follow such a simple plan. I'd gained enough insight into his psychology to realize his actual course.

I could explain to Enzo Lanza what had actually happened to save myself and my family the coward way or I could keep my mouth shut and save the man I loved the way I should have before.

"Leo has Nicole held on an island. Her husband is going there now to look for her. If he doesn't find her, I have to go to that island myself with Angelina Bellomo and her son. And you."

"Why me?"

"You know why, Ravenna."

Because I loved him. That didn't mean he loved me, too. "Did he not ask for Angelina? That tells you I'm not enough leverage."

"We found the house you were hiding in. The little blood on the bed, too. We know what he did to you there. You're more than enough."

I swallowed. "If I come with you, what guarantees you're not going to hurt my family later?"

"Nothing, but I can guarantee that if you don't come with me or try to escape before I arrive," he put a gun to my father's temple, "your father will be dead."

"Don't do it, Ravenna! Just run!" Papa yelled in Russian.

Lanza smacked him on the head unconscious.

"No! Papa!"

"Where the fuck are you?!" Lanza bellowed.

"Palermo. I'll send you the location."

The call ended, and I moaned hard. I couldn't take this pain anymore. Sniffling, I called Don Bellomo. "Leo is on some island. Domenico is going there to look for Nicole."

“I just got the call from one of my guards there. How did you know that information?”

I told him. I told him about the danger his wife and other son might be in, too.

He paused, but I could hear his fuming breaths. “Listen to me, Ravenna. My son isn’t stupid. Nicole will not be on the island. The Lanzas will come and take you. You’ll do as their capo ordered. Don’t let him get suspicious, and I’ll be following you. I’ll be on the island at the right time. You won’t be harmed. Can you do that for me?”

“I...I...”

“I’ll take care of your parents. You have my word.”

“Okay. Thank you.” I wiped my tears. “What about Leo?”

“Whatever you do, don’t tell him I’m coming.”

“Don’t kill him, Don Bellomo. I beg you. I came to you to save him. Please.”

“Just like you trusted me and told me everything, you’ll have to trust me with what comes next. It won’t go unrewarded.”

CHAPTER 31

Ravenna

Everything was happening so fast. After Don Bellomo shot Nicole's husband, bullets started bellowing around along with the crying of Leo's brother. Leo grabbed me and pulled me down to take cover, sheltering me with his body while he fired his gun right and left.

Don Bellomo spun, pulling out a second gun, and stood in front of Lina, shielding his wife and both his sons. "This is for torturing my son behind my back, you fucking bastard." His arm stretched toward Don Lanza, who was on the floor, inspecting Domenico's wound with one hand, the other stretched with a gun, too. "Tell your men to retreat or you'll never see *your* son again."

"Cazzo?!" Don Lanza exclaimed. "Basta! Tutti! Subito!"

The booming of the bullets died yet it still rang in my ears, the air fogging with smoke and adrenaline.

"You took Mario?" Don Lanza fumed.

"Si, *amico mio*. Surprised? Does it fucking hurt?"

"Where is he, Tino?"

"Safe. For now."

"What do you want?"

"My family. All of them. The doctor and her family will be under my protection from now on, and you can kiss our fucking business and friendship goodbye." Don Bellomo pointed at Domenico's body with the gun. "And I want that fuck."

"He's my cousin, Tino. You already shot him. It's enough. I don't even know if he'll survive."

"I don't give a fuck. He doesn't get to live after what he's done to my own son. It's either him or the two of you."

“I didn’t stab you in the back, Tino. Your wife came to me, begging me to lock your fucked up boy up, keep him somewhere safe so he’d never come back, so *you’d* be safe. I was doing her and you a favor.”

“Enough lies!”

“She’s right here. Fucking ask her.”

“It’s true,” Leo said. “She set this whole thing up with the Lanzas. A favor for a favor. Domenico torturing me in exchange for marrying Nicky.”

Oh my God. I glanced at Leo. He must have been devastated. How did he remain in control all this time? How did he come face to face with Lina and didn’t murder her? Oh my God. Did he kill Nicky instead? No. Even if he wanted to, he wouldn’t have killed her baby. Was he able to finally take control of his own violent impulses?

“I didn’t ask them to torture Leo,” Lina said quietly. “I only asked they’d make sure he’d never come out. You have no idea how scared I was when I thought you were going to die.” Her voice cracked with tears.

Don Bellomo howled like a stung wolf, bearing his teeth at her as if he were going to tear her limb from limb by them like a real animal. “How could you? How could you?!”

“I was terrified of losing you again,” she said as quietly as before. “How could *you* not understand? *I’m obsessive to a fault and possessive as fuck, but I’ll always protect and care for you. Every single thought, every goddamned action of mine revolves around you. You don’t understand how deep you’ve carved yourself inside me. I’m ready to give up anything and everything for you.*”

Don Bellomo’s face suddenly softened by those words. They must have carried a certain sentiment to them they both related to on a deeper level.

“I’d do anything so I wouldn’t lose you, Tino.” She shrugged. “Anything.”

My gaze kept bouncing back toward Leo. I was worried all this affection his ex was showing to his father triggered him or

forced him to relapse. I held on to him, begging him to stay with me, to focus only on me. Perhaps my love for him could be a distraction good enough. Any impulsive mistake now could cost us our lives.

“She was just a kid. What’s your fucking excuse?” Don Bellomo directed his anger toward Don Lanza. “You didn’t do it as a favor. You did it because you wanted to. You gave my boy to Il fucking Coyote, knowing exactly what he was going to do to him.”

“Your boy stepped on my honor, Tino. No fortune could have fixed that. Family always comes first. You know that. We follow the same rules. You’d have done the same thing if the roles were reversed.” Don Lanza stood. “Now, I took your boy, you took mine. My cousin tortured him, and you shot him. We’re even.”

“Not even close, Enzo. Not even close. Your fucking cousin comes with me. If he’s still alive, his fate will be decided by Leo and Nicole. Remember my daughter he stole with lies?”

“The boy you’re trying to protect kidnapped her.”

“He never hurt her. He kept her at a safe place.” Don Bellomo glanced at Leo. “Good thinking keeping her with Arancia.”

“I did it so you could find her if I didn’t make it,” Leo said.

His father nodded. “She’s on a plane back to Chicago.” His head tilted toward Don Lanza. “And for kidnapping my wife and son, I should fucking kill you.”

“I only brought them here to get Nicole back. Your wife insisted on coming to save her sister. The doctor is enough proof my only intention was to pressure him to tell us where your daughter was. I’d have never let your boy near her or your baby.”

“You still used them as bait behind my back. You still lied to my face over and over and over.”

“So did you. You lied to me for years about your boy’s Russian girlfriend when he was betrothed to my cousin, and

then Angelina. You lied to me when you took her on her wedding night and brought her here, leaving your boy behind thinking *we* did it, letting him go mayhem on our men and operations, costing us millions. We can go on and on all night about the mistakes we've fucking made, but that won't solve anything. My son has to go home, Tino, and I have to live to raise him. We can either work something out to make that happen without any more blood or we settle it the best way we know how, right here right now, except it's not my whole family that would be in the line of fire."

Shit. Enzo Lanza was a firm believer in retribution. He'd told me once everybody had to pay for their mistakes. He believed what he'd done was right. Il Tagliatore wouldn't just surrender to Il Lupo.

Would Don Bellomo make the right decision and cease fire? Leo was growling next to me, scaring me to death. He could snap at any moment, and he was obviously not content with the outcome of the battle. He didn't get to kill his father or Enzo, and Don Bellomo would never let him take his baby brother away. I hoped capturing his torturer was enough for him to stop seeking a lethal revenge.

I couldn't lose him again.

CHAPTER 32

Leo

One arm in a cast, walking down the hall—my leg felt much better, and my other arm didn't need a cast, even though my fingers would never look the same again—at my father's mansion toward a room I'd once been lying in with gunshot wound. One I took to win the heart of a woman I realized now never belonged to me. "Are you ready?"

"How can I ever be ready for this?" Nicky said, as distantly as she'd been speaking since we returned to Chicago.

I stopped and held her arm gently. "Ravenna says keeping a healthy mentality and a positive psychological environment is crucial to the fetus's health. That's all you need to think about. Everything else isn't worth it."

"Are you for real? It might not be worth it for you, but it is for me. My sister has been locked up for two weeks. No one but Tino is allowed in her wing. The only time she gets to see her son is when he needs to feed. I haven't laid eyes on her since we came back. God knows what he's doing to her in there." Distraught, she peered at the room we were heading for. "And then there's him..."

"If you're not ready to see him, I can wait."

"Aren't you dying for your pound of flesh?"

Pounds. One wasn't going to cut it. "He's not going anywhere. Domenico is our prisoner until we decide differently." Enzo had to give him up in exchange for his son because my father wouldn't budge. "You have a right to his torture, too."

"Because Tino decided I'm now labeled a Bellomo?"

"Because Domenico fucked you up as much as he fucked me up. Whether you're a Bellomo or a Lanza that's up to you to decide."

She let out a long sigh, circling her arms around herself. “Will it be too crazy if I say I don’t want revenge anymore?”

“Ah...yes. Didn’t you tell me revenge is sweet if you live to remember it? We’re both alive, and so is he. The bastard survived a hit on the head and a gunshot wound. In all honesty I’m glad he did so I can take my time with him. Dying is too easy for the fucker.”

She just stared at me, dread and shame mixed together.

I rubbed her arm. “There’s nothing to feel guilty about. He didn’t feel guilty when he played you all this time. He certainly didn’t feel guilty every time he entered that fucking cage. He’s only getting what he deserves.”

She glanced up, her eyes glistening. “He’s still the father of my baby.”

“I thought we agreed some men should never be fathers, and their children would be better off without them.”

“Stop lying to yourself, Leo. You’re a mess because all you’ve ever really wanted was your father. No matter what you think of him, no matter how bad he is, no matter how hard you convince yourself you hate him and want him dead, you’re desperate for his love. You had a chance to kill him but didn’t because you want him to be there for you.” She shrugged in resignation. “It’s just the way it is.”

Her words felt like blunt daggers piercing me. My eyes lowered. That realization I’d made long time ago and the confrontation last week affirmed it, but as long as I kept it to myself, I could deceive myself into denying it. Hearing her say it that obvious and clear made it true.

I needed my father. I’d always needed his love and acceptance.

But I’d just have to live without them because Sebastiano Bellomo and I reminded each other of how ugly we could become. We could no longer exist in the same universe.

“Your baby hasn’t been born yet. He or she doesn’t know who their father is. You can choose a better father for them, Nicky.” I touched her belly, feeling a certain kind of joy I only

experienced with touching Nicco. “That’s the most precious gift you can give your baby.”

“You’re right. I have to choose a good father for them. That’s exactly what I’m going to do. As soon as you stop touching my belly. Can you not...do that? It’s super creepy, and I still hate you.”

I laughed without removing my hand. “I still like you.”

“Whatever. I’m serious, though. If Tino sees you like this he’ll divorce me from Dom and force me to marry you.”

“But I’m with Rav.”

“Uh...have you met your father? Do you really think that will stop him?”

“Jeez.” I yanked my hand away and lifted both of my hands in the air, chuckling. “Speaking of my father, how do you feel about him? Are any of the things you said on the island true or do you still wanna kill him?”

“The time we’ve spent together on the run, and the secrets that unraveled during, made me realize things aren’t as black and white as I want them to be. As my sister made me understand how, for some people, love could only be found lurking in the shadows, she made me see that she, you and even Tino, and even me, aren’t made of only light or darkness. There is no such a thing.

“I also realized love, especially the kind people like us need, can make you do the most twisted things you never thought you were capable of doing.” She glanced at me. “So to answer your question, no, I don’t want to kill him anymore. My sister *chose* Tino, and I have to respect her choice.”

“But she chose for you. She took that power from you.”

“Maybe. But once I enter this room, I’m having that power back. Whatever my decision is, it’ll be mine. *I* will get to choose this time.”

“You’re right. Good for you, Nicky.”

“You seem...happy,” she said as we continued down the hall. “Are you healing on the inside as you are on the

outside?”

“That’s a...very complicated question.” My bruises and festering wounds might have started to pale, but every single ache I’d felt in their formation was still there. I needed to see Domenico before I could even think about an answer. I needed to look my torturer in the eye and do whatever it took to feed the hungry screams so I could start to hear my own thoughts, not theirs. “I still have a long way to go.”

“Good thing you have a shrink for a girlfriend.”

I chuckled. “Fuck yeah.”

“How are you dealing with...you know...her fake last name?”

“I think I’ve proven long time ago I’m not my father in this matter. Sia was a Romanov, and I still loved her. I love Ravenna, too. She’s a Seppi, but she didn’t kill my mother. That fear of her last name is what caused the epic betrayal we’d fallen in. If it hadn’t existed from the start, none of that would have happened. But this is the Mafia. The world we live in is built on fear. That’s why I never wanted to be in it.”

“But you are.”

I shrugged. “We are.” And so when I entered this room, my screams would roam free and gnash at the son of a bitch who stole pieces of me I’d never have back.

I nodded for the guards to step aside. Before my hand touched the knob, Tino opened the door. I scowled at him. “Did you start without us?”

“I was tempted to. What took you so long?”

My glance fell on Nicky. She was fidgeting, her breath rapid. “You can take all the time you need. Let him suffer in waiting.”

She swallowed. “I just want to get it over with.”

“Va bene.” I gestured for her to enter first. “Make him grovel. Please.”

One slow step after another, she finally brought herself to enter the room where we kept Domenico, and I followed. Tino stood against the wall, arms-folded.

Domenico was stripped naked, shackled, the dark scar tissue the bullet left on his chest visible from here. No bruises or blood, though. No one had touched him yet. All mine and Nicky's as promised.

He didn't look at me. His stare was only on hers. "Baby."

"Don't call her that," I said without thinking. I found myself very protective of Nicky against my better judgment. One of my many impulses I had yet to control.

"She's *my* wife. I'll call her whatever I want. Whatever you've done, whatever you're gonna do, she'll always be my wife and nothing will stop me from having her back." He yanked at his chains, a scene that poured ice on the flames of rage dancing inside me, and stared back at her. "Nothing."

"That's not your fucking decision anymore," I said.

He glared at me like Nicky used to, with all the hate and anger in the world, only more rabid and vile.

"Not only hers either." I moved over to him. "How does it feel now, Domenico? How does it feel that *I* am the one out of the cage and in charge of your destiny, while you are in shackles, picturing all the sick things that could be done to you, unable to do anything but wait for them to happen and be over, only so you'd live another day and relive the same pain all over again?"

"I don't care what you do to me. Whatever you'd do, I've been through worse. The only thing that hurts is seeing my own wife standing right in front of me but I can't touch her." He kept his eyes steady on her. "Nicky, I know I hurt you. I betrayed your trust. But I never used you. I knew the consequences of what I'd done to bring you close to me. Still, I went through with it. And as I'm about to pay for it, I have no regrets. Marrying you, making you mine is worth every moment of pain I have to endure from now on. I don't care what they do to me. All I care about is that you know that from

the moment I saw you, I was truly and irretrievably in love with you. Everything I've done to make you stay with me might have been wrong, but it was the only way I knew how. I meant every single word I said to you before. I love you more than anything. We belong to each other."

She held her proud tears, glancing at the ceiling to prevent them from falling. Her lips parted with a moaning sigh. "When you care for someone more than they deserve, you get hurt more than you deserve. I wish I could give you my pain for one moment, not to hurt you but to make you feel how much you hurt me."

He pulled at the chains, and his knees hit the floor. "Hurt me all you want. Torture me for years. Make me feel it all until you've had enough. But then, through the pain, find your way back to me like you did before. Like we did together."

One tear fled her eye, and she looked away instantly. Her gaze landed on my father, but she didn't find the kind of comfort or support she was looking for. She sought my gaze, but that, too, wasn't the answer she needed. Her eyes returned on Domenico. And stayed.

My lips pursed, and I sighed in disappointment. Anybody could see her love for him didn't go away. It made me sad. I still believed she could do a lot better than Domenico Lanza. She deserved better. But I also knew beyond doubt what it meant to be unable to see no one but this one person and no one else, no matter how flawed they were or how toxic they were for you.

"My baby deserves a good father, Dom," she whispered.

Surprise struck his face like a heavy slap. No Lanza had known she was pregnant yet.

The chains rattled and rumbled so loud as he got to his feet, growling her name, and tried to reach her with all his might, his veins popping from his neck and arms. "Please. I'll do anything." His head whipped toward Tino in panic. "Did you hear her? You have to let me go. She has my child. Have your fucking revenge. Tear me to pieces already, but then let me go. I have to be there for my baby. No man will raise my baby but

me.” His bulging, glowing stare bounced back to her. “Promise me, Nicky, no one will raise that baby but me like I promise I’ll take care of both of you with everything in my power. All of you, just have your fucking revenge and let me take care of my family.” He fell to his knees again. “I’ll do anything. I’ll give *anything*.”

“Anything?” I dared him.

He gazed back at me, humiliated and torn, no more sickening power, no more gloating or mocking, only pain and fear. “Anything.”

I kept the eye contact until I was satisfied, reveling in the sight of him on his knees, begging like a dog. Then I peered at Nicky. “Do you believe him?”

She held my gaze for a few moments, and then she nodded.

“Well, I don’t, but I’m willing to test him to prove me wrong.”

“What are you gonna do?” she asked with a catch to her breath.

“I’ll take that anything he’s so ready to give...from his own flesh,” I said. “But don’t worry. I’ll keep his dick for you.”

“What?”

“I know you want him to live. You even want to take him back. Fine. I’ll let him go back to you. But not whole. He literally took pieces of me that I’d never get back. It’s only fair if I did the same.”

“But Leo—”

“It’s either this or he’s dead. Your choice.”

“It’s okay,” he told her. “I accept. I’d rather live missing an organ than leaving you and my baby behind. I accept. Just wait for me, baby. Wait just a little bit, and I’ll be with you again.”

My father held her arm, pulling her gently outside. “Andiamo, Nicole.”

“It’s okay,” Domenico told her when she wouldn’t move. “Just for a little while, then we’ll be together.”

She buried her face between her palms and dragged her feet out of the room.

I crouched in front of him and grabbed a fistful of his hair, yanking his head up so he'd look at me. "Do you know which part I'm going to take, you disgusting traitor?"

He tried to look down, but I forced him up. "Uh-uh. Take a good look at me. Take a very good look at the last thing you're ever going to see again."

His stare bulged as he seemed to have understood what I was about to do. He swore at me, his jaws clenching, spit foaming around them.

"That's right. The face of the man you thought you had under your mercy, the face you spat at and covered in blood, piss and your filthy cum, is going to be the last face you ever lay eyes on." I got out a knife from my pocket. "Not your beautiful wife and not your baby you'd live all your years dying to see but can't because I am about to gouge your eyes out, leaving you blind for the rest of your life, Domenico Lanza."

CHAPTER 33

Ravenna

I wasn't supposed to be around this side of the mansion, but I snuck in anyway. Leo had left with Nicole to finalize the hanging matter of Domenico Lanza. I wanted to be there for Leo after he was done. Violence could be a cathartic outlet for him, but it was also a lurking danger that could threaten any progress he'd achieved.

Counting the seconds, I hid, waiting through the agonized screams of Nicole's husband and her painful weeping as she walked away back to her wing, holding myself tight so I wouldn't let it get to me and blow my cover, until the door was open.

Leo came out, a knife in his hand, blood staining his face, hands and clothes. His father was waiting right outside the door for him with a towel. Leo took it from him and wiped the blood of the knife and his skin. "I'm done with him."

"Let's see if his wife will still want him now," Don Bellomo said.

"Oh, she will. Maybe more now. He can't be an enforcer anymore, and Enzo wouldn't make him his underboss after everything that's happened. She'll finally get out of the life like she's always wanted. She'll raise her baby safely and go back to school and even find a decent job."

"How much do you care about Nicole, Leo?"

My heart skipped a beat. I've been dying to know the answer to that question for so long.

"Enough to want her to be happy...away from us. Nicole Baldi might be the only good friend I have in this world."

"Friend?"

"Si. She's never been anything more."

“And the doctor?”

“Rav?” He grinned. “Ravenna is everything.”

My heart careened and fluttered in my chest. I wanted to be in his arms right now so badly.

“What are you gonna do with Li—with Angel?” Leo asked, and a chill ran through my spine. He’d finally called her by the name her husband gave her. He’d finally acknowledged their union.

“That’s between me and her,” Don Bellomo said.

“You’re right. She’s *your* wife and the mother of *your* son. But for once listen to me. You lost a wife before and cost a child his mother. Look what that child has become.”

“*You* are looking out for *her*?”

“I’m looking out for my brother. He’s so innocent, and he can stay that way. Don’t...don’t let him be like me. Don’t let him be like us.” He squeezed his father’s shoulder. “Don’t make the same mistake twice, Don Bellomo.”

Leo gave him the knife and the towel and turned, walking away down the hall. Suddenly, his father stalked after him and swirled him in his direction. Then he pulled Leo hard into his embrace. “You think I didn’t love you, but I do. I didn’t choose her over you. I never chose anything over you. But I needed her more than you did. I still do.”

Tears dropped from my eyes in silence. This father son twisted love was so dark yet so real and painful and worthy of compassion. I wished with all my heart these two could have forgiven each other and acted upon their obvious love neither was strong enough to live by.

“She’s *your* lifeline. I get it now,” Leo said. “Believe me, I do.”

“Stay with me, Leo.”

“You know I can’t.”

Don Bellomo drew back. “Because of Angel?”

“No, Papà. Because of Ravenna. I want to be happy with her. I want to heal with her. We can’t do that in this world. Our names have doomed us for so long. Leo Bellomo and Ravenna Berlusconi have to disappear.”

That was what we agreed on. The names Leo Bellomo and Ravenna Berlusconi would belong on tombstones. He’d be the man Don Bellomo killed to protect his wife and other son as the myth had it. And I’d be the Mob bitch who eventually got what she deserved. But to ourselves and our families, we’d be very much alive in their memories and their hearts, while we built a new life for ourselves in the Canaries. They’d find solace in our absence, knowing we’d finally found love and peace in each other away from all the blood and hate, where we’d start over with new names and professions, leaving our sins behind, moving only forward from now on.

“Is this your final decision?” Don Bellomo asked.

With a confident smile, Leo nodded.

“There’s something you need to know first,” Don Bellomo said, and my heart shrank. A secret revealed at a crucial time could be nothing but ominous. “Anastasia...she’s not dead.”

The world spun around me, and my knees gave. I held tight on the wall, afraid to fall and give away my hiding place. I couldn’t let them know I was listening, especially not now. I had to know how Leo would react to the news without knowing I was around.

“I found her after you shot her,” Don Bellomo added. “She was still alive. I helped her and gave her money to disappear.”

Leo faltered back a couple of steps, his breath catching. The he clasped his hands behind his head and pressed his forearms tightly over his temples. “Why are you telling me this? Why now?”

“You have to know that you didn’t kill either of your girlfriends. You can’t run because of it anymore. At the same time, if you expect to have a new life with Ravenna, you have to be sure you’re over the old one.”

Leo crouched down, his head lifting heavenwards. “Sia is alive. All this fucking time she’s alive.”

“I know where she lives and who she lives with. I can tell you, but only if you want me to.”

No. No. Please, don't. Please, don't take him away from me. I can't live without him anymore. He's mine. Mine. MINE! Please, Leo, don't. Don't ask. Don't leave me. Don't.

With every heavy breath Leo took, I held mine, my tears running free. *Please don't say it. Please.*

“I... Fuck,” he mumbled. “Well, is she happy?”

My head jerked with a gasp. I placed a hand on my chest to contain my galloping heart, feeling as if it was going to explode. That was the last thing I'd ever expected to hear from Leo now. He didn't ask for her address. He didn't want to track her down or pursue her or finish what he started. He only asked if she was happy. Without him.

“Yes,” his father answered.

Leo nodded once and rose to his feet. Then he nodded again to himself, inserting his hands in his pockets and started down the hall. “Good for her.”

“That's it?”

Leo glanced at his father over his shoulder. “Si, Papà. That's it.”

“Then I hope you'll be happy, too.”

“I know I'll be. I already am.” Leo rounded the corner across from where I was hiding, and I couldn't make myself invisible anymore. I needed him. I needed his physical touch surrounding me, and I needed him to feel me.

When he saw me, his lips stretched with a grin. I ran and threw myself into his embrace. He dug his fingers into my hair and took my lips into his in a scorching kiss. “Did you hear it all?”

I nodded, unable to hold back the tears.

“Do you hear this, too, baby? The silence in my head,” he said.

I heard it as loud as I heard the silence in mine.

“Do you still think I’m like my father?” he asked.

“No. I’ve always known you’re your own person, Leo. Anything I’ve said before was to wake you up from the delusions. You were never a clone or a replacement, not to me. There’s no one like you. You, too, are my everything.”

He smiled. “You were right about the void, baby. Just like you silence the screams, no one can ever fill that void but you. With Sia and Angel, I was obsessed. They were fantasies I created but could have never become real. Our bond is stronger than any obsession. With you, I’m in love.” He kissed me again. “Nothing could ever feel more real.”

Thanks for Reading, Playlist and Epilogue!

I’m utterly devastated and heartbroken Forbidden Cruel Italians series has ended. I’ve lived with these characters for almost two years, and now I feel like a piece of me is gone.

Each and every scene in this book broke my heart. Especially, the scene with Leo and Tino confronting each other. I put the words I’ve always wanted to say to my own father but never did in that scene. I hope you can feel it as much as I tried to make it reach you.

I was sobbing when I wrote the final scenes as well, especially the ones with Domenico and Nicky. The closure for that couple might be devastating for some, but I swear I’ve rewritten the ending, at least, five times, to give them something that could be interpreted as a HEA. In the beta version, two characters had to die, and a totally different couple was formed, but I had to change it so it wouldn’t be so overwhelming to you like it was for the betas. I hope it is satisfactory enough now.

If you missed the reading order and just started The Italians with Leo's book or haven't read the rest of the series, this is for you:

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About the Author

N. J. Adel, the author of The Italians, All the Teacher's Pets, Her Royal Harem, and I Hate You then I Love You series, is a cross genre author. From chocolate to books and book boyfriends, she likes it DARK and SPICY.

Mafia bosses, psycho anti-heroes, bikers, rock stars, dirty Hollywood heartthrobs, supes, smexy guards and men who serve. She loves it all.

She is a loather of cats and thinks they are Satan's pets. She used to teach English by day and write fun smut by night with her German Shepherd, Leo. Now, she only writes the fun smut.

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