

A man and a woman are shown in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The woman is on the left, wearing a black dress with red lace. The man is on the right, wearing a white shirt and a dark jacket. The background is dark with many small, sparkling diamonds falling from the top. The title 'THRONE OF DIAMONDS' is overlaid in large, red, serif font.

# THRONE OF DIAMONDS

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# THRONE OF DIAMONDS

EMILY BOWIE



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# CHAPTER 1

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**SAVIO**

I TOSS A SMALL pebble of concrete across the sizzling ground before it plops into the cool-looking water of the pool. I can hear a woman moaning and crying from all the way down here. My hand shades the sun from my eyes as I look up toward the second-floor window where the sound is coming from. I should have known when my brother, Dante, sent me a random address that he'd be up to no good.

This house looks nice, nicer than any of the ones his usual girls have. Dante rarely fucks for pleasure, he always has an angle. Not sure what this one is. From behind the house, I hear a car drive down the driveway. Its tires crush the pavement with a rush that has me staying close to the white siding so I can peek around the corner. I see one of our underbosses get out. *Oh, fucking Hell.* The first rule is never fuck with the wife of one of our own.

He stops and pulls his phone out to answer it so I run toward the back of the house and slide the door open to slip in.

On light feet, I head up the stairs. At least the woman isn't screaming Dante's name anymore. I glance into the first room, empty. The front door opens and shuts. My hand turns the next knob and I'm forced to watch my brother with his pants around his ankles, his hand covering the brunette's mouth as he takes her from behind.

Neither of them notices me as I step in. This is not good. Her husband can easily catch them. Then Dante would be a dead man. My brother never learns the easy way.

I tap my brother on the shoulder and grab the woman to cover her mouth. She screams against my hand while my brother quickly pulls out his gun. The cold metal pushes into my forehead and he lets out a sigh of relief.

“I told you noon,” he says, out of breath. His hips continue to push in and out, still banging the broad.

“Her fucking husband is home, you moron!” I whisper through clenched teeth.

His eyes widen and he pulls his dick out of her and yanks his pants up. “The party is about to start then.” He leisurely walks to the window, opens it, and looks below.

“We’ll break our legs jumping out of that.” I shake my head, hating being in this position. “You owe me.” I point a finger at him and he shoves past me toward the door.

I turn toward the woman who is now quiet, looking back and forth between us.

“I could be into twins,” she purrs, not keeping her voice down.

My muscles tighten and I glare at her. “Not twins,” I correct in a growl.

She shrugs like she doesn’t care. Checking over my shoulder, my brother is already out the door.

The husband’s voice carries up from the ground floor and the woman spreads her legs, giving me a smile. A scowl of disgust rips across my face. I’m probably going to get

murdered, and here she is, not giving a fuck about getting caught.

I open the door to look down the stairs, hoping for a clear view. Her husband's red, angry face is right in mine. His gun is pulled and he lets a bullet fly out of the chamber. I dodge it the best I can before I run for the window and fling myself out. Either the fall or the husband will kill me, and I'm liking my chances with the plummet.

As my body flies through the air, the wind whistles in my ears and my stomach drops from the gravity tugging me down without restraint. In a matter of seconds, I belly flop into the cold pool, its harsh impact hitting my body. Two more bullets rush past me from above. My lungs burn as I stay under the water, trying to look for an easy escape from the pool. My feet push against the underwater floor, propelling my body straight up, readying myself to jump out as fast as I can. Nobody shoots at me. I chance a glance up and he's not there. The familiar sound of a gun echoes again and the shot whizzes past my head as I round the corner toward the street.

Dante has my car running with the passenger door open as he presses on the gas. I race to catch up, my lungs burning along with my legs with each stride. Another crack of a bullet sounds. The familiar burning sensation of metal borrowing into flesh steals my breath. *Fucking Hell*. Using all the energy left in me, I grab hold of the door frame and launch myself forward, swinging my legs into the car. I land in the passenger seat as another shot shatters the back window. "You owe me a

new window!” I yell at Dante, who throws his head back to laugh.

“Relax. You know I’m good for it. There’s nothing like getting your adrenaline pumping early in the morning.”

I press my hand against my bloody side. “He saw my face, asshole. This is bad.”

My brother scoffs. “He’ll kill his wife before anything happens to us.”

“You can’t fuck with a man’s wife!”

“I just helped him see her for who she is. Relax. Romeo will never let anything happen to us.”

I shake my head. Our brother Romeo thinks we’re spoiled, believing we’re the brothers who never had to live through anything. No one knows of the trauma we survived because our mother hid her crazy well.



## Charlotte

**T**HE CRACK OF A bullet has my head snapping up. Excitement has my once-unmoving heart racing to a sudden drum that has me jumping out of my chair and climbing up the twelve-foot stone wall. I sit on the cement and rock searching for where the sound came from. Ripples in the neighbor's pool have me leaning over, trying to catch a glimpse. Another shot rings out and I see the bullet pierce the water.

I sit up straight, my legs dangling off the ledge, enjoying the show. A man dressed in a full suit jumps out of the pool and runs at breakneck speed, soaking wet. The black material of his suit clings to his body, accentuating his muscular legs. I can't help but think he would be able to run faster if he took off the heavy clothing. I catch a quick glance of what looks like his getaway car. From my vantage point, it looks like it's not waiting for him.

I wonder if he'll end up getting killed. I bet he'd be a bleeder. Another bullet whizzes past him and I jump off the wall onto the safe side.

I don't bother with shoes as I run to the front of our rented summer house. That car will have to drive past ours to make any type of escape. The grass in the front yard is soft on the pads of my feet as tires squeal around the corner before I see the car driving manically down the road.

I wonder who would miss these people if they died. I step into the road, hoping to get a better view of them. Another few steps and I'll have a front row seat.

I stare the driver down, our eyes lock, he doesn't slow. I wouldn't either if someone was chasing me.

The heat of the car pushes forward, coming right for me. My heart is thudding a hundred times faster than it ever has before. I sometimes imagine my own funeral and what everyone's grieving would be like. I used to tell my father about my daydreams, but it just made him sad and he blames himself for the way I am.

I jump out of the way at the thought of my father who would do anything for me. I could never do that to him. The rush of air pushes against me and causes me to stumble back.

"Charlotte, what the Hell are you doing?" Katrina, my mom, yells. I look up and find she's opened a window from way up in the house.

"I wanted to see what type of car that was." I shrug before placing my hand over my eyes to cast the sun out of them. Her look tells me she knows what I was doing. I can't get much past her. Within seconds, she's running out of the house and embracing me with a tight hug.

"Why must you be so fascinated with death? You're going to cause your father a heart attack."

My heart slowly steadies into its normal rhythm. "I didn't mean to scare you," I apologize and mean it whole heartily. I

wish I could pull away and study her face. Her hug shows me she was scared, but I can't say I've ever experienced fear.

“Don't ever do that again.” She pulls me away, but her hands clutch at my shoulders.

“I won't.” My forehead furrows as I try to decipher her face. Then I try to mimic her facial expressions.

“For a smart girl, you do some silly things.” She sighs. I'm beyond smart. I heard my psychologist tell my parents I have the highest IQ of any of his patients. Not that I go there anymore. I've been able to fake normal enough for them to believe it.



# CHAPTER 2

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**SAVIO**

“I WANT YOU TO go work under Demetri Sokolov.” I suck my cheek in on the right side as I repeat my brother, Romeo’s, words in my head. The Bratva would never accept me. I’m an outsider from the Italian mafia. There’s no love between us. The truce that exists between us is shaky at best.

My eyes widen at the reality of my situation. “For fucking that whore? That’s bullshit. It’s not like either of them is faithful to each other.” I fight the urge to glance over at Dante, who’s watching our interaction.

“That’s not the point. You disrespected a high-ranking member of our team. Last week you beat another underboss’s nephew to death.” *The dick deserved it.* I look down at my knuckles; I still have the bruises.

“No. I’m staying here. I’ll apologize.”

“This is an order!” Romeo slams his fist on the table. His face is twisted and strained, his anger turning his face a deep shade of red.

I cross my ankle over my knee, relaxing in my chair, hoping my heart rate will regulate itself if I give the illusion that everything is okay. “I’m your brother. I realize no one gives a fuck, but you don’t throw family out.” I could easily tell him that it was Dante, but what’s the point? I’m far too skilled to live with the enemy. I’ve been scrapping since I was old enough to realize I didn’t feel pain like regular kids did.

“I’m not throwing you out. It’s a good opportunity. More than what you will have here.” Romeo softens his tone, acting like he’s doing me a favor to get me more experience. My older two brothers, Romeo and Maximus, lived by the iron first my father ruled with. Unlike them, Dante and I were dismissed, forgotten. We were our mother’s problem, not our father’s. Our father had enough heirs, we didn’t matter.

Even when our older brothers were cast out from society, no one bothered to banish us. We were said to be too young and were *allowed* the freedom of staying with that monster they called our mother.

“Romeo, you’re the don of our family, the Mancini boss, you can do whatever you want. If my own brother doesn’t want me to be part of his team, why would anyone else?”

“How dare you say that to me? I have done everything in my power to make you who you are.” His nostrils flare and I force my eyes to hold his fierce, dark ones.

“Then let me prove myself to you!” I fight back. My adrenaline spikes and my muscles tingle for a fight. I hold on to the table behind me to keep myself from lashing out.

“You’ve caused too much damage. I’ve already abused my power to make sure you don’t get killed.”

“It wasn’t my fault. I didn’t know she was married,” I lie, and it’s a weak attempt to have him change his mind.

“She wasn’t just married. Her husband is the underboss to the don of New York!”

I already know I'm fighting a losing battle. My anger and frustration get the best of my tongue. "No one told me that. I would have just let her suck my cock; I would have never stuck it in her." *Which is what Dante should have done.*

"You don't get it!" Invisible steam billows from his ears. He blows out a breath and closes his eyes. When they open again, he levels me with a stare. "This is good for the family. You can learn his trade routes, and maybe we can strengthen our alliance with them."

"You could gain his oldest daughter's trust, and we could use that to our advantage," Dante jumps in to add his input.

My body freezes as I realize my brother may have an alternate reason for sending me away.

"I'm no fucking babysitter. I'm a fighter. If you're looking for someone to manipulate his daughter, use Dante. It's his specialty." My eyes dart between them.

"I'll save his girls the heartache," Romeo sneers, rolling his eyes.

My pulse relaxes. "Good. I don't need babysitting added to my duty."

Romeo laughs, his eyes twinkling as he realizes I was worried about an arranged marriage. "She's too young for you."

"Damn right. I like my women older, mature, and to know what the Hell they're doing. Every now and again one of them surprises me and teaches me something new."

Romeo shakes his head and the fight goes out of us both.  
“You’ll do it?”

I roll my eyes, knowing I don’t have a choice. “I didn’t realize I had a choice.”

“You don’t.” He shrugs, placing his hands in his front pockets.

He allows a moment for all of this to sink in. I stand, walking to Romeo, and shake his hand. Dante owes me a lot more than a new back window. I turn to my other brother and we give each other a half hug, half slap on the back in a silence exchange.



I SHAKE THE HAND of Demetri Sokolov. His grip is hard and the coldness in his eyes tells me that he’s expecting me to wince. I refuse and squeeze his hand just as strongly. “I’ve been told you’re interested in the diamond business.” He continues to stare me down. Neither one of us trusts the other.

*Nope.* “It’s hard not to be impressed with a man of your stature. You have it all: the perfect business model, beautiful wife, and wonderful daughters.” I try flattery to win him over.

His lips straighten. He’s heard the rumors about me. *Well, fuck me.* “I heard you like older women.” He lets go of my hand and three of my fingers throb from being crushed together.

“Not your wife’s age,” I quickly respond. Demetri is known for cutting out a man’s tongue for disrespecting his wife. I stare back into his eyes trying to avoid the grotesque scarring on his face. Every man has heard how he had gained those scars from saving his wife. This man knows no limits when it comes to family.

“You telling me my wife is too old for you?”

My eyes grow wide. *Back pedal! Back pedal!* “Everyone knows she only has eyes for you, sir.” I gulp. Me and my smart-ass mouth. I was only trying to butter the guy up.

He hits my back with his open palm. “I’m messing with you, kid. But you eye fuck my wife once and you’ll be blind within the hour.”

“Noted.” I give him a sharp nod.

“Eye fuck my underage daughters and I’ll bury you alive.”

I’m getting hot under the collar. I know better than to mess with a married woman—Dante is the one who needs to learn *that* particular lesson—and now that I’m faced with Demetri’s piercing glare, I’m struggling to remember why I took the fall for my brother. Where was past-self looking out for future-self? If I could go back and change the clocks on that one, I would. Or at least I’d stop Dante from ever leaving his house that day.

“Demetri...Sir...you don’t have to worry about me. I don’t do girlfriends; I don’t do relationships...” He’s scowling at me like I’m about to steal all the women in his life away. I blow

out a breath, my words not conveying what I'm trying to say. "What I'm saying is, my work is my life. I have no interest in fucking this up. If you let me prove myself, I will never let you down."

*If that isn't the truth.*

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two, sir."

"Why are you wasting your talent? By the time I was twenty-two—" I cut Demetri off.

"I want to learn and to work. The problem is, no one believes in me. My father had three heirs older than me. I was useless to him. My brothers and I were separated for a time, and I was too young to rebel against what was happening. Since then, Romeo has held the power so tightly in his hands he forgets he has people who would help him at the drop of a hat, people who would die for him. I just need someone to put me to work. I will work hard. I need someone to believe in me."

"I can see the dedication in you. I'm happy to give you the chance. Treat me well and I will repay it a hundred times over. Fuck me over, and no one ever lives to tell about it." The legend of Demetri's fiery temper is well known. No one goes against him. "I'm happy to have you in my company." His hand extends to shake mine one more time.

"Thank you for this chance, sir," I answer honestly. I'm more than grateful for someone to take a chance on me. I plan



to make my brother wish he would have done the same. I'm going to tie my rope to Demetri and live and die by his code. There's no turning back now.

"You'll have to earn your keep, and start at the bottom, like everyone else." Demetri points at me.

"I would never expect anything else."

He nods. "I need you on lookout for tonight." I follow his lead and match his steps as he walks away. We round his house and he lifts a hidden door from the ground. "I don't normally work from home like this," he comments.

I walk down the steps, and the smell of stale air hits me. I stay at the bottom, already understanding my role and unsure if this is a test.

A man sits in the middle of the dungeon-like basement tied to chains. Demetri walks up and punches him in the gut.

"Classic one, two combo." I hear a soft voice murmur. I walk to an opening behind the stairs that I hadn't noticed. A young blonde teenager sits watching with a bag of popcorn. She shoves the kernels into her mouth and large, puffy masses fall through her fingers onto the floor.

"Who are you?" My deep voice cuts through the air louder than I intended and she lets out a scream.

"Savio!" my boss calls, and I glare at the young woman.

"Fucking Hell," I mutter, dragging the girl up by her shirt collar. Day one and I'm already fucking up.

“Now, look at what you’ve done,” she hisses, giving me a menacing look while crossing her arms in defiance.

“Charlotte. You’re not allowed to be down here.” Demetri talks to the girl with a softer voice.

“Papa, I have to gain business experience somehow,” she pouts.

My eyes ping-pong between them. “Watch the prisoner.” Demetri points to where he wants me.

I watch, my confusion overwhelming, as he graciously leads the girl out, like this is a regular occurrence.

# CHAPTER 3

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**CHARLOTTE**

## 2 years later

**I** BLOW OUT A breath, hoping this will work, and my eyes trail the black-singed wall that was stained all the way to the ceiling from my last experiment that went wrong. My parents have long since stopped trying to fix my room every time I accidentally explode something.

Since the day my father showed me sparkling diamonds, I've been obsessed. I started with drawing them everywhere and progressed to making my own crystals with do-it-yourself remedies. Now I am on a mission to make real diamonds. One of these days, I'm going to get it right. My methane gas sits in the container and I have hydrogen plasma in another container. It took me almost a full year to find a black-market seller to get the plasma.

A knock on my door has me looking over my shoulder. "Yeah?"

"Miss Charlotte, when should I tell your driver you will be ready for your shopping trip?" My nanny, Polina—yes, I'm the only seventeen-year-old with a nanny—asks through the door.

"Won't be long now," I call out. I try to listen for her footsteps to disappear in the distance, but time is of the essence. If I don't do this now, I'll be delayed a few more days.

I just need to have the right amount of pressure to get a little diamond seed. I wouldn't have to risk my room with stuff like this if I had the right equipment, but my father doesn't believe in "fake" diamonds that are grown. He's old-fashioned and believes they should be mined from the ground to be worth anything.

I place my safety goggles on and tug an old baseball jersey over my head, hoping it will protect most of my clothing. This could lead me one step closer to achieving my dream and making my dad see the value in my ideas.

I pick up the methane gas as self-doubt creeps into me. *This isn't going to work. I should have done this outside. Please don't let me blow myself up.* I would like my hands to be steadier, but they shake with the beat of my speeding heart. I hold the methane gas with a special holder over a heater, trying to add pressure before it goes into the chamber with the plasma.

"Charlotte!" I startle, dropping the methane gas. The glass container busts apart. I turn toward my door, grabbing the fire extinguisher. Instantaneously, heat rakes over my back. There's no time to assess the damage as I press the lever and white chemicals coat my clean room.

"Charlotte?" Worry laces Polina's voice and she opens my door. "Oh, dear, you've been at it again."

I scratch at my head, my lips stretching horizontally across my face. "I dropped something into a candle?" We both know

it's a lie. Disappointment radiates back through her facial features.

“You're going to smell like burned toast while shopping. Now off you go and I'll get this mess figured out.” She begins to shoo me away.

“Polina, this is my mess. I will clean it.”

“I'm not giving you a reason to miss shopping. Your father will be very upset if you don't have a New Year's Eve dress. It's a very big night for him.”

I sigh as I lift the baseball shirt over my head and toss it in the corner. I was so close.

Annoyed that I fucked up, I take my time walking down the stairs, trying to figure out if I hadn't dropped the gas, would it have worked?

Entering the kitchen, Katrina, the woman who has raised me like one of her own, rolls out dough. Specks of flour coat her cheeks and hair. There's a twenty year difference in age between us, but even still, I feel like she's not just a mother but also like an older sister to me.

“Papa gave me his credit card and told me to go shopping.” I toss the piece of plastic onto the kitchen table. “Doesn't he even know who I am?”

She looks up and her nose wiggles. I have no doubt she smells the damage I've caused, but doesn't question me about it. “He means well. He wants you to be excited about the New Year's party, and this is how he thinks he can do it.”

I take a seat, looking at Katrina, the only woman I know as a mother. My biological mother was killed when I was too young to remember, but sometimes I think I remember the blood. I have visions of it while I sleep.

“I’m too busy to go shopping.”

She levels me with a look. I hate shopping, and everything my father thinks I should like. “You’re seventeen. If I sent someone out to buy you a dress, you would still hate it. At your age, I loved shopping and meeting up with boys.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m too busy for both of those things.”

Katrina puckers her lips and cocks a brow. “Last I checked, Klaus is a boy.”

“He’s my friend. My best friend, who I never get to see unless I have a chaperone.” I raise my hands. “Why can’t anyone ever see that I’m the responsible one? I should be shadowing Demetri.”

Katrina frowns, not liking that I just called my father by his first name. It has nothing to do with disrespect. If I take over, I can’t be calling him Papa in front of other people.

I’ve had this conversation so many times, it’s exhausting. Since I was old enough to know what my father does, I’ve wanted to be like him.

The danger lures me in. I was four the first time I watched my father kill a man. It should have given me nightmares. Instead, I grew to idolize him for always keeping me safe. My father refuses to see that I am a grown woman. I can accept



responsibility. I watch boys as young as fifteen get initiated and yet, I'm seventeen and feel trapped in my family home.

It's sexist. The mafia world needs to lose its old traditionalist views and have an awakening. The only way to prove to anyone I'm worth as much as a boy is to show them the evidence. It's how it works. I must prove myself before anyone will take me seriously.

I scoff, irritated. If I had a dick, my father would already be grooming me to take over one day. I never wanted a brother for this reason. I knew if I had one, he would steal everything that's mine. Sadly, I realized this by the age of seven.

"I'll go shopping if I can have some time to hang out with Klaus." *We have plans to make.*

"You can spend time with Klaus if he accompanies you shopping," Katrina sighs, caving to my wants. "You know the rules, Charlotte." It's the best I'll get. I guess my bodyguards will act as chaperones.

"What rules is she trying to break now?" my younger sister, Capree, asks.

She sees the credit card on the table and her eyes light up. Our mother snatches it off the wood and places it back into my hands before my sister can get any ideas.

"Capree. You're supposed to be at tutoring."

"It's Charlotte," she argues, wanting to be called by her middle name. Why our parents would give us both the same name is beyond me. It has my nose flaring. Capree is the

opposite of me, yet she mimics everything I do. It's like having a shadow that tattles on everything.

“Where is your tutor?” Katrina asks again.

“I convinced him to study in a coffee shop and snuck out when I said I was going to the washroom.”

The kitchen door opens and my sister's bodyguards walk in. She got a good two minutes on these new guys.

I walk to my mother and place a kiss on her cheek. She has bigger problems than me right now. Capree is like having three children with the amount of problems she causes.



**M**Y FATHER SMILES BRIGHTLY at me from the bottom of the stairs as we all get ready to leave for the New Year's Eve party. He believes I'm finally toeing the line. I'm dressed up in a hideous, childish dress because he refuses to see me as a woman, but I have a smile on. It's not the party that has me excited; it's the freedom that this party signifies. I would wear a paper bag if it meant I wouldn't be watched twenty-four-seven.

It would be easier if I had a close girlfriend, but girls at school don't like me. One look at my father and they're too frightened to come over.

Katrina walks toward my dad and gives him a kiss on his puckered cheek. She doesn't see his scars like everyone else does. She has always looked at him like he could raise Hell

and lower Heaven for her. I've never seen two people more in love than they are.

One day, I want that. I'm too ambitious though. I never plan to settle in my personal life or business life.

Capree comes out of her room and she's wearing torn jeans and a T-shirt. Our mother's eyes flare, but Papa distracts Katrina with a kiss and she relaxes into his side. Because Capree and Katrina butt heads so often, he is left as the referee. He's too soft on my younger half-sister. She gets away with far more than I ever have. She shines in the spotlight, for better or worse. It's unfair. Just like her trying to steal my name.

*It doesn't matter. I'll be the one to carry on our family business.* It's only a matter of time.



**W**E ENTER THE BEAUTIFUL banquet hall and our family stands in a line like royalty on a throne. People approach my father, never the other way around. Immediately, I see a few of my cousins. I'm the oldest by four years, but I love them all. My favorite thing is to be surrounded by lots of family. There are a few faces I don't recognize around the room, but that's normal.

My eyes land upon my best friend, Klaus, from across the room. If I'm honest, he's my only friend. I try not to smile in his direction because I don't need my dad embarrassing either of us.

“Savio!” My father waves over a younger man. It takes me a second to recognize him, but my lips automatically turn down in a scowl at the memory of him manhandling me that one day in the cellar. I turn my body in the opposite direction, hoping that with their attention elsewhere, I can escape and go to Klaus.

“Charlotte,” Katrina whispers in warning and grabs hold of my hand when my leg moves forward. I step back into line, plastering a fake smile on my face.

“This is my family. My wife, Katrina, and my two daughters, Charlotte and Capree.”

This has to be the rudest man I have ever met. He doesn't even glance in our direction, but keeps his eyes on my father. If he's being introduced to us, he must have climbed the ranks quickly over the last two years.

“Nice to meet you,” I say to be polite in hopes of getting away as fast as I can.

He looks as cold and mean as the rumors make my father out to be. He barely glances my way, his eyes flickering toward me in annoyance before he gives me a tight smile. Being the oldest child of the Pakhan, he should be kissing my hand.

I raise my hand for him to do just that. It's left in the air with his attention a hundred percent back on my father. *Ass kisser.*

“Now you can go,” Katrina murmurs into my ear.

I place a kiss on my mother's cheek and squeeze her hand in thanks. I slowly walk the perimeter of the room until I reach Klaus.

“Do you have everything?” I ask.

He gives me a smile and leads me onto the dance floor.

“*Well?*” I question impatiently. I gathered everything, he just had to set it up.

“It's all a go. I have everything set up just outside. Finding an extension cord that was long enough caused me grief, so I think I'm owed a kiss for all of my hard work.”

My heart flutters at the thought of my first kiss, or maybe it's the idea of finally being able to make a diamond. “When this works and we go into phase two, you will have earned your kiss.”

He chuckles, not discouraged. “I can wait for as long as you need.” He leans in and I can feel his breath on my neck. “But...I *will* be your first kiss.” The determination in his tone has a shiver ripping through my body.

The song ends and I step back to find my father's eyes are on me and Klaus. We should have waited to dance. Klaus and I part ways, going to our friends. When I reach the girls, my father stops watching me. I only come here because my dad wants me to make more friends. The girls all ignore me, only accepting my presence because of who my father is. I have nothing in common with these girls who only talk about boys and marriage. This is why I love my family. They all accept

me. I would much rather hang out with my cousins than be here, but this is all about image and keeping my father from watching me.

Four hours to go until I find out if all my research and calculations are right. At the stroke of midnight, everyone will be preoccupied and I'll finally be able to test my project.

When I turn eighteen, I'll receive a portion of my trust. It will help fund my business idea. Klaus doesn't have a trust to use, but I don't mind using my money. He does the heavy lifting when I need it. I would never be able to do this without a partner in crime.

Klaus catches my eye and I glance at the clock; a half hour until the countdown starts. I glance around and see Katrina with her sisters and Capree off with some of our cousins.

I nibble at my bottom lip, unable to find my dad. My eyes dart to the clock, impatience prickling my spine. I can't wait around until he shows himself. Slipping out of the room, I head outside. The air is cold compared to the ballroom and my skin immediately goosebumps at the change of temperature.

Klaus is waiting for me when I round the corner of the building. Here goes our first attempt, my second, at making an artisan diamond. Apparently, a microwave works better than the heater I had tried.

I clap my hands together excitedly and create our little concoction. "Here goes." This isn't how diamonds are made in the industry, but I think I can create my own recipe if I learn how everything works better.

Klaus's eyes gleam, but I'm not sure if it's because I could be on the verge of a breakthrough or if it's in anticipation of the kiss. I push down the thought, happy he could pull everything together for me.

Voices drift nearby and it has my muscles stiffening. One of them definitely belongs to my father, but I can't make out what is being said. Just my luck he would be out here too. I'm going to be grounded for a month if he finds me out here with Klaus.

"All you have to do is press start," Klaus says.

I glare at him, wishing his voice wasn't so loud. We've done too much work to back down now. I press start and the microwave lights up. Its low rumble steals the calm sounds of the night.

The crackling from inside the machine can be heard. "We're going to be so rich," Klaus says, his eyes focused on the microwave. A flash of flame dances inside and I step back.

"Should we stop it?" I ask. My eyes dart from the microwave to the direction the sound of my father's voice was coming from. At any moment, my father could round the corner toward us.

"Not a chance."

I rub my hands together, nervous for our results. More crackling comes from the microwave and I take another step back. The opportunity to stop is gone now. With little warning,

the box explodes. Pieces fly everywhere; a sharp shard impales the flesh of my arm.



# CHAPTER 4

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**SAVIO**

**W**E SHAKE HANDS WITH Peter Kenney, a greedy politician. He's shady as fuck and Demetri has him on payroll, adding fuel to why I don't trust the guy. The reason for our meeting is because of the guy to my right. The leader of the human rights activists who are responsible for all of our headaches at our diamond mines. Our solution should be simple. One lump sum payoff to the activist and he goes away. With the media coverage away from our mines, Peter will continue to help with our venture.

The mines have been closed for two weeks with all the protesting, and its coverage is picking up steam as more news channels pick up the story. We've paid off a lot of them, but the go-getters and keeners won't be so easily bought.

"This is a time sensitive issue," Demetri begins. "We need those protesters gone. If I have to, I'll send my men in there at night and gas them out." His eyes slide to the activist. I can't even remember this guy's name.

"You have one chance to have the group leave, *peacefully*, before it gets messy. A half a million dollars will be transferred to your bank account once we are back to normal operations." I add, not able to hold my tongue.

"We all want to make some money and enjoy New Year's Eve. Let's make this happen." Demetri side-eyes me for talking out of turn. I clamp my mouth closed, knowing I have enough blow and hookers to keep Peter under our thumb for life after tonight.

Everyone is on edge. Too much tension hangs in the air. The hairs on the back of my neck continue to crawl as I realize how dark—and *quiet*—the night is

An explosion has me jumping. It shakes the ground, escalating the tension in our meeting. I crouch down, bringing my gun out. Demetri shoots the activist, killing him instantly, leaving a gaping hole in his head. Peter returns fire, aiming at Demetri. The two of us unload our clips.

“Get out of here!” I yell at Demetri. Replacing my clip, I cover Demetri as he leaves the scene, not being able to be associated with a murder. Police sirens can already be heard in the distance and one of my bullets hits Peter in the arm. I could have easily killed him on the spot, but I don’t have time to get rid of his body. People in general get angry when politicians die for what they see as no reason.

I try to escape, knowing their reinforcements will be here in seconds. Red and blue flashes in the dark sky. The gun fight is over before it even had a chance to start. We don’t need a shootout with all the families inside.

I turn my back, shocked to see Charlotte standing wide-eyed in front of me. Her long, beautiful blonde hair falls loose around her shoulders. She’s looking shell-shocked and innocent. Dark red blood seeps down her arm, a shocking contrast against the paleness of her skin.

The crack of a bullet leaving its chamber has my instincts taking over. I push her down, my body covering her petite

frame. More men move in, shooting at us. No uniforms have reached us yet. Charlotte wiggles from underneath me.

“Get off me,” she demands in what I assume is supposed to be an angry voice, but it is the most beautiful angry voice I have ever heard.

I grunt a response while continuing to fire. *Doesn't she realize I'm the one saving her life?*

The other men see Charlotte too, making her the perfect target. I continue to empty my clip as the flashes of light come closer. I'm not going to have much, if any, time to leave the scene of the crime. Holding a gun with a dead guy at your feet is never a position you want to be caught in.



## Charlotte

I TRY TO COVER my ears, the deafening sound of the guns making them ring.

I can't move with the mountain of muscle on top of me. Klaus ran in the opposite direction as soon as he heard the guns, but I had to make sure my father was alright. It was a stupid idea to be out here at night, and now that I'm in this situation, even more stupid to run in the direction of gunshots.

My heart drums against the hard ground. This is going to put my research back a bit. I should have known my father always comes out on top. He's the smartest, toughest mother F-er I have ever met.

"Stop wiggling so goddamn much!" His deep voice startles me for a moment. "I'm trying to save you from death here. As much as I don't care about my life, I would like to hang around here on Earth for a few more years. If you get one scratch on yourself, I'll die tonight, because your father will kill me, so you better tell him that blood seeping out of your arm was doing so *before* I saved your ass."

I turn my head to look up at him. His voice has my stomach fluttering, and it has nothing to do with this being a life-or-death situation. His face is hard with sharp lines as he protects me. He yanks me up and pulls me around the building. My back hits the wall and all the air in my lungs is knocked out of me.

“You could be a little gentler,” I squeak with the limited air in my lungs.

“Shut up, let me do my job.” His condescending voice vibrates down my spine.

“I’m not keeping you here. You can leave and play Rambo while I slip through the back door.” I wiggle to escape his hard hold on me. I can see the exit door. No one has to know I was out here.

He turns and pins me with a glare. “You’re not leaving my sight. What the fuck did you explode? It’s your fault we’re in this mess.”

Hearing the hostility in his voice has me sucking in a breath. “You can’t talk to me this way.”

“Listen, little girl. I can talk to you any way I want, as long as I keep you safe.” I can’t cross my arms because his body is pressed hard against mine. No one has ever talked to me with such disrespect.

“You can consider yourself fired after I tell my dad.” He grunts, not looking concerned. “I’m serious.”

“Your dad is out there with one less man than he should have because I’m here trying to save your ungrateful ass.”

Guilt wraps itself around my ribs. *He’s right*. The pressure makes it harder to breathe.

Sirens scream through the crisp air as he pulls me from the wall and drags me around the building toward the side door I exited from. I’m shoved inside, into the hands of one of my

father's men. I look up and see a fuming bodyguard that was probably supposed to keep an eye on me.

I try to pull away, but their grasp is too strong. When I look back, my father now stands in the doorway in one piece. Relief floods me, even though I knew he would be alright. I expect my father's eyes to be hard and angry, but instead, his eyes brighten and his shoulders visibly sag. My father leads me back into the ballroom with the bodyguard trailing behind. The countdown for New Year's Eve is over and everyone is dancing. We walk toward my mother, who embraces my father. Both my parents give me a hug. Everyone is acting like my dad wasn't just outside in a gunfight. The room is oblivious to the warfare of the night and it has me questioning what happened. The pulsing throb in my arm is the only indication that what I saw was real.

My finger smears the red blood from my wound, intrigued with its color. The deeper the cut the darker the color. I've seen darker maroon blood before; my cut can't be that bad. Katrina's forehead wrinkles watching me, and I quickly place my finger in my mouth to clean my skin. She hands me a napkin to place on my arm until we can sneak away to bandage it.

My father's attention drifts and I watch a cop step into the room, trying to be discreet. Demetri dips his head, giving Katrina a kiss first, then me. "I will be back. I need to make sure everything is handled."



I'm standing in awe as my dad shakes hands with one of the cops. He looks relaxed and in charge and not a soul realizes the dangers that could have erupted into this room.

"We need to fix up your arm." Katrina touches my wound over the napkin. The small touch hurts and has me flinching away from her and toward my father, needing to hear what's happening.

My father frowns, the scars on his face looking more pronounced than normal. He glances behind him and the man who saved me is placed in handcuffs. I look at my dad, waiting for him to work his magic since it's obvious he's not the one who should be arrested. My father does nothing except tap the man who saved me on the back before he's led out of the ballroom, leaving me confused. He was one of the good guys, even though I gave him attitude.

My father must be waiting for the right time. I don't know why I'm worried. I'll see that guy around the house within a week, and then I can thank him properly for keeping me alive. Unless he tells lies to my father. Then I'll be true to my word and get him fired.

# CHAPTER 5

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**SAVIO**

I STAND IN THE courtroom as the judge delivers my sentence. Ten years in prison for that activist being killed. His family is outraged by the leniency of my sentence. They want me to rot and die in prison.

I'm not going to lie, it fucking sucks going to jail, but it's also part of my world. I accept the charges. It's better me than Demetri. He has a family, with daughters that need him to watch them grow up. I don't have that. It's an honor to take the fall.

I'm led out of the courtroom in shackles. The bus ride toward the prison is silent. My body sways with each turn of the bus. My fingers are clasped in front of me, the metal around my wrist biting into my skin.

I'm not sure if this is what my brother was hoping for me in terms of opportunities.

A few hours later, Demetri stares at me through the glass wall with the phone in his hand. I pick up the receiver on my side, waiting to hear the reason he came.

"You're a good man, Savio. I appreciate everything you have done."

I nod my head. There isn't much that can be said with all the watchful eyes and ears that see and hear everything.

"I'll have your salary saved for you when you get out."

I scoff. “I don’t want your money.” I never got into this lifestyle for that. The danger that lurks around every corner is what calls to me. This lifestyle is in my blood. “I would do it all over again if I had to.”

“I am in your debt now.” His face is hard and untelling. He says it like the thought of him owing me leaves a bad taste in his mouth.

I’m twenty-four, and am losing the last bit of my youth. When I get out of here, who knows if Demetri will still be in power? All leaders are prone to uncertain life expectancies.

Romeo strolls into the room. He wasn’t at the trail and I’m shocked to see him now. “We want an arranged marriage between him and Charlotte.” I read my brother’s lips, not being able to hear him clearly.

Demetri’s eyes widen with an evil darkness. Charlotte is his light and one of the few things he values over his own life.

“No.” I have no interest in her young, spoiled self. “She will be long engaged and married before I get out of here,” I comment, but neither man is looking at me. The air around me becomes stuffy and thick. I wouldn’t trust anyone around me. I’m too jaded to be married. I get a thrill out of hurting others. I crave the adrenaline I get from the first crack of bones or bloody scream of pain.

I just want Demetri to realize I’m giving him a large portion of my life. Being in his favor is enough for now. His body tenses, as I expected, at my brother’s demand.

“I always take care of my own,” he responds with passion. “My daughter is not for sale. She will never marry an Italian.”

I bite my inner lip at his rudeness.

“Savio will be well taken care of. When he gets out, we can talk more.” Demetri turns back to me, as if Romeo is not fuming beside him. The arrogance of the two men is clear and I know neither one will let this point of contention go.

“I’ll be in touch, Savio. You are an important member of *my* team.” The jab is intended for Romeo.



I CATCH THE SOUND of breathing behind me a split second before whoever it is forces themselves to be silent. I flip the page I’m pretending to read and slip my pencil shiv from under my book into the palm of my hand with limited movement. Demetri was able to get a razor blade to me through a bar of soap, and I have it attached to a pencil. It’s sharpened to a point. Soft footsteps attempt to sneak up on me. My fingers wrap around the pencil and my muscles itch to be let free to do what I’m best at.

My back is to them. I’m the new guy in town and this will be a way to prove myself. I didn’t get a comfy living section like TV shows lead you to believe. The human rights activist

was a cousin to some snotty judge, and now I have a price on my head.

I crack my neck with a tilt of my head, focusing on the sounds behind me. No one's connections can save me now. I'm known as part Bratva and part mafia. No one knows what to make of me so I'm going to have to prove my worth.

Before they can attack, I flip the table I'm sitting at in the library. I already paid off the guard. No one is around. These fuckers thought they were getting lucky.

The two men pounce, attacking from opposite directions. I jump over the table, sticking my shiv into the neck of the first guy, before I kick up and break the jaw of the second. The third one, I don't see coming. He stabs my left side and twists the homemade weapon. Fire burns into my stomach at the action, but I ignore the pain, pushing it deep down so I can focus on kicking his ass. A blob of jelly jumps onto my back and I flip him off, his back bends unnaturally against the table. The wood sheet cracks and I hold him down by the throat. Within seconds, I have three dead men in front of me. Looks like my fighting skills are an asset.



**T**HIS IS THE THIRD time I've been given solitary confinement in the last two months, which is a bitch. I blow out a breath. My work has quickly earned me a reputation.

I hear the whispers from the other inmates. “One kiss from the Angel and you’re not waking up.”

The newcomers always have something to prove. They think fighting me will be their ticket to respect. I have to watch my back at all times. Just last week I was jumped from behind, a trend I’m coming to hate. They cracked a rib before I shanked them. Problem solved for the moment, but then I had to explain my actions and accept the time added to my sentence. I’m now sitting at sixteen years and only a few months in. Apparently, I’m getting the Bratva discount on time because of Demetri’s connections. At this rate, I’m going to die of old age in here and I’m not sure how Demetri plans to get me out. He keeps promising me, but I don’t pay too much attention. It’s easier to not give in to hope.

As the years continue, Demetri doesn’t step foot inside the prison again to see me, but his missions still continue on the inside. Today, I turn thirty-two. I’ve endured eight years in this hellhole.

“Mancini.”

I stand, waiting for a guard to pass me a note or something useful for me to use from the outside world in here. Instead, he opens the bars to my room. “You’re going home today.”

The sound of metal panging from the other inmates echoes around the room and combines with the inmates’ hollers.

I’m not ready to leave this place yet. I should have another decade left from all the Hell I’ve raised in here. I follow the guard, waiting for the ruse to be up.



I'm given a Ziplock bag with my shirt from the night I'd been booked, a wallet, car keys, and my old clothes.

They lead me outside into the sunny day. I expect to be shot in the back. They'll spin it as me trying to escape, which is the one thing I *haven't* done in this shit hole. I turn my wrist over and the tally marks for each of my kills are bright on my skin. I stand still, waiting for the bullet to be placed in my back. *Cowards.*

The gates close behind me, rattling like the rest of my body. I can't keep the tremors away. Looking over my shoulder, the guards have turned their backs on me and I'm left standing in the parking lot not knowing what to do.

It's like I've been forgotten. I start to walk down the sidewalk, not knowing where to go, when a car speeds into the lot. I stop and watch Demetri step out with a smile on his face.

"Welcome back to the real world," he says, coming to me and shaking my hand. His other hand slaps me on the back and I have to fight the instinct to shove a shiv into his throat. *He's not the enemy.*

# CHAPTER 6

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**CHARLOTTE**

**F**REEDOM. IT'S THE ONE tangible feeling I have as I step across the graduation stage. My name is announced and I can hear my father cheering for me. His voice carries clearly to the stage and the people around them all turn to look at who is making the big scene. Katrina is beaming up at me, clearly crying with happiness.

*I made it!* Six years and I have a Master's Degree in Chemistry and Physics. I shake a hand and accept my piece of paper. My eyes scan the crowd, hoping to see Klaus in the distance. We kept in touch over the years and he's helped build my diamond company with me, the distance between us never being a problem, even though my father never wants me to say Klaus's name. He would rather believe I left the mafia world behind me and accepted the normal life of a university student.

I step down onto the first stair on the exit and finally spot Klaus way in the back, far away from my parents. I haven't seen him in person for a year and can't wait to hear about the new warehouse that should be completed.

My parents have left their seats, making everyone get up in their row, and meet me at the bottom. My father is the first one to hug me, followed by Katrina. My sister, Capree, is mysteriously missing. She's probably still sleeping in the hotel. My eyes dart back to where Klaus had been seated, but he has disappeared.

"We are so proud of you!" my father says as he squeezes me so tight it feels like my insides will pop out. This is the first

time he has made it out to my university campus. As soon as I graduated from high school, he shipped me as far away from home as he could. Me going to university made for the perfect excuse. I suspect he was hoping my thirst to become him would disappear with the distance he's placed between us.

"You're crushing her," Katrina reprimands, and I'm brought into her arms next.

Tears threaten to overtake my eyes. I hadn't realized I missed home until now. I've been so focused and driven to make a name for myself, I never had time to think about anything but diamonds.

"I've missed you two."

I want to ask how Klaus is, but after the New Year's party eight years ago, he's a sensitive subject in our household. I wasn't allowed to hang out with him and he began working for my dad shortly after that. He's been working his way up, and soon my father will be forced to see how talented we are together.

"Katrina has planned a huge celebration for when we return back home," my father informs me.

I give her another hug and hold her tighter. "That's so kind. Thank you." Katrina always thinks of everything. Even though we're not blood related, she has always loved me like a daughter.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Klaus in the shadows and his head tilts, gesturing for me to come and meet him. "I

just want to say goodbye to a few friends before we leave. Can I meet you by the car in ten minutes?”

“Take all the time you need.” My parents smile at me with pride in their eyes. My father places a kiss on top of my head. “We are excited to have you back,” he says before they turn to go wait for me in the parking lot.

“You made it!” I hug my best friend. He had said the trip was too risky with my father being here.

“I couldn’t miss it, no matter the risk.” He hands me a single long-stem rose and I bring it to the tip of my nose. It’s perfect. His lips descend down, trying to kiss me, but at the last second, I turn my cheek.

“It’s too risky to kiss out in the open,” I scold, looking around to make sure we have not been seen.

He chuckles, looking confident that we won’t be caught. “I’m going to ask your father for your hand in marriage,” he tells me. “I want to do more than kiss you, Charlotte. I’ve proven myself to him; he knows I would be a good match.”

Klaus has been talking about our engagement for the last four years. He holds me by the shoulders and my stomach dips with nerves. To be honest, I don’t think I want to marry anyone. Most girls my age are already married, but I’ve been able to avoid it because my father believes in education. Klaus takes my silence as a cue to keep talking, never asking for my thoughts. “When he sees our love with his own eyes, he’ll agree,” he continues. “If that doesn’t work, when he sees the company we’ve created, he won’t be able to refuse.”

*My company.* Not that I say that. I've done all the hard work, but Klaus has stayed by my side the entire time, supporting my ideas.

“My parents are having a graduation party for me when I move back home. Will you be there?”

“That's when we'll announce our engagement.” I have always envied his assuredness. He's always positive, never worried anything will go wrong. I can't help but have a list of every bad outcome possible.

“Stop worrying so much.” He kisses my forehead. “Enjoy your family. I'll see you at your party.”

# CHAPTER 7

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**SAVIO**

I'M FORCED TO COME to Demetri's house early. I loosen the tie from around my neck, not wanting to be around a large group of people. It leaves me open and vulnerable for anyone to take me out. *No one is going to try to kill me at the boss's house.*

"Demetri will be right down," his wife informs me. She leads me into their family room. "Take a seat."

"No thank you. I prefer to stand, ma'am."

"It's Katrina." She smiles before scurrying away.

I position myself so my back is against the wall. I have a clear view of the room and the main staircase. Movement on the stairs has my mouth drying as I watch Charlotte walk down them. She's all grown up, and nothing like the young version in my head. Her strides are graceful, and I quickly do the math in my head. She must be in her mid-twenties by now. *Too young for me.* But I can appreciate a beautiful woman. I glance down at my scarred hands; hands that only know how to inflict pain.

"You're Savio, right?" Charlotte's voice is soft and has my heart beating faster. *So this is what happens when you haven't seen a woman in eight years.* I blow out a breath, trying not to stare as I raise my head to look at her.

"Correct," I answer, averting my gaze. She's too stunning, and if I'm caught staring, Demetri will burn my eyes out. I've

never forgotten the warning her father gave me the first time we met.

She walks closer, her perfume coiling around me. I've never smelled anything so exotic in my life. Her presence looms in front of me as I try to ignore her, but my throat tightens from her proximity and I glance down, giving her a tight smile, hoping she'll walk away.

"Why won't you look at me?" She still has those wide blue eyes. My attention goes to her lips and I force my eyes back to hers.

"Pardon?" My voice is husky and unrecognizable to me.

"When we were first introduced at the New Year's party, I remember you refused to look at my mother or me."

"And that's the memory that stuck?" *I saved her life, and that's what she took away from that night.* I bite the inside of my cheek to refrain from saying what's on my mind.

She studies me and I'm forced to continue giving her my attention. It would be nice if someone entered this room to save me.

"I want to thank you," she says. "At the time, I was too young to understand the danger, and I know I gave you a hard time."

I grunt. "Looks like you outgrew your spoiledness in university." My hand touches the wall for reassurance it's there. Her body has trapped me and I can't slip away without having to move around her.

Her eyes narrow and she steps back, her warm honey scent swirling around me. The distance allows me to breathe once again, but it's just as hard with her damn perfume all around.

She scoffs. "I just thanked you. The appropriate thing would be to say you're welcome."

I gave up my youth and she wants me to say you're welcome. Coming here was a mistake. It's too soon. *Just say you're welcome and she will leave us alone.* "You're welcome," I comment, turning my attention away from her. I really do like my eyes and I don't want anyone getting the wrong impression here.

"Did you hear any rumors about this party?" She steps back into my personal space. I look at all the exits before I look back down at her.

"Don't you have anyone else to annoy?" Was I this annoying in my twenties? Her fingers walk up my arm and I flinch. I have nowhere to go. "You need to stop touching me."

She continues and my heart rate spikes. The last people to touch my skin have all tried to kill me, but I came out the victor. Her fingers walk up my arm and trace little circles on my neck. They dip beneath my tie. *Fuck, it's hot in here.* I fist my hands at my sides and my nostrils flare with each breath I try to calmly take.

Without thinking, I lose myself to my instincts and allow my anxiety to take over my limbs. I turn and push her against the wall, my fingers clasped around her neck. I have my knife out and it's pointing at her diaphragm.

Her eyes are large and it takes a second for me to register that I'm choking her.

*Fuck!*

I release my grip and she sucks in a breath. Her hand touches where my hand gripped her. There's a slight red mark, but nothing too noticeable. Anger ignites her once-soft irises, turning her eyes from a light blue to a deep gray.

Charlotte is much too sheltered. Demetri should have taught her some street sense. I could have snapped her neck with little effort.

"If the rumors are to be believed, I will be announcing my engagement tonight. If you ever touch me like that again, I will have my husband kill you." Her hand lands on my chest and pushes me before she walks away.

I find my wall and lean my head against it. My eyes close as I force my pulse to slow. I pity her husband, that woman is a handful.

"Good luck on your endeavors," I say with my eyes closed.

"Why would I need luck?"

Opening my eyes, she's stopped and has turned back to me. I can't seem to shut up around her. "I was trying to be polite," I drawl.

She tips her nose up and walks out of the room.

"Savio!" Demetri walks in as his daughter leaves. His forehead mars with a slight frown before his happy smile is

back on his face. “We have lots of business to discuss.”

He walks toward the china cabinet and takes out two short crystal glasses and pours each of us two fingers of whisky. I haven’t consumed a drop of alcohol in eight years.

I accept the glass and follow him toward his office. “You’ve changed,” he says as we both take a seat.

“Just grew into a new role,” I answer. The man who walked out of that prison is not the same man who entered it.

“I want to discuss your wife with you.”

I hold up my hand. “With no disrespect, I honestly wasn’t expecting to get out of jail for another ten years. I have the most gratitude toward you for my early release, but I’m married to the mafia. There’s no need for a wife.”

His lips thin and his hand strokes his beard.

“You are a rich man now. Men fear your presence.” He thinks aloud. “Every man needs a wife. They help to keep the humane parts of us alive.”

“I lost my humane parts the first month in prison.”

He chuckles, but I struggle to find anything funny about the truth. “There was a time when I thought I had lost mine too.” His eyes drift past me and a smile graces his face.

A knock interrupts us and that goofy smile is replaced by hard lines on his face. A young man pops his head through the door.

“Klaus, come in.”

No introductions are necessary. I remember this punk. I size him up, wondering why Demetri would have this man work for him.

# CHAPTER 8

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**CHARLOTTE**

THE INTERACTION WITH SAVIO unsettles me in an odd way. It's hyped up each of my muscles and I can't sit still. I watch as Klaus enters my father's study and nervousness settles into my already agitated body.

"Charlotte," Katrina rounds the corner and I pretend like I wasn't just trying to spy on what is happening in the study. She shakes her head and I know I've been busted. "Go get ready." Her hands shoo me away toward the stairs.

My fingers unconsciously touch my neck when I pass the area where Savio had his hand on me.

"Tonight is your night," Katrina reminds me from a few steps behind. Her eyes are bright and I wonder if she knows news about my engagement. I still haven't truly allowed myself to think about marrying Klaus. My thoughts tend to cover one step at a time, otherwise, it's easy to lose track of my goal. I just returned home and my diamond business needs my attention.

"Is tonight only going to be about me graduating?" I ask, knowing Katrina can never lie to me. She tilts her head with a smile she can't hide. It's her signature, *I can't tell you but you are right* look. "You know I refuse to pick sides," she scolds with a laugh. *Marriage could help...*

I step back and toss my hands around her torso. "I'm also getting engaged tonight, right? I'll act surprised. I promise." I laugh, feeling carefree. With Klaus in my corner, he will make

my father see the amazing work I'm capable of. Klaus believes in my business; it's priority number one. If I am going to succeed in this type of environment, I need a husband who supports me. It's sexist, but I can let that go when I know I can achieve great things.

She pulls away and studies me. "You're happy with an arranged marriage? This is something you have considered?" Shock resonates across her beautiful face.

It would make my business work so much better. I'd rather not marry, but I have come to the conclusion that marriage to Klaus is my best option for my diamond enterprise. If I came out and said all of this to my father, Klaus would be driven away. If my father believes this is his idea, then it will come to be, no one can stop Demetri when he thinks of a great plan. I'm not sure why Katrina looks so shocked.

I have to be the last twenty-five-year-old virgin on the planet. It's time I start my life, and this is a step in that direction.

"You and Papa know me best. I trust in your judgment." I hate manipulating my parents this way. If they listened to me better, I wouldn't have to go to these extremes. If my father didn't believe I needed protecting in all aspects of life, this would be easier too.

"Enjoy the party, Charlotte. We're proud of you."

I race up the stairs. Tonight is going to be perfect and I feel like I'm floating on air. I know everyone at this party. For once, it's truly about me and not my father's connections.

When I walk back down, the room is full of people. My eyes search out Klaus.

His shoulders are tense and it's driving me crazy not to go over and talk to him. His eyes refuse to find me like they normally do. *Can't he feel me staring?* I slowly work the room, making my way toward him. When he notices what I'm doing, he gives me a little head nod, telling me to follow him. Unlike his normal confident self, his eyes dart around, looking worried. It's as if we have switched places and tonight, I'm radiating the self-confidence he normally does.

"Charlotte, you look beautiful!" My auntie Aly says with a big smile as she pulls me in for a hug. My other aunties wait in a line, wanting to squish me in their embrace and congratulate me. I have to go through each of them before I get a moment to breathe.

"How was university?"

"We've missed you so much."

"Stop overwhelming the poor girl." They all talk at once, fighting for my attention.

Katrina comes from the Italian mafia, so it's not very often we get together with her side and the Bratva. The two groups are at peace, but it's pretty shaky. I feel like one wrong move and that peace could easily be destroyed.

Excusing myself from my aunties, I walk toward Klaus. A few steps later, a large figure steps in my way and I have to crane my head up to see Savio.

“Excuse me,” I politely say, with a smile on my face. Nothing is going to ruin my night.

“May I have this dance?” he asks, extending his hand.

I look to the empty dance floor, then to him and grind my teeth. “No one is dancing,” I reply with a hint of attitude.

“I believe we are waiting for you to start your party.” Savio is bold. Other than my family and a few close friends, no one asks me to dance. Even Klaus has only danced with me the one time. Savio is staring down at me with such intensity that I fiddle with the material of my dress at my hips.

I don’t want to. My head tries to tilt around Savio’s large frame to see Klaus. He interprets my silence as a yes and takes my hand. It’s warm. For some reason I was expecting it to feel like an icebox. He walks me to the floor and I can feel everyone’s eyes on us. The chatter is silenced before it picks up again with a softer murmur than before.

“Don’t be shocked if my father interrupts this dance,” I smugly say as I try to lead. His eyes dance with mischief before his firm body moves me around the floor. I have little choice but to follow his graceful moves.

“Dancing should be fun,” he says, and I “accidentally” step on his foot. He refuses to be discouraged and continues giving me dancing advice. “You need to relax in order to be elegant in your moves.”

“How does my father’s top enforcer know how to dance?” Annoyance creeps into my tone. He’s better than I am at

dancing. Klaus is glaring at me from his little corner and I have no way to get to him.

“Look at you taking an interest in me.” His deep, condescending voice is barely a whisper, and doesn’t match the fake happy expression on his face.

“Please. Everyone knows you took the fall for my father to kiss his ass.” His expression changes and becomes cold and tense, matching his tone from a moment ago. Our steps become more rigid with his hold tightening around me.

“I suppose my ass kissing helped save you too,” he scoffs and steps on my foot.

“If you relaxed, you’d be more graceful,” I mock.

He chuckles. “I didn’t say that to hurt your feelings. I’m sorry if I offended you. I didn’t realize you were hurt so easily.”

“Ahhh, a backhanded apology. Men like you are only good at hurting people.” His feet falter before he turns us in a circle.

“If you think about it, I must be very good with my hands.” His hand sweeps up my back, along my naked flesh. I hate the way my skin tingles from his light touch. I ignore it, not willing to give him any satisfaction or anything to hold over my head. Now my mind is thinking of everything his hands could be good at. I try to force the images out of my head before I blush.

His mouth twitches and I step on his foot again. “My father would cut out your tongue if he heard you.” I glare at him. He

still didn't answer how he's such a great dancer. "You must be as old as my father, you should know better than to talk to me that way."

"The eight years in prison must have done something to my boyish good looks if I'm now being accused of being almost sixty!" Savio's laugh is boisterous and gains the attention of the crowd once again as his body relaxes into mine. Instead of infuriating him, like he does to me, he seems to enjoy my less-than-friendly comments.

"Why are you smiling? It was an insult." His hand glides up and down my back, never drifting any further than is unquestionably appropriate. His touch is gentle with a slightly rough edge from his fingertips. I shouldn't be loving the way he's possessively holding me in his arms, but my breaths become shaky as a zap of energy swirls around me.

"Charlotte, while I agree that I am much older than you, I'm only in my thirties."

"Thirty-nine might as well be fifty or sixty." His hand on my skin is distracting.

"I'm thirty-two. Still a few years away from fifty." We have come full circle around the dance floor and begin another lap around. "Twenty-five isn't that young, you know. I would have suspected you would be married and have children by now."

My irritation slithers back into me, clearing my head of the temporary fog he created. "We're not our parents' generation. Lots of women don't marry until well into their thirties," I argue, allowing my feminism to come flying out.

“But you’re not most women. You are the oldest daughter of a very prominent man. Mafia princesses are often married, betrothed at the very least, before they’re nineteen.” There’s no heat behind his tone. He seems more curious than anything. I look away from him into the crowd. “I’m sorry if I offended you once again.” His breath dances along my neck and I shiver with delight. *What is wrong with me?* At least he looks sincere.

The song ends and the dance floor is flooded by people dancing. Looks like Savio was right. Everyone was waiting for me. I search the crowd for Klaus, but he seems to have disappeared within it.

“Thank you for the dance,” the manners ingrained into me have me replying. He lets go of my hand and walks off the dance floor, leaving me in the middle. *A real gentleman would have at least walked me off the floor.* Not a single man is brave enough to approach me to ask for my second dance and my irritation floods through me all over again as I walk off the floor by myself.

“You two looked cute.” I glance over my shoulder to see Capree talking to me.

“Oh, please.” I roll my eyes.

The motion of our parents walking over to the microphone has me stopping to watch.

“If I can have everyone’s attention,” my father greets the room. “Today is a very special day in our household.” You can hear a pin drop from the silence my father’s voice commands throughout the room.



“Charlotte, can you please come up here?”

I smile, dipping my head as I walk over to him. His top men are behind him, including Savio.

“Charlotte has worked very hard over the last six years, earning her Master’s Degree, proving she is just as ambitious as I was at her age.” He smiles down adoringly at me. If only he could see how ambitious I am. He always says the words then turns around and puts up obstacles at every step I take. “Not only that, Katrina and I are both ecstatic to announce our daughter’s engagement.”

I look around for Klaus. He’s in the back of the room. He steps closer and my smile stretches across my face until the muscles hurt. I walk to the stage and stand by my father, who gives me a nudge to go to the front, where I wait for Klaus to make his way to my side.

Savio steps forward beside me. I expect for him to tell everyone to make room for Klaus. This marriage will bring me one step close to my goal in life.

“Charlotte and Savio Mancini will be married this month,” my father announces.

My smile falters. Clearly, I heard wrong. I look behind to my father as Savio holds my hand. He places his lips on my knuckles and the room erupts into cheers for me, but the wrong man is holding my hand.

“Excuse my fiancée, her joy has made her words leave her momentarily.”

There is more applause and hollers as everyone in the room accepts the information. I watch as Klaus leaves the room, pushing people out of his way. I try to go toward him, but Savio tucks me into his side, refusing to let me go.

“Smile,” Savio snarls into my ear.



## Savio

CHARLOTTE'S BODY IS TENSE as I keep her in place. She's obviously surprised by the news, much like I was when Demetri informed me of our engagement tonight. I don't deserve her. I only know how to kill. I know nothing of loving a woman beyond dumping my seed between her thighs.

My eyes follow hers and I see that weasel, Klaus, walking out of the room. Demetri told me all about him after he interrupted our meeting. The only reason he'd had him work for the Bratva was to keep him as far away from Charlotte as possible.

Even after we walk away from the adoring crowd, there are still glances being cast in our direction. Everywhere we go, we have eyes on us.

"Let's give them one dance, then we can find somewhere private to talk," I say low into her ear. Her hostility vibrates through her entire frame as I try to lead her to the dance floor, giving her a moment to process the news, but her feet refuse to budge and she raises her perfectly manicured brow.

"I'm tired. I want to go to bed." The spark that is normally held in her words is gone. It kills a part of me. Charlotte is a breath of fresh air, one that I certainly don't deserve. I want to do well by her even though I'll never be able to love her. How can I love when I've never had role models showing me what it looks like? I glance down at my killer hands cradling her soft, innocent flesh.

“Come on,” I drag her back into the crowd. At least she keeps her fake smile on. I hate the look of it, but I know I won’t have to drag her out on the floor kicking and screaming.

We begin to dance and she steps on my feet with each movement she can. “I know you’re trying to anger me, but you need to eat more to do any harm.” My lips brush against her ear as I speak. It has my heart beat accelerating.

“This marriage will not be happening. It has to be a misunderstanding.” She sounds like she’s trying to convince herself.

“You better not be comparing me to Klaus. The man has no backbone. Anyone is better than him,” I scoff.

She glares up at me. “I’ve known him my whole life. I know he’s better than you.”

My hand slides up and down her soft skin. I’ve never felt anything so smooth in my life. “Where was he when I saved you? He ran away like a scared little boy.” She sucks in a breath at my words. “Ahhh, you thought we didn’t know. Your father knows everything.”

She studies me in a new light. “Believe me, he doesn’t know everything.” She rolls her eyes.

My lips dip, wanting to know what she’s talking about. She glances away and refuses to look me in the eye. For once, it’s hard to read her, and my body tenses as if it was jealous. Her imaginary shields are firmly in place and I wonder what it is

she feels she needs to guard so heavily. It only piques my interest more.

With each stroke of her skin, my body comes alive. I had forgotten what this feeling was like. I refuse to let it show. I need to stay in control, especially around her. She's delicate and needs romancing and protection. Nothing I know anything about.

I understand now why my brother didn't want me working for the family. I would have never had the chance to become anything there. We all have a darkness that likes to play and mine would have been caged had I stayed.

Much too soon, the song ends and I keep Charlotte's hand in mine. If I let go, I worry she'll run to her room and we'll never get a real chance to talk.

I lead her toward the outside garden that is lit with twinkling fairy lights that cast a soft glow in the dark night. We step onto a circular block patio with flowers surrounding it, making this a beautiful romantic backdrop.

Her arms are wrapped around her torso in a protective gesture. She's young and beautiful. *Much too young for me.* My hand tugs at the back of my neck. Marrying Charlotte is the highest honor Demetri could grant me and I'm not stupid enough to let her go.

From the edge of my vision, I spot Klaus sneaking around the corner. He freezes when he sees us and I automatically place Charlotte behind me. I don't trust the man. He would sell his own flesh and blood to get ahead in life.

Charlotte steps around me. “Klaus,” she calls to him.

I grab her wrist, twisting her body to bring her slim frame to my torso. She comes up to my chin and I tuck her closer. Her heart beats rapidly against my chest as I hold her and she struggles against my possessive hold.

“Do not disrespect me and your family by going to him, Charlotte,” I say in a low, gravelly voice that has me clenching my teeth. My eyes stay on Klaus and he walks in the other direction. “He’s not even man enough to fight for you. If I had claim on you from the beginning, I would have walked over fire and gone through Hell to keep you.” I look down at her and find her glaring up at me. “He knew our engagement was going to be announced at the same time I did. He stood in your father’s office and did nothing.” She eyes me wearily, not trusting what I’m saying. “I have no reason to lie to you.”

“You have stolen my happily ever after.” Her words tremble out of her kissable mouth. They’re so low I have to lean closer to hear her.

“No, I’ve only altered the story by making the happily ever after worth it.”

Defeat sags heavy in the slump of her shoulders and her downcast eyes. I want to see that breathtaking glare back on me. I would happily kill anyone who took that away from her.

“I suppose the next time I see you will be on our wedding day.” Her comment doesn’t sit right, and I tense up. It would allow Klaus to weasel his way back to her, and he will get no such luxury.

“I’ll see you whenever I want,” I announce, cocksure. The thought of not seeing her before the wedding has sweat dripping from my underarms. “Meet me for coffee tomorrow.” *Coffee? That’s what normal people would do, right?* I can’t believe that sentence exited my mouth.

“My driver has Sundays off.” She smiles triumphally. *Why is it so hot out here?* I refuse to tug at my tie that feels like a noose around my neck.

“Drive yourself then,” I say with a bite I can’t control.

She looks down, her body tense in my arms once again. “Real gentlemen pick up their dates.” Her eyes fly back to mine and I see that fire back in them.

This has nothing to do with her wanting me to be a gentleman.

I lean down, wanting to be surrounded by her light honey scent. “You don’t want a gentleman.” She shivers in my arms before she schools her features. “Now tell me the real reason why you want me to pick you up.”

She remains silent and I hear the sound of the patio door as it opens then closes. Reluctantly, I let her go and a few seconds later, Demetri enters our little silent standoff against each other.

“We doing alright back here?” he asks, his eyes dancing between the two of us as he searches for the reason for the thick, hostile air coiling around us.

“Charlotte and I are just making plans to get to know each other. She’s going to drive and meet me for coffee tomorrow.”

“Charlotte doesn’t know how to drive. You’ll have to pick her up,” he answers before she has a chance to say anything.

I watch as her small hands turn into fists. Her father doesn’t notice the hostility fuming from his daughter.

“Until tomorrow, Charlotte.” I step in and pick up her hand. Turning her small fist over, I kiss over her flickering pulse, enjoying the way it dances across my lips.



# CHAPTER 9

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**CHARLOTTE**

**S**AVIO FORCING ME ON a coffee date is impeding on my business time. I need to get to the new warehouse I had built while I was away. Instead, I find myself in Savio's new Mercedes.

“Must be nice to get out of jail and be able to buy a nice car like this,” I comment as my hand glides across the soft leather. He shows no reaction, much to my disappointment. “Is jail a pride thing you have?” This time, his eyes slide toward me for a brief second. “I suppose it must be. Go to jail and gain the Pakhan's daughter as a wife. Pretty good gig you have going on for yourself.”

He stops the car in the middle of a deserted parking lot. The buildings are all closed out, some of their windows boarded up. His silence only angers me, so I continue on my tirade. “While you get slapped on the back, want to know what I get?” I ask, rhetorically. He turns the car off and stays silent. “I will get ridiculed that my father didn't even choose a real Russian. I get an Italian whose family didn't even want him in their pack.”

He moves so fast I don't see it. I'm pushed against the seat, his hand firmly around my neck. His eyes are cold, hard, and full of death. He could kill me here and now and no one would hear. “You know nothing of my situation. You are nothing more than a spoiled mafia princess who has zero respect for anyone. I've shown you kindness. I will not tolerate disrespect.” The lump in my throat is hard to swallow with his

palm pressing against my trachea, but somehow, I force it down.

“You can’t scare me.” My words are bold, defiant, even.

“Trust me, if I was trying to scare you, you would know. This is me being nice.” He wants respect, but no one respects *me* in my father’s world. But when I turn from Charlotte to Charlie, I have an empire of soldiers willing to die for me.

He loosens his grip around my neck and sits back in his seat, his hands clinging to the steering wheel, his knuckles white.

“What are we doing here?” I ask, trying to break the tension coiling in the car.

“Get out of the car.” His words are clipped with a dark edge.

I do as I’m told, slamming the door after me. I really hate head games. I should be working, I *want* to be working, but I’m here instead.

He gets out and tosses me his keys. I almost drop them, having to bend forward to catch the clanging metal in time. “Today, you’re going to learn how to drive.”

My mouth opens and closes. There was a time when I begged my father to teach me. Eventually, I gave up. *Independence*. It’s the first thing that comes to mind. It’s a lot easier to sneak around when you can drive yourself.

I walk to the driver’s side, slipping in behind the wheel. “Thank you.” My words are quiet but genuine as we both settle into our seats.

He grunts, and his body leans toward me. I hold my breath, not knowing what his next move is, but his crisp, masculine scent wafts toward me and it's impossible not to breathe it in. My heart accelerates. His hand glides over mine and pushes my hand against the keypad to turn on the ignition before leaning back into his seat.

My fingers tingle with giddiness at learning to drive. I try to school my expression, but it's impossible. I press down on the gas and the car lurches forward and we're thrown backwards.

Savio's hand grasps hold of my thigh. "Brake," he commands.

I let go of the gas to stomp on the brake. We both fly forward, then back, before the car comes to a halting stop. My eyes are trained on the parking lot ahead, but my focus is on his hand touching my leg. It's hard to concentrate with the heat of his skin on mine.

"Press the pedal slowly, don't go over ten until you have a feel for the car."

My attention remains on his hand on my leg, even though I nod and turn to look out the front window. The pressure on my leg releases and I begin again, slowly. I circle the empty lot, making loops around the few cinder blocks scattered across the pavement.

"I have to admit, this is better than coffee," I remark, smiling.

“Not a coffee girl?” His deep voice sends a thrill up my spine.

“I’m more of a Diet Coke kind of girl. I never did learn to like the taste of coffee. And knowing the amount of flavored coffee cream I would need to enjoy its taste makes me shudder. I feel like I would be walking into a diabetes trap if I ended up liking it.”

“You’re comparing diabetes between coffee cream and Coke? You sound absurd.”

I glance over at him, annoyed. “Well, what do *you* like?”

“I prefer water.”

“Why did you want to go for coffee, then?”

He shrugs. “It seemed like a normal thing to do.” I want to ask him what he means by that, but his phone rings and he pulls it from his front pocket. “I need to take this. Park the car over there.” His hand points to where he wants it.

The car is still moving at a slow glide when he opens the door and walks out. It’s not until the door is closed that the car has rocked to a stop and I shift it into park. I watch his back, his muscles moving under his shirt as he walks away. His feet pace in a small circle with the phone held to his ear.

I open his middle console, curious to learn more about Savio. It’s empty. Not even a receipt or pen in it. Continuing my perusal, I open his glove box and a gun falls out. I quickly glance back out the window and find he’s still on the phone.

I've seen more than my share of guns in my life. I don't know why I wasn't expecting to find one in here. I pick it up, holding it in my hands. The handgun is bigger than the type I like to use. Looking back into the compartment, black leather gloves also rest inside. I wonder how many crimes this gun has been used in. I gather my shirt and try to rub anywhere I've touched before grabbing the gloves to place the gun back.

With the firearm safely tucked back into its hiding place, I look around. His car is spotless. Who keeps a car this clean unless they're hiding something? I almost laugh at the thought. Of course he's hiding stuff; he works for my father.

I turn on the radio, the silence becoming too much. How long do phone conversations take? This is supposed to be a date. After three stations, I find a song I like and place the car into drive, wanting to practice some more.

I weave in and out instead of going in a straight line, while I move to the beat of the song. This driving thing isn't too hard. I should have taken a car out years ago. I can't remember why I stopped asking for lessons in the first place. The song ends and I fiddle with the screen to find another song I like. My eyes glance up to check the space ahead and Savio's eyes connect with mine. They're wide and surprised.

Squeezing mine shut, I break as hard as I can. *Shit, shit, shit!* I hear the thump before I feel it and the car stops. My heart is fighting against my ribs and I don't want to open my eyes. If I killed my fiancé, I wouldn't know what to do anyway.

This is bad.

My one hand lets go of the wheel and I feel for the stick to place the car into park. My body shakes as I step out, the engine still running.

Savio is lying on the ground. “I’m going to have to call you back.” Relief washes through me when I hear his voice. He’s alive, for now at least.

“I am so sorry.” I bend down to see if there are any major injuries that need attention.

He rolls onto his knees, the movements not as fluid as they normally would be. Each motion looks to cause discomfort. Biting down on my lower lip, I hold on to his arm, helping him stand straight.

“I didn’t see you, honest. I was changing the song.” I close my eyes for a brief moment, knowing it’s a horrible excuse. I lift his shirt, looking for evidence of damage. Instead of bruises, I reveal a solid wall of muscles and hundreds of scars. I gasp and my fingers lightly trace one before he quickly brings his shirt down. “I didn’t mean to hit you.” I keep trying to search for any broken bones in his arm, but he steps away from me.

“You saying that me being dead wouldn’t make your life easier?”

“Well, it would, but I would never.” Killing is his department, not mine.

He scoffs, shaking his head. “At least you’re honest.”



Guilt eats at my insides. “Savio, please look at me.” His features are sharpened by the coldness in his gaze.

“I’m sorry.” I step back into him and go onto my tiptoes, placing a kiss on his cheek. “Honestly, this was the best date I’ve ever had. I don’t want this to ruin it.” It’s my only date, but he doesn’t need to know that.

“Typically, running over your date ruins the night.”

If he’s angry enough, he might refuse to marry me. This could work in my favor.

“What are you thinking in that head of yours? You almost convinced me it was an innocent mistake, but the smile that just slid over your face would say otherwise.”

“I get it if you don’t want to marry me,” I try to say all innocent like.

“Running me over isn’t enough to scare me away.”

I look down at my feet, frustrated at myself that he can read my emotions so easily. His pants are frayed with a large hole in his knee from the ground.

His fingers lift my chin up and he looks like he wants to say something, but he withdraws his fingers and goes to the driver’s side of the car. “I’ll drop you off at home. Work needs me.”

# CHAPTER 10

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**SAVIO**

**I** PULL INTO OUR warehouse to meet Demetri and find him in the boxing ring with a soldier who has no chance of winning the fight.

“Why don’t you fight someone who challenges you?” I call out. It’s been a while since I’ve fought and even longer in a ring. I’m used to the type of fighting that catches you off guard, where the only rule is to not get caught.

Demetri looks up and grins and the poor soldier slinks off the mat. His arm looks dislocated and needs to be set.

“We lost another buyer,” Demetri informs me as I wrap my hands. “When we find this fucking Charlie guy, I want him hung on chains for days. I want his death to last for a month.”

I step into the square. “You’re attached to the guy,” I tease. “A month’s torture sounds too nice for the Hell he’s caused us.”

Demetri steps in, attacking me, and I roll out of his path. “He’s making a mockery of my business.”

I dip under his punch, trying to wear him out. Demetri is old man strong. I’d hate to see us in a real match. I’m not sure if either of us would make it out alive. I kick, hitting his ribs, but he has enough momentum to grasp my leg, bringing us both to the ground.

“You bring me his head and I’ll announce you as my successor.”

I stop, stunned by his words and he takes advantage, his one-two combo lands a split second before his leg connects with my jaw and I fall to the ground. “Why the fuck would you do that?”

Charlotte already voiced my fear that she would be ridiculed for marrying an Italian instead of a Russian.

“You’re marrying my daughter.”

“You announce me as your successor and the Bratva will have your head, your family’s heads, and probably mine too. I know my place. I’m your enforcer. Don’t make us more than we are.” I didn’t even want to be marrying his daughter, but Romeo forced his hand.

I kick his feet out from under him and grip his neck. I hold strong, showing him what I’m capable of, but his elbow jams into my neck and jaw before he wiggles out of my grasp.

“I never had a boy.” He huffs. We’re both covered with blood.

“It’s still not too late.” His wife looks hot. I’m sure she has more birthing years in front of her.

Demetri’s eyes grow large, insulted by whatever I said, and charges at me. We pull each other down and wrestle until we both stay still on our backs, sucking in much-needed air.

“Feel better?” I ask.

“I will when Charlie is chained in my warehouse.”

“I’m happy to make that happen.” I lift my head and we both fist bump.

Standing, I wipe my forehead with a towel. “You know, your life would be easier if Charlotte married a Russian in your ranks.” I really have no sense of self-preservation when I speak. I should bite off my own tongue. Demetri’s eyes narrow and I can see I’ve offended him. “I mean no disrespect by it. Honestly, I only say this because I respect you. Charlotte is intelligent and beautiful. I am, in every sense, marrying up.”

He steps toward me, his voice low, “You have already proven to me you will protect her with your life. I know you don’t hurt women, even though you are the most ruthless man in my regime. She is as lucky to have you as you are her. If I ever hear of you questioning my choices, I will cut out your tongue. Do I make myself clear?”

“Thank you for letting me keep my eyes.”

Demetri’s eyes narrow. I step away before he decides I deserve to miss a pinky or some shit like that.

“I think I found a location where this Charlie guy could be holed up. I’ll go check it out and let you know if we need to bomb it or go in with guns a blazing,” I mention.

“Take Klaus with you.”

I spit the water I was drinking out. “Why? I don’t trust him.” I also don’t trust myself not to kill him.

“Neither do I. But if he’s with you, that means he’s not near Charlotte.”

I crush the plastic bottle in my hands. “I can have him disappear...”

“Not yet.” I give him a look. “I mean it. He needs to stay breathing.”

“I can keep him breathing.” I shrug, even though something dark and possessive burns my chest and wants me to do otherwise.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say jealousy was a factor.” Demetri fucking grins at me.

Crouching down, I dip under the rope before tossing my water bottle at his head. “Please.” I shake my head. “I’m not capable of being jealous.”

“I have to ask.” Demetri has never pried into my personal life before, and I worry about what he’ll ask. “Who was the last person you loved?”

A cold frost runs through each of my limbs. “My mother.”

“She lives, yet you talk like it’s the past.”

I swallow. Dante and I know the truth. No one has ever cared to ask. Everyone thought we lived happily ever after with our mother once our bastard of a father was killed. No one knows.

“She’s been dead to me since my father died.” The old witch only cared about saving her sorry self. She thought Dante and I cursed her, and if we were still around, they would want her head too, as they tried to eliminate our entire

bloodline. She did the dirty work for them, but we survived. Not that anyone knew or cared. So, maybe she was right.

“Should I send her a wedding invite?”

Ice runs through my veins. It's thoughts of her that help keep me in the darkest of states. I had to go so deep I forgot what death tasted like. It was the only way for me to survive jail. “I don't fucking care. Just don't sit her near me.” The need to spill blood pools in my nerves. I've always preferred to channel my rage into something useful.

Klaus walks in and I consider what pain I could inflict on him while keeping him functional. He gives me a strange look, but ignores me.

“You make it easy to read your mind,” Demetri says, low enough for only me to hear. Raising his voice, he continues, “Klaus, go with Savio, I have a job for the two of you.”



# CHAPTER 11

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**CHARLOTTE**

I WALK INTO MY meeting with sky-high black boots, jean shorts, a tank top, and a large, long sweater that continues to slip off my shoulders. The boots allow me to hide a few extra knives and my guns are concealed at the back of my shorts.

My security is behind me as I enter the grand building. The diamond business no longer exists in shady back rooms. It's out in the open under the guise of shell companies. This is my first in-person meeting. Klaus was supposed to be here, but he's currently with Savio trying to find me. Not that he knows that.

I search the doors for the right room number and when I find it, I walk right in like I own the place. A surprised, large man sits behind a desk. His eyes do a quick once-over and an evil gleam lifts his smirk into place.

“What can I do for you, darling?” He licks his lips, his eyes lighting. I can only imagine the perverted things he's thinking.

He stands and I quickly toss my ninja star at him. It catches the sleeve of his jacket, and sinks into the wall behind him. *I have his attention now.* If I was an inch farther, I would have missed entirely. My head is light and I'm nauseous.

“It's Charlie, sit back down.” I introduce myself; my voice is steadier than my insides.

His eyes widen with shock. *It pleases me.* The man in front of me is forced to remove his suit jacket and lowers to his

chair. “Charlie, you are a day early.”

“Here, I thought tomorrow would be a day late as I heard you are meeting with Demetri tonight. I thought we had a deal?”

“The Pakhan’s diamonds are majestic beauties. You can’t blame a man for wanting to know all his options.”

“Mine have better clarity and higher carat for the same cost as one of his small ones. I thought you were a man who knew value?”

“The Pakhan and my business go way back.” He steepled his fingers, refusing to look intimidated by me.

I’m sweating, not confident in my skills. I expected Klaus to have my back, and once again, he’s not here when I need him. I half expected for this man to instantly recognize me. My fingers have a slight tremor from my nerves. I need to make this meeting short and sweet or he’ll see right through me.

I toss a velvet bag onto the desktop. “We never get delays because of transportation, and people like conflict-free diamonds now. Check them out.”

“Why don’t you sit on my lap and show me what I’m supposed to be looking at?”

My eyes narrow and my heart rate spikes. “If I walk behind that desk, it’ll be to stab your dick.”

He angrily shoves himself to his feet and I roll my eyes. I step closer and his hand touches the bag of diamonds. His reflexes are slow and his attention is on stealing my diamonds.

I stab my knife through the offending appendage and take the velvet bag back.

“I suggest you tell Demetri why your hand is injured when he asks and see who is kinder. This is your one and only chance to be a buyer of mine.”

“Of course, I want yours,” he spews, his forehead sweating from the pain in his hand. But he hasn’t attempted to pull the knife out. Smart man.

“I expect the money wired to me first, then you will find your precious diamonds in your safe under this desk.”

He glances down, his eyes wide. “Yes, I know it’s there, and I know the code.” I wink.

“How do I know you’re not screwing me?” he asks.

“You mean like you wanted to do to me?” A half smile emerges on my face. “You don’t. But you can’t stand knowing all of your competitors are going to me, and you won’t have the upper hand anymore.”

“You will have the money within the hour,” he wheezes.

I pivot on my heels and walk out the door. I just won my father’s third top diamond buyer. It won’t break his empire but it sure as heck will have Charlie noticed.

My security follows me and it’s only once I’ve reached the safety of my blacked-out SUV that I fold in on myself. My body shakes and I can’t breathe.

I wish I could tell Katrina. She would have been so proud of me. For the first time in my life, I feel like a badass, like the stories of her in her younger days.

My body shakes from the adrenaline rushing in and I need to feel this again. Sitting up, I laugh, a crazy, manic sound, and throw my head back. I did it!

“Joe, take us out of the city. I’m going to practice driving today.”

My security looks into his rearview mirror at me, his lips curving up to mirror mine. “It would be my pleasure, Charlie.”



**M**Y FATHER GETS CLOSER and closer to finding out the truth each day. I wish he would come out and ask me. I want to tell him the truth. I *try*, he just never listens, hearing what he wants instead. If my father wasn’t so blind, he would already know our location and immediately know it has to be me.

I look over my shoulder from pouring wine for Savio and me. Through the doorway, I can see him standing with his back to the wall, his eyes sweeping around the room, his expression hard. Savio smells blood, he knows he’s close to our trail. Klaus had to lead them away earlier today, but he can only do so much. I have to distract Savio until I know how to announce my side of our diamond empire.

I blow out a breath as I walk into our living room with a drink in both hands. With me being the so-called Bratva

Princess, and him being my dad's ass kisser, I'm shocked that Savio accepted my invite. But the look on his face tells me he was expecting more people around. My parents are out for the evening and he and I are the only ones in the dimly lit house.

"Where is your nanny tonight?" he asks, looking around the quiet, empty house. His implication that I, a grown woman, would still have one irritates the shit out of me. I hand him his glass.

"She's out accompanying Capree tonight. Chaperone is the more accurate title. I think she outgrew her nanny title when I was ten." I take a sip of my wine and watch him over the glass rim. His expression doesn't move but his eyes dance knowing he struck a nerve.

I can only imagine what I look like to him. He's had this exciting life of murdering people in jail and dealing with mafia life stuff, while I look like a pampered, spoiled adult, who didn't even know how to drive until a day ago.

Savio clears his throat. He walks around the room, farther away from me, but I notice he keeps his back to a wall at all times. "Last I checked, we're not married. It would make sense for the nanny to be here." I hadn't expected Savio to be the respectable type.

"You have great observation skills." I laugh and try to keep my nerves calm. At the best of times, I find myself socially awkward. I know how to take charge and build something from the bottom up, sure, yet, I have a hard time holding a

conversation with a man. I never needed those skills. I'm a horrible flirt because I don't know what I'm doing.

"I shouldn't be here." He arches a brow as if he's asking me a question, holding himself with confidence. Even his casual attire makes him look powerful, with the way his jeans hug his muscular thighs and the way his long-sleeve shirt clings to every crest and valley of his torso.

He steps away from the wall and closer to me. Our eyes are locked, and I find it impossible to remove myself from his orbit. I must look like a caged animal who's too scared to realize there are no metal bars keeping it in.

"You know where the door is. You can leave if I make you uncomfortable."

He takes my hand, his thumb tracing a smooth circle over my palm. His lips purse for a second before he takes a sip of his wine.

I slip my hand from his and force myself to look away. The way he's watching me has my stomach fluttering. His eyes, although cold and hard, have a glint that makes me feel like he's digging for information he'll never get. If I can wrap Savio around my finger, I can control him. I see how my father will do anything for Katrina. He may rule the Bratva, but she holds all the power.

"Your mother told me you took a car out to practice driving earlier today." Now that I have had a taste of driving, I want more. I can't wait to get behind the wheel again.



“Did she?” Him asking about me shouldn’t warm my heart. I push down those feelings and remind myself this is a good thing. It’s one step closer to having him tell me what he knows and me pushing them further away from the truth. When I reveal myself, I have to be successful enough that my father will see my full potential and be proud to have me as his daughter. He never had a boy and I have to prove to everyone that Demetri never needed one. “I didn’t even run anyone over this time.”

“I’m beginning to suspect that you running me over, perhaps, wasn’t a driving mistake.”

“You think I did it on purpose?” I didn’t and I don’t know a single person who would say that aloud, even if they thought it to be true.

“I have the bruise to prove it,” he states nonchalantly.

“No, you don’t. I checked you over.” My eyes flick over him and I wish he wasn’t so good looking. It’s criminal.

“All you need to do is flip my shirt up and you would see it.” *Is that what he wants?* Or does he think I won’t do it?

Being brave, I walk toward him, and my fingers clench the hem of his shirt. I steady my breath as I pull him closer, trying to be all flirty-like. I bring the shirt up and find white, pink, and red scars that jet out of his skin. The new and old jagged lines tell the real story of his prison days. Guilt ripples through my stomach, tightening, as I realize I was glorifying his time he spent in jail. My fingertips trail over his hard planes until they meet the dark bruise he is talking about. An electrifying

crackle envelops my heart. It's no wonder my father chose him as his top enforcer. I couldn't imagine a life so violent. It breaks my heart that men are forced into situations that leave them no other choice but this way of life.

The room closes in on us and the air becomes thick. My fingers feather over another of his scars. He clears his throat and the sound draws my attention up to meet his gaze as he peers down and his eyes bore into me. Quickly, I remove my hand from his skin, dropping his shirt back into place.

"How do I know I did this and you didn't get it in a fight?" I hesitantly ask. Our bodies are so close we almost touch with each rise and fall of my chest.

"Is that why you made that face? You worried about me hurting?" His voice is low, his breath hot against my skin.

"I know you can handle your own. Though, I don't understand why anyone would want that life." I take a sip of my drink, hoping the cold liquid will cool me off. I'm overwhelmed by this new craving—of wanting this man.

"It's about respect. Fighting comes naturally to me. I'm good at it. You need to play to your talents in this life, and this is mine."

A new energy radiates between us. It sparks a desire to kiss him. I go up onto my tiptoes and place my lips on his smooth jaw. Unlike his eyes, his skin is warm. His arm wraps around my waist and brings me flush against him. He stares down at me like I'm an enigma, something he can't quite understand. My eyes are drawn to his lips, and when I raise my gaze back

to his, I find him staring at my lips as well. Painfully slow, he tilts his head closer to mine. I hold my breath, not sure if he'll kiss me. I want him too. He cracks a small smirk before he captures my lips against his. Our lips easily mold together, his are softer than I thought they would be. My knees go weak for him as my body heats in response to his kiss. His tongue is hot and playful as it dips into my mouth and circles my tongue. I could kiss him all night.

I pull back, flustered, reminding myself he is a means to an end. I can't lose myself in his kiss. I need to stay focused on my task. Already, my head is spinning from the simple touch.

He's back to evaluating me. "What's going on in there?" He taps my head.

"I could ask you the same thing."

His hand stays resting on my hip. He makes no attempt to remove it. My mouth is dry and I take a needed drink. "What's the real reason you asked me over?" His gaze heats as he looks me up and down. "Everyone talks about how perfect and innocent you are. I get the feeling that you have no intention, nor do you want to keep that assessment."

His phone dings and he lets go of my hip to check it. I miss the contact immediately. "Want to watch my fight tonight?" he asks.

I don't want our night to end.

I've never been to the cages. It's too hard to keep my identity concealed, and if my father thought I was there...there

would be Hell to pay.

“You honestly aren’t afraid of my father.” Of all people, Savio should know what he’s risking by bringing me there.

“I have no self-preservation. I can’t help myself. We’ll put you in a baseball cap and jeans, no one will know.”

Excitement flares inside me. If one day I’m going to do more than sell diamonds, this is the type of thing I should get used to. “Ok. Give me five minutes.” I rush upstairs to quickly change. Taking one last check in the mirror, I add a little lipstick, then run back down. When I get to the bottom, I’m slightly out of breath.

“Do I get to drive again?” I ask. Savio gives his signature cold look accompanied by a raised brow, but I catch the slight smirk he’s trying to hide.

“Not a chance. I can’t show up to a fight with a broken foot, or worse. This bruise is going to hurt enough.” He taps the rim of my hat with his fingertips, knocking the bill a little lower over my eyes.

I follow him out of my house, my legs having a hard time keeping pace with his long strides.

We pull up to a building that has one window boarded over, and the other is too dirty to look through. “Stay near me.” His hand tugs me to his side before his feet stop and he looks me over. I become self-conscious when his lips turn into a frown. My hand threads through the ponytail coming out from the back of my hat. “One second.” He steps back toward his car.

His jeans sculpt his ass perfectly as he leans over into the backseat. When he stands back up, he tosses a sweater at me.

I look down at my plain black t-shirt. “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“If you walk through that door, looking like that, you’ll become the feature show of the night. Then I won’t be fighting one guy, but a whole room.” He takes the sweater from me and throws off my hat. With a few jerks and tugs, he places the material over my head and I slip my arms through the sleeves. It’s about four times too big for me. “Much better.” He loops my hair around his hand before pulling it through the hat as he places it perfectly on my head.

Walking through the doors, I suck in a breath. It smells like beer, blood, and sweat. All the tables are already full, leaving standing room only. The cage, a hexagonal thing with twelve-foot fences surrounding its black mat, already contains two fighters. I stand frozen, watching. Both opponents are covered in blood. The man in red shorts jumps and kicks the other one in the jaw. Blood splatters and the crowd goes crazy.

Savio pulls me away, and it takes a second for my feet to work again. He gets a few nods and the occasional fist bump as we walk through the room.

“Don’t talk to anyone and don’t accept drinks that I don’t personally deliver to you. I’m going to quickly change and I’ll be back.” He looks like he doesn’t want to leave my side, but reluctantly steps away, leaving me by the bar counter.

“Don’t be staring at him that way, girl, he’s a taken man.” I look to my left and flinch. The man standing at my side looks almost identical to Savio. They’re not twins, and I’d say he’s slightly younger than Savio, but their resemblance is uncanny.

I shrug. “That sounds like a him problem.”

The man’s eyes light up but doesn’t look shocked by my rebuttal. What type of women does Savio surround himself with? It reminds me I know nothing about this man I’m supposed to marry.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Dante Mancini.”

“You two are brothers.” I state the obvious. There’s something familiar about his eyes, but I can’t figure out what it is.

Dante steps closer to me. His smile looks friendly, but my body is screaming for me to step away. “You ever been with two brothers before?” I stiffen at the question.

I’m shoved back and Savio’s scent wraps around me. My body instantly relaxes. “Leave.” Savio grits the words out through clenched teeth as he speaks to his brother.

I’m shocked by the aggressive edge in his voice. His brother doesn’t look offended. He gives me a wink and walks away. “I told you to talk to no one,” Savio growls in my ear.

I turn into him and our bodies are knocked together. He’s shirtless, his scars on full display. “I thought your brother would be safe.”

“No one is safe.” His hands slip up the huge sweater and his thumb brushes up and down on my back. My entire body ignites from his small touch.

The air crackles and I have a hard time controlling the rapid beat of my heart. His lips capture mine. Savio knows how to kiss, and when he’s holding me like this, I never want to stop kissing him back. His kiss is dominant and skilled. I shiver as he elicits a moan from me. It’s terrifying how easily my body surrenders to him.

He pulls back. “Now everyone knows you’re with me.”

I’m left speechless. For the first time in my life, I understand the expression hot and bothered. Savio doesn’t leave my side until his name is called and he’s forced to make his way to the enclosed mats.

His walk is like a prowler when he enters the cage. He looks at me with a cocky smirk before he pays any attention to the man he’ll be fighting. They hit fists together and a bell rings out.

Each man carefully circles the other. His opponent lunges a few times, but each time, Savio is faster. He twists away, taunting his opponent with a menacing grin. His hands come up, gesturing for the other guy to come closer. When the fighter stays shifting on his toes, Savio faces the crowd, working them into hollers.

I watch in horror as the other man takes the opportunity to jump him from behind. A squeak leaves my mouth as I’m forced to watch it happen in slow motion. It takes a split

second for Savio to maneuver the opponent to toss them on their back. The crowd goes crazy, eating up the way he puts on a show. Reaching down, he picks up the man and punches him in the face before tossing him back to the ground. He circles around the cage, much like a vulture stalking its prey.

He's ruthless; his face is focused and determined. The man stands on shaky legs, shaking his head. Savio jumps in, landing a right hook to his jaw, before he steps back in a silent demand for him to fight back. Each hit looks calculated. While his opponent is sweating and out of breath, Savio looks like he's on a leisurely stroll. I can't take my eyes off him. I've never felt as in control as he looks.

The sinister grin never leaves Savio's face. It spreads across his face into a full smile whenever the crowd cheers, wanting more of his performance. It seems like he could have ended the fight almost right at the start but he keeps the crowd happy by keeping the show going for about fifteen minutes.

Savio once again finds my eyes in the crowd. It's only a spilt second that he shifts his focus, but for a skilled fighter, that's more than enough. He gets punched in the face. His murderous stare is enough to make the room grow silent. Savio stops playing with his prey, and within seconds, more blood flies as his fists pound into the man's face. He leans over the man, his muscles taut and his fists clenched. When the other man falls to his knees, Savio doesn't let up until his opponent taps out on the ground. The room holds their breath waiting to see if Savio will allow for the fight to end. Not even



the announcer will call the end of the fight, as we all are held on pins and needles to see if Savio will stop.

Savio takes a small step back, then crouches down on the floor. He whispers something in the man's ear. His right hand never relaxes, and it looks like it pains Savio to stand back up and away from his opponent.

The room erupts once again. Savio raises his hand and sends a wink my way. It has a few people turning their heads to look in my direction. I dip my chin, praying no one notices who I am. I've been away for school and my father shelters me from this life, so the odds are in my favor.

Savio walks toward me with his body splattered in blood while his opponent is held up by the arms by two men who help him to the locker room. The room's focus is still on Savio and I wonder what it's like to command a room like he does. To hold everyone's respect and attention. He leans in, his lips tickling the shell of my ear. "This is what I am. I will never pretend to be someone I am not. Can you be so honest with me about who you are?"

He walks away, into the locker room, not giving me time to respond. I don't know how to. He can't know about my operation, can he?

I'm lost in my thoughts when he nudges me and I jump. "Let's get you home before anyone knows you were here."

We walk out together and I have the urge to hold his hand but stop myself.

The night is dark and as we walk around the building I see a drug deal happen right before my eyes.

Savio whistles, the kid freezes and looks like he's going to run when Savio speaks his name. "Miles."

Miles pushes something down his pants before walking over. "Savio, how are you?" They fist tap each other.

"What have I told you about selling drugs?" Savio scolds.

The kid looks to the ground, his feet kicking up dirt. "You know my situation. My little brothers will starve if I don't."

"Next time I see you wheeling; your tax is going to double for each time."

The kid opens his mouth to argue. "My mom's already in debt. I have no other choice," he whines.

"Train with me. I'll give you a weekly allowance, but soon as you're caught with drugs, it stops. Your choice."

Miles eyes us both warily. "Why would you do that for me?"

"Everyone deserves a second chance. This is yours. If you're at the mats by ten in the morning, that will be your answer. Now get out of here and go babysit your little brothers. We both know your mom isn't there."

"Are you the one who trains new recruits?" I question as we walk to the car.

"No. I'm too busy with other things, and I like getting my hands dirty." He opens the passenger door for me.

“Then why did you offer to help that kid? Why would the Bratva pay him?”

He steps closer to me. The frame of the car at my back. “They’re not paying him. I am, out of my own pocket.” He looks down at my confused expression and sighs. “The kid is twelve. If he starts dealing now, he’ll be sampling the product by fourteen, and dead by eighteen. It’s how most kids in his situation and lifestyle go. Fighting can change his life for the better.”

“School could do that too.”

Savio shakes his head. “Their mother is a crack whore. And I’m not calling her names. It’s the truth. That kid has been the only parental figure to his siblings. School isn’t going to save him. Fighting might be his only way to have a half-decent life. If anything, it will protect him and anyone he places under his protection.”

It’s times like these I realize how sheltered I am.

# CHAPTER 12

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**SAVIO**

“COME ON, LET’S GET you home.” I lean around Charlotte to open the car door. She’s trapped between me and the metal frame and her breathing picks up from my proximity. I can’t help myself. I dip my head close to the crook of her neck.

“What did you think of the fight?” My lips tingle from the slight vibration of contact between my lips and her earlobe.

“The energy was remarkable. Every man in there wanted to be you.”

“I found it very hard to concentrate.”

“Why?” Goosebumps scatter down her chest as she questions.

“There was a gorgeous woman in the crowd and I couldn’t stop thinking about her.”

Her voice is low, “Oh.” I move my head back and see the disappointment on her face before she flushes. She has no idea I’m talking about her. “Your brother did say you were a taken man.”

“I am talking about you.” The air crackles with a current that feels close to electricity. It has the hairs on my arms standing. Shouts from behind us and the sound of a bottle breaking have me stepping away.

I look at the rowdy men who are jacked up from watching the fights. They’re looking for trouble. This is no place for

Charlotte to be and she slips into the seat immediately after I give her room to move. I frown, not liking how fast she wanted to get away from me.

My hand closes the door before I walk to the driver's side.

The drive back to her house is silent. I can't put a coherent thought together to speak it. She unnerves me. I pull into the shadows of her house, neither of us having said a word the entire way.

"I got it from here," she says, placing her hand on the handle. The door is open in a flash. Even though we're on her property, I don't feel right about her walking through the dark.

"I'll walk you in."

"You're forgetting that I'm sneaking in. Pretty sure you walking me in defeats the purpose."

My eyes try to search the blackness of the night for any danger. "Where are your security lights?"

She giggles and it sends a jolt to my dick. "They'll be off for the next half hour."

"And why is that?" I ask, studying her. She is the perfect mix of sexy, innocent, and mischievous all mixed together.

"Because I planned it that way," she shrugs, giving me a smile. Taking me by surprise, she leans in and presses her soft lips against mine. It's over faster than it started, but my cock is now fully hard in my pants. "Good night, Savio." She lightly closes the door, not making a sound, and disappears into the darkness.

I wouldn't even be able to walk her to the door without revealing what she does to me. It confuses me. I've never been interested in more than sex with a woman before. And here my cock is, acting like a fifteen-year-old who can't control his hard-ons.

A light turns on upstairs and the curtains move, her hand giving me a wave. She's safe. I've done my job. But my hand won't press on the ignition. I stay sitting in my dark car looking at her window, which she's already walked away from.

I need to get myself together. I can't lose focus like I did during the fight. It could cost me my life against a stronger opponent.

My hand slips up to the circle ignition pad, about to start the car to leave, when her shadow passes by the window again. I watch as her arms go up and her shirt is removed. I can only see a dark figure, no details, but I know she wasn't wearing a bra earlier. She's naked from the chest up.

All I can imagine is her on her back and me sucking on her pink nipples. I bet they are as soft as her lips. Undoing my zipper, I give my dick some room. She bends down, and she has to be fully naked now. I swallow hard.

I can't help myself. My hand reaches in and pulls my cock out. I give myself two hard strokes before I look around again. She said the lights won't be going on for a while. I can be gone before they do.



I imagine her innocent eyes looking up at me. Her on her knees, not knowing how to suck a dick. My hand would lead her to my shaft. Her soft lips would wrap around me. She would take me all the way to the back of her throat, gagging as she tests her limits. My hand strokes me faster as I imagine myself watching my cock slide in and out of her pouty lips.

Her tongue would twirl around while she kept her eyes on me, needing constant reassurance that she is doing it right. I can feel my balls tingle, and I growl out her name, “Charlotte,” as I imagine her taking my cum down her throat.

I’m breathless and just came like a virgin who’s never had pussy before. Fuck me, I’ve never come so fast, especially by my own hand. I look down at the fucking mess on my hand and lean back, grabbing my fighting bag and take a towel out from it. I quickly clean myself up before I turn on the ignition and get the Hell out of here.



**D**EMETRI WALKS INTO THE warehouse, and it puts me on edge. The look on his face tells me he wants to murder someone, and his fury seems to be targeted at me. “I’m starting to understand why your brother didn’t want you.”

My fists curl and my nostrils flare as I take a breath, trying to hold my tongue. Since the day I was born, I was never good

enough for anyone, but to hear Demetri say it twists my gut. He's been the only one to treat me with respect, but today, he punches me in the jaw.

That will be the only free shot I'm giving him.

"What the fuck is this about?" I yell, my hand slowly rising to the side of my face.

"You at the fight last night." I pause for a second before I barely duck under his foot. He shakes his head. "It's fucking true." Demetri spits at my feet.

"Not sure what you're talking about." I play dumb and my heart's rhythm increases its pace slightly. It's impossible for him to know Charlotte was there, unless she told him.

"You fucking kissed another woman in public with hundreds of witnesses while engaged to my baby." *Oh, that.* I block a three combination move. "I should fucking bury you," he growls.

"I meant no disrespect." I could only imagine his rage if he knew I brought his *baby* to a place like that, and kissed her like a starved man.

"You openly disrespect me!" he bellows. Two men enter from the back and I already know they're here for me. Demetri is worried I'll run. I have more pride than that.

"You don't need those goons. I am loyal to you, Demetri. I accept my punishment."

Demetri grabs my hand and pulls me to the ground. My arm rests on the cushion of the mat while my hand sprawls against

the concrete. “I have always treated you like a son. I hate you are making me do this.”

I could tell him it was his daughter with me, but last night, I felt like respect passed between us. If our marriage is going to work, I can't break her trust. Demetri should realize I'm the most loyal person he has ever met. He should be asking me if it was his daughter. But the sad truth is, no one has ever given me the benefit of the doubt. They all write me off and I'm not the type of man to beg.

I give him a nod and he brings his knife out of his holster. “Get him something to drink before I begin.”

He doesn't want to do this, but the stand has already been made. I'm given a bottle of rum and use my free hand to pour some on my pinky finger before I slug some back.

It takes about three seconds longer than I would like before I'm left with one less finger than I was born with.

I refuse to scream. The burn radiates up and down my body and my head goes light, but I refuse to show signs of weakness. I am worthy of Charlotte. I take another gulp of rum.

I look up and see the kid from the night before. “Oh, fuck,” I mutter. Miles is standing there, unsure if he should run back out the door. “Be useful and find some bandages for me, kid.” I try to keep a pained moan out of my voice.

Demetri pats me on the shoulder and leaves the room. He can't even look at me. “Am I still invited to family dinner

tomorrow?" I ask, trying to break the tension between my boss and I.

I didn't even think how people would perceive me kissing a woman at my fight because all I wanted was for everyone to know she was off limits. I've never experienced that gut tightening feeling over a woman when I saw every man looking at her like they wanted to take her home.

"Are you stupid enough to think I'd let you still marry her?"

I try not to react to his words, but my head flinches. My heart accelerates at a pace it's not used to. My finger is leaking blood all over me, yet I can't help but think the kiss was worth it. "You won't catch me looking at another woman other than your daughter, sir."

"All you had to do was keep your head out of trouble for a month until the wedding. I know you had to blow off steam since you returned, but I thought a fight was what you needed."

The few men who are in the room pretend not to notice. The kid is waiting with bandages but doesn't dare interrupt. "I promise you I haven't fucked anything other than my hand in almost a decade."

One man in the corner fucking snickers. I envision me placing a bullet between his eyes. I'm man enough to admit it, if it means I get to keep Charlotte. She's grown on me.

"Next time you disrespect her, it will be my gun," Demetri concedes.

“Yes, Sir.” I take another gulp and Demetri turns his back to me, walking away.

The kid comes with the first aid kit. “Looks like today you get your first lesson on cleaning wounds,” I say.

“Should I be calling your girl?” the kid asks. I’m impressed he keeps his cool with the blood.

“Naw. I don’t want to worry her.” The burn continues to radiate up and down my arm, the rum having little success with blocking my pain receptors. I blow out a breath. I might be the stupidest mother fucker for not coming clean, and I hope, in the end, I made the right decision.

I stagger to my feet. “I think your fighting lessons will have to start tomorrow.” My vision goes double for a second before it rights itself.

“You’re bleeding through the bandage.” His eyes are wide as he points to my injury.

I glance down at the shit job done. I’ll fix that once I have more energy. “Don’t worry about me.” I dig into my pocket and pull out a bill. “Use this to put some food on your table.”

Miles hesitates to take the cash and I push it toward him, my hand hitting his chest.

“Take it. Then bring my bag to my car and drive it around for me.” I hope this kid knows how to drive a car. The memory of me teaching Charlotte flashes through my mind. I can’t help but laugh when I think of her running me over and her huge wide eyes trying to check if I was alright. Her fingertips on my

skin had my dick turning to steel. I had to step away or I may have let her touch me anywhere she wanted.

By the time I have my hand cradled effectively, my car is at the front door and Miles tosses my key fob to me. My Mercedes is in one piece. I can't complain.

My bag is placed in my passenger seat with my phone on top. Dante's number lights the screen as I press the ignition. I'll talk to him later. It can't look like I went running back to the family who sent me away after this.

With my other hand, I crack the top on a Coke. My head is fuzzy and I can't do my job with an unclear mind.

# CHAPTER 13

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**CHARLOTTE**



IT'S BECOMING CLEARER THAT I need to find a way to tell my father about my part of the diamond business. I have made it so that I can guarantee its stability. There's no way to tell the difference between mined or an artisan created diamond. The artisan diamond is clearer and larger than the ones dug up and with my diamonds, there is no middleman or additional transportation, which will double our profit. If only I could get my hands on my father's ledger to see what type of profit he's pulling in. I have my own estimates in regards to that figure, but concrete numbers would be nice. I need to make sure I can pull the same amount, at least, before I take the risk of blowing up my life.

I'm thinking about all this while I watch our van get loaded up for the delivery run. I can't help myself and I've stopped two of my men already, tweaking the loading procedures as we go.

"I told you I would handle the transportation." I glance up when I hear Klaus's voice. Normally, I allow him to organize the deliveries, but when I woke up this morning, something felt off. I can't explain it, but it's the same feeling that drives people to not board planes for any reason other than their gut. My gut has never steered me wrong before.

I hand one of our men another gun. "Why the extra guns?" he asks, irritated that I'm here.

"I want them to return alive." I shrug. We both know my father has placed extra security, making our deliveries harder.

“Charlotte. Has anything happened before?” Klaus’s hand rests on my shoulder. Normally, I would find the gesture calming. Now it only causes my stomach to twist.

“There’s a first time for everything. I’m going on this run.”

“We’ve discussed this. You run the diamonds, I run the transportation. I know every route your father uses. It’s how we’ve slipped by them each time.”

“You just made a perfectly good point. I’ve never done the transportation. As owner, I need to know every aspect of this business.”

His second hand comes to my shoulder and I twist out of his hold. I watch as he fakes a smile at me, but his brow twitches, like it does every time he thinks I should be taking orders from him. “Fine. I’ll be in the lookout car,” he concedes, his tone condescending. Since I’ve returned, it’s like he doesn’t want me around.

I get in the back of the cube van that looks like a grocery delivery truck, and tap on the clear pane that separates the two compartments. The driver starts up the truck and I close the back doors. The thrill, or maybe it’s the anticipation of something going wrong, has my entire body jittery. Much like a roller-coaster.

Our bodies are shifted right and left from the few turns as we drive. We’d be carrying about five million dollars of diamonds if they weren’t fake. I couldn’t risk them being stolen, and I know something is going to go wrong. I hope I’m proven wrong.

I take my gun from my thigh holster and grip it in my hands while it rests on my lap. The back is silent. My body turns right as we turn and gun shots ring through the streets. It sounds like hundreds of hailstones hitting the side of our vehicle. Our van swerves.

I fucking hate it when I'm right.

One of the men tosses me a bullet-proof vest and I slip it on, even though my clothes should stop most bullets. The technology is still waiting on being patented, but I managed to score some. I slip the black ski mask over my head, the air leaving my nose hot under the cloth.

Adrenaline spiked with excitement strums through my veins. My fingertips tap on the grip, wanting to see how I handle the gun in a high stressed situation. I've trained mercifully for this and now I get to have a firsthand experience.

My men go into place. Slides are removed and guns are placed through holes, preparing for us to return fire. The van bumps along and it feels like we've gone off the road. Then we're thrown backwards and stop before we move again. It feels like a cargo sized truck has hit us from the side. I'm tossed to the opposite side and catch myself on the bench.

I throw a bag full of the fake diamonds at each man, in case we're forced to run. It'll help separate the people attacking us. I have trackers on each one, which will tell me who is loyal and who's on the other side.

Guns rapid fire as the van bounces from one side to the other and I pray it's not my father's men. I'm so close to proving to him that I can be useful.

My back hits the wall, hard, as I'm thrown backwards. It feels like the van's back wheels fly into the air before they bounce on the ground. More guns are fired. My men push through the doors and rapid fire. I shoot my gun at the men stepping out of our attacker's truck. I don't recognize any of them and relief floods through me.

I expect Klaus's car to fly toward me, but it's nowhere in sight. I keep my gun raised, ready to fire as I step out of the back. There's a small group of trees a few yards to my right, but it would do little for cover.

A thick arm wraps around my waist, taking me by surprise. "We have you surrounded. Might as well give up now." Savio's deep voice has my heart fighting to escape my ribcage.

He takes my wrist and painfully twists it. I have no choice but to drop my gun. It clatters to the ground as I look around for an escape route, knowing I can't wait for Klaus. It would ruin his cover.

My leg kicks behind me, hitting Savio's balls in my attempt to escape his grasp. He doesn't flinch and brings another hand up around me. It's bandaged with brown stains, leaving dried up specks on my clothing. I dig my nails into his wound and he growls with pain. My foot stomps on his before I kick him in the nuts again. His grip falters, and I grab my gun from the ground before running toward the road. One of our cars comes

squealing down the pavement and slows down minimally. Savio fires his gun at my back, missing me. My legs burn from running. The car is only an arm's length away. Sneaking a glance over my shoulder, Savio is too far to catch me now. He lifts his gun, the bullet just grazing my cheek before I jump into the car. I pull down the mirror and see a red line across my unblemished skin.



I WALK INTO MY home, needing to regroup and figure out how it went wrong. No one is supposed to be home, but Katrina comes running toward me and wraps her arms around me in a tight squeeze. The open affection catches me by surprise. I stiffen in her embrace. “What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I’ve been calling you all day. Where have you been?” She grabs hold of my chin and tilts my head up to look at my scratch. “What happened to your cheek?”

I show her my fresh long nails. “I’ve been at the salon. I’m not used to wearing two-inch nails and scratched myself.”

She doesn’t say anything, but the skepticism on her face tells me she’s not buying it. “If you ever want to talk, I’m here.” I hate how she guilt trips me. I wish I could tell her. It’s strange that Katrina sees all of me and yet my own flesh and blood would prefer I’m more like a hologram; there in idea, but not in physical form. My father has always held me an arm’s length away and tries to make up for it with gifts.

“I know, Mom.” I really did luck out with having Katrina as a mother. We’ve always gotten along great, and she is the most understanding person I know. It kills me having to keep secrets.

I go up and Capree comes out of her room. “Can I try something out on you?” She doesn’t wait for an answer before pulling me into her room and placing me in a chair.

“Mind if I make this red scratch look like you took a sword to the face?”

“Only if it looks real.” It has me wondering if my father would try to fix the wound or push me out of the room to get revenge on who did it.

I can’t help that I’ve always been obsessed with the idea of death and blood for as long as I can remember. I remember the first time I faked my own death by floating face down in our pool. My lungs burned as I waited for someone to find me. It was Katrina who jumped into the water to save me. My father was entertaining men in his office and didn’t even see me. Instead of dealing with the issue, my father filled in the pool the next day. Our parents thought acting might help my little outbursts, as they like to call them, and put both Capree and me into acting. It worked out great for her, but never really sparked my passion.

Capree and I are opposites in many ways, but we seem to have an understanding with each other.

She makes short work of the makeup and small prosthetic placed on my face. I admire her handiwork in the mirror while

I look at it at different angles. It looks like my skin is split across my cheek, making my small red mark look insignificant in comparison. “You’ve gotten good at this.” My finger goes to touch it, but stops just before.

“You’ve been gone for six years. I’m no longer that little girl you once knew.”

“I missed you while I was gone,” I confess.

“Don’t go crying on me or the makeup will run. We saw each other enough during the holidays. It’s just hard to stay close when so many miles separate us. You know I love you no matter what,” Capree says matter-of-factly. She has never been emotional or sentimental. We’re both similar in that way.

“I love you too,” I reply.

She takes my hand and gives it a squeeze. “Let’s show dad and see if we can freak him out.”

“He knows better than to fall for one of your tricks.” I laugh.

“Yes, if I were the one wearing it. But it’s you this time.” Her brows bounce up and down with excitement.

“He’ll never fall for it.” I shake my head.

“If he does, you owe me a night of dancing.” We both like to push our boundaries. It could help bring us closer.

“Deal.”

She jumps up and claps her hands. Even though she’s twenty-one, our father would never agree to her out drinking

or dancing. But I don't have to worry about that, because he will see right through this.



# CHAPTER 14

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**SAVIO**

“THEY HAD TO HAVE been tipped off.” Demetri paces from his desk to the family photo that seems to have been taken when Charlotte was around four or five.

“No one knew but you and me.” I shake my head, not understanding how this went so wrong. The diamonds we managed to get our hands on were fake. Not the ones stealing part of our diamond market. The one man we did catch killed himself before we could question him. “Is there any way our conversation was overheard?” I think aloud.

My bone still pulses where the guy had dug his hands into my wound. Thankfully, I cauterized it myself at home to help with the bleeding, and the wound didn’t reopen from that pussy who dug his nails into me. I should have shot him in the kneecap to make it easier on myself. I’m not used to working with a weakness like my fucking finger being cut off. Fuck, it hurts.

The door opens without a knock and Charlotte walks in. My eyes zoom to her bloody cheek, and my chest squeezes in a way I’ve never felt. Before I can control my muscles, my feet travel to her. My hands cup her cheek and I have to consciously make an effort not to hurt her in my grasp because of the rage coursing through me at the sight of her wound.

“Who the fuck did this?” I growl, ready to hang the man responsible from my favorite roof hook. Demetri is behind me, immediately.

“What happened?” Demetri questions. He tries to push me out of the way to get a better look, but I refuse to move. I pick her up in my arms, ready to run to the bathroom to look her over more closely, when Capree walks in laughing. *Does she have no soul?*

“Got you!” she yells, leaving me confused.

Demetri places a hand on my shoulder. “It’s not what you’re thinking.” He sighs, sounding more tired than I’ve ever heard him.

My body is tense, my finger no longer of any significance, its pain now unrecognizable. For a moment, the flash of the man digging his fingers into me pops into my mind.

“It’s not real Savio. Capree does stage makeup.” Demetri tries to ease my mind. “Charlotte, I thought you were more mature than this.”

I allow her feet to slowly touch the ground. “I honestly didn’t think you would fall for it.”

My hand touches her cheek and my two fingers spread a small drop of fake blood on my skin. I look back at the fake wound. It looks real.

“I thought you would outgrow this unhealthy obsession,” Demetri reprimands Charlotte while narrowing his eyes on his youngest daughter. “Charlotte, take Savio and clean his bloody bandage.”

Charlotte’s warm hand takes mine as she drags me out of the office and Demetri closes the door with Capree still in

there. She takes me to a bathroom and opens a lower cabinet. Her ass is in the air and I have to avert my gaze.

“Why are you looking at the wall?” Her voice has me turning to look at her.

“I was trying to be a gentleman.”

“I’m not a porcelain doll. I’m my father’s daughter. It’s impossible to offend me.”

“Your father is quite easily offended.” I look at my missing finger, and she unravels my gauze. “It’s pretty ugly to look at. You may want gloves to touch it.”

“I’m not afraid of a little blood. I’ll wash my hands and be ready to go.”

Her touch is tender, while her face is focused. “Why did this happen, anyway? I assume it was my father...I thought you two were close.” Her voice softens and her fingertips lightly graze my knuckle, careful not to hurt the ugly red mess I once called a pinky.

“We are close. That’s the only reason I’m still breathing.” My fingers itch to pull her in. I’ve never been drawn to a woman like I am with Charlotte. When she touches me, I lose all sense of right and wrong. I crave each of her touches.

“I suppose a pinky has no value.” She sighs but her forehead mars like she doesn’t agree with the statement.

“Only to the person it belongs to,” I say gruffly. Her kindness rattles me. That exotic scent of hers swirls around us and I force myself to control my breathing into steady, low

breaths, each more difficult than the last. She has done nothing but show a tiny bit of kindness, and my inner beast wants to be let out to taste her in every way possible.

She looks up and I grace her with a smile. “Are you taking any antibiotics?” she asks.

Concern is written all over her face. *Nothing has killed me yet, this won't either.* I swallow, thinking of a hundred different ways to answer this question, but they all seem too harsh and crude to be said in front of a lady. Her caring is unnecessary. I've never had anyone fuss over me before. The whole act is unsettling. “Don't worry your pretty little head about my wound.”

This has her glaring. She has a temper like her father. “There's more to me than my looks. It's pathetic that my biology dictates my worthiness of Father's position. Did you know most great reigning royalty were women? They were the ones who always got shit done. I could be the next Catherine the Great. And yet hundreds of years later, we still have not changed our ways. Our world is still as sexist as it was back then.”

I step into her and she stops talking, even though it looks like she has more to say in her outburst. I place my hand on the side of her ribs and it slowly slides down to her waist. The air between us crackles like it did the other night. “You will always be a queen at my side,” I whisper. I can't stop myself from touching her. She is like a flame and I am her moth, unable to escape the delicate dance of her glowing light. Her

skin is so much softer, perfect, and unblemished compared to mine. I wait for her to shudder from my rough touch.

“I’m not looking for a figurehead position.” Her hand comes up and rests on my forearm. It takes all of my willpower to not lift her up and taste that sweet pussy of hers. I immediately harden thinking of all the ways I could make her feel good. My internal war rages inside. I’ve only known a life of pain and hard truths, but here in this small space, I can’t think of anything other than that gorgeous smile of hers and how I want to make her feel good.

I clear my throat. “I’m willing to fight your battles. After all, what is a queen without her army?”

Her head tilts to the side. She does this every time she’s trying to figure something out. “I don’t see how a man in your position would take second best.” It is honestly torture being this close and not touching her how I want.

“That’s because you don’t know me. It’s not about the number in the position, but the value I give. I was never born to rule. I work best with my hands. It’s what I enjoy.” My good hand trails down her arm until my fingers interconnect with hers. “I know two things: pain and pleasure.”

I can’t read the emotions running across her face.

My lips beg to press down on hers. I shouldn’t be in a closed room with her. What the fuck was Demetri thinking when he sent her to clean me up?

She closes the distance, our bodies pressed against each other, and my resolve breaks. I mold my lips to hers. She's so fucking soft. My mouth conquers hers and she melts into my touch. I suck on her lower lip and she grants my tongue access into her sweet mouth. I can't control myself around her, even when I know the consequences.

My hands sweep down, ready to pick her up, when the door opens.

“Oops.”

We fly away from each other. Capree is standing wide-eyed with a tear-streaked face. Charlotte moves past me to console her sister, leaving me to myself.

Once the girls are gone, I attempt to catch my breath. I need better control over myself. *I know better!* I adjust my pants and lean into the mirror as I wait for my hard on to go down before I head back to my boss. A boss who's not afraid to kill anyone.

I can still taste her, and I already know this has the possibility of ending in disaster. Charlotte may be the one situation that I won't survive.



# CHAPTER 15

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**CHARLOTTE**

**I** PRESS THE GAS down, going straight on an old back road, far away from city traffic. The speed is exhilarating. My back is straight, focusing on the pavement. One hand is at the ten position, the other at the two, gripping tightly.

The country road is peaceful; helping my inner anxiety about my father being holed up in meetings all day because of all the fake diamonds he was able to get his hands on from the raid. It all loses focus from my mind forcing me to think of only driving.

Cresting over a hill a minivan comes toward me in the opposite direction. Wanting to keep the excitement, I slow minimally, moving closer to the shoulder. It feels like I could slip into the slope of the ditch any second. I can't watch. Squeezing my eyes shut, I hold the wheel tighter as we pass each other.

Opening my eyes, my head follows the other vehicle, my breath releasing. Continuing straight, my head swivels to the other side and in my mirror I notice a stop sign at the bottom of the hill that I entirely missed. My foot eases off the gas, thankful no one was coming the other way. If some had been coming, I wonder who would have braked first?

My phone rings, and I have to stop the car to answer it.

“Charlotte, you need to come home. Mom is still wanting us girls to eat together tonight.”

I lean back in my seat and sigh. “Okay. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

I look behind me to see Joe behind me. I hope they didn’t stay too close to see my driving errors. I step out of my car and the passenger with Joe steps out as we exchange places.

After dinner, my father is still in meetings. I sit in the room closest to my father’s office with a book that I haven’t read a single line from open on my lap to see if I can learn anything.

I watch Klaus go into my father’s office and my hands fist into themselves. He let me down and disappeared on me today when he was supposed to be my getaway car. A small part of me knows he wanted to teach me a lesson, he was angry...but we’re partners. I would have never treated him like that.

Savio exits the office close to midnight. He must be going home. He doesn’t see me in the dark corner, allowing me to study him and watch how he holds himself when no one is looking. His strides are long and powerful, his head always held high.

I make a mental note to find stuff to help with his wound. He doesn’t seem like the type who takes injuries seriously.

I slip outside to wait for Klaus. I can’t go to bed without talking about what happened today. I need to know if I can trust him on my team. It’s risky to have this conversation at the house, but it’s necessary.

An hour later, he walks outside and I follow.

“You know this isn’t safe,” he scolds while lighting up a cigarette.

“What would have been safer is you being there for me today,” I snap back with my teeth clenched. Our voices are low to ensure no one can overhear us.

He takes three long drags that have his cigarette shrinking by half and makes me wait until he blows circles of smoke into the night air. “I told you not to go. You refused to listen.” He turns toward me, throwing his butt down on the ground, and gets right into my face. “The problem is, you only listen to yourself.” I take a step back. Klaus has never taken this tone with me before.

He stalks toward me until my back hits the back of our house. His arms cage me in. “Tell me, Charlotte, can I still trust you? I’m the one who can lose everything.”

“Where were you today?” I ask, standing tall against him.

“The one thing that was supposed to save me if this goes down was our marriage. You belong to me, not some loser whose family didn’t even want him.” My spine prickles, hating how he speaks of Savio. “I see the way you look at him,” he sneers.

“He’s a means to an end. No one will be getting in the way of our business.”

“Prove it to me then. Kiss me.”

Guilt and loathing spread through me, because my gut says I’m loyal to Savio. It turns at the thought of kissing Klaus.

Klaus's eyes look down at me with disgust. "You're nothing but a frigid cunt, using whoever you can manage to get your claws in."

Anger sets my skin on fire. "If I wanted you to have a kiss, I would have given you one without asking."

"How many of my gifts has he stolen already?" Klaus's tone is dark and menacing.

How dare he question my virginity, or anything else he is implying, for that matter? I once thought Klaus would have had all of my firsts, but I'm slowly realizing that he's not the friend I thought he was.

"He can't steal something from you that was never meant to be yours."

Klaus's one arm moves across my chest, his forearm pressing hard against me, pinning me to the wall. Fear slithers its way down each of my nerves as I mask my face to keep it indifferent. I was stupid to believe that Klaus was trust worthy.

He cups my pussy through my clothes and my body seizes. The evil gleam in his eyes confirms I was naïve as his forearm pushes bruisingly into my skin. Then the pressure disappears. Klaus grunts and I see a figure toss him to the ground before a fist cracks his bones with a punch to the face. Another punch and more stomach twisting cracks are heard.

"I should kill you for touching my fiancée," Savio murmurs with a low, deadly tone full of promise.

My heart pounds and relief floods my veins before worry replaces the notion. *How much did he hear?*

I can't move, my legs frozen and my voice seemingly in the same state. Klaus is my friend, my only real friend, I should help him. Instead, I'm mesmerized by the way Savio flawlessly moves with each of his blows.

When Savio stills and his head slowly lifts, the moonlight shadows half his face. I've never seen a man look so powerful and handsome in my life.

I'm a horrible person.

He comes toward me and cups my cheek, his thumb rubbing my skin back and forth. "Are you okay?" His eyes study me. There's no judgment, only curiosity.

I nod, my eyes not able to leave his irises.

"Does anyone know you're out here?" he asks, and my body shivers from his dark tone.

"You do," I answer. My hand finds his hip and rests there softly. Klaus is moaning in the background, but my entire attention is on the man in front of me.

"Be careful of the secrets you keep. They always have a way of surfacing," he cryptically warns.

"Is that what happened to your hand?"

"You could say that." He takes a step back, the distance between us quickly filled with the night's chilly air. He clears his throat. "You should head back in."

I know he's right, but there's something about being in his presence. I don't want to go. "What about Klaus?" Savio's softened features turn hard once again and I regret asking.

He leans in and I try to control my breathing. "Do you love him?"

I have a hard time thinking when Savio is this close. His scent overwhelms me, and my traitorous body screams for him to do the naughty things I've only ever dreamed about. The light sensation of his teeth pulling at my earlobe has me swallowing.

"No." If I had loved him, I would have fought for us. Deep down, I know the only thing that kept me tied to him was our friendship, and now the company. My father has always squirreled me away and making friends has never been easy for me.

"You just saved his life." His injured hand slips behind my back, going up and down ever so slightly. "For tonight." The night air zips between us, creating an inevitable energy storm that dances across my skin. Savio has a way of making me believe he's searching my soul. It's there, and undeniable, but I'm terrified that he'll find out I'm more like my father, and not some docile woman who wants to stay locked in my cage. "Do you want him to stay living?" His breath fans across my lips as he pulls back to watch my reaction.

"I didn't think you held back on anyone's account." My words are breathless in the dark. There's just enough light to



see the glimmer in his eyes and it lights my desire for him on fire.

“The way you avoid my questions with smart ass comments drives me crazy,” he murmurs. His lips press a kiss against my pulse that’s hammering in my neck. “I want to kill him. I want to blind any man who looks in your direction. When you step into my sight, my body thirsts to keep you safe. This notion is unsettling to me. I thrive on hurting other people. I’m not used to holding back. This is my new warning to you. From tonight on, I don’t plan to hold back. Remember this: I will kill for you, but I will never ask again if this is what you want.”

Lust fills his eyes. I want him to kiss me. I want to lose myself in his touch. We stand there, not saying a word, and the anticipation builds with each passing second. Minute by minute, I watch as his resolve breaks and he kisses me. His lips are unrelenting against mine as he devours me with skill. Our breaths are ragged as we steal each other’s air. My head goes light, and it’s his arms that keep me standing as I kiss him back with everything I have.

My arms wrap around his shoulders, pulling us closer together. I allow his kiss to consume me. When we’re both breathless, he pulls away and rests his forehead on mine. “You need to go in before I risk taking what I really want.”

“What is that?” My heart pounds so hard he must be able to feel it against his own chest.

“Your virgin cherry.” His hand pushes me toward the door. I do as he silently asks, but before I reach for the handle I turn

around.

“Savio.” He raises a brow. “Some risks in life are worth it.”  
I open the door and go to my room.



**I** LIE IN BED, my mind racing. I can't sleep; my body is too restless from that kiss and interaction with Savio. The house has been silent for the last hour. Getting back out of bed, I slip my housecoat over my pajamas to leave my room.

Light on my toes, I go down the stairs and fix myself a warm glass of milk. My eyes keep darting to my father's office. I walk toward the room that continues to beckon me and turn the handle, but it refuses to budge.

The house shadows push me forward and I bring out the key from my pocket. It slips in perfectly, and this time the handle twists in my grasp. My feet step forward. I love this room. I remember playing in here as a child.

Going behind the desk, I sit in my father's huge chair. My body, in contrast, is small in his large seat. I turn on the small reading lamp to my right and it casts an eerie shadow into the room. The house creaks its protest as I open my first drawer. I just need to find some insight on if our numbers are as good as my father's. I can't bring anything to him until I know he'll be impressed.

“Why are you up so late?” I jump, not expecting my father to be standing in the doorway.

“Can’t sleep. Do you remember Capree and I playing in here when we were little?” I ask as I slowly move the bottom drawer back in with my foot.

“You remember that?” he scratches at his sparse beard. The scars only allow his beard to grow nicely on one side of his face.

“Yeah. Mom went on vacation and you kept insisting to our nanny that we could play in here while you worked.”

“You would have been five then.”

“I remember watching you from the floor and knowing I wanted to be you when I grew up.”

“You keep saying that, and it never stops scaring me.” He walks further into the room. “I love our family, but I never wished my life for any of you. I’ve seen too many horrors. My scars only touch the surface of what I’ve done and seen. That’s why I made sure you received an education. I never had that. The world is so open for you to do something wonderful.” It’s the same speech I’ve heard since I was old enough to voice what I want. If only he would listen and take me seriously.

He pulls out a chair and sits across from me. “What’s really bothering you?”

“I just couldn’t sleep,” I lie.

“Charlotte, the only time you find your way in here is when you’re stressing out about something. Is it your engagement to Savio?” I could come clean now, but what’s the point? He’d

refuse to listen. When I tell him, Katrina needs to be with him. She's the only person to ever make him see reason.

“I'm just nervous about making you proud. That's all, Papa.”

“Charlotte, you are my pride and joy. When your birth mother died, you became my reason for living. I have been proud of you since the day I held you in my arms for the first time. You became my second chance.”

I stand up and give my father a hug. “I love you.” When he's looking at me with such pride, I chicken out on telling him anything more.

“I love you, too. Try to get some sleep. The morning always comes too quickly.”

# CHAPTER 16

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**SAVIO**

I CAN'T UNDERSTAND WHY Charlotte is sweet on this douchebag. I pick him up and dump him in my trunk. What I *should* be doing is asking Demetri for permission. With a *thud*, I close the lid, wishing a limb would be squished between the metal. I swear this has to be the longest fucking day of my life. Starting my car, I call my brother, Dante.

“Savio, you’re three days late in returning my phone call,” he greets.

“I’m picking you up in an hour. Have a shovel and a tarp ready.” I’ve never been the ask-for-permission type.

“It’s going to be one of those nights, I suppose. You know I’m a better lover than a fighter,” he teases me.

“Careful or I’ll mess up that pretty face you use so well.”

He chuckles. “It’s been a while since we’ve had one of our bonding nights.” Fuck, he’s right. We used to be inseparable before everything went down and I was sent away from the family. He must sense where my thoughts run to. “You know you didn’t have to take the fall for me.”

“Like you said, I’m the better fighter. It made sense to go with everyone’s preconceived ideas.”

“I never got a chance to say thank you, this is me trying to make it up to you.”

“Be ready, I’m almost there.” I end the phone call.

I head straight to Dante's place. It takes no time to place what we need in the back seat and head out to the edge of the city. There's a huge landfill out here. All we need to do is dig to the bottom and no one will ever find Klaus again.

My brother drags him out of the trunk.

"What secret do you and Charlotte share?" I ask while punching him in the stomach. There's something holding them together and I can't figure it out.

He attempts to spit on me, but half of it lands on himself. His one eye is already swelling closed. "Go fuck yourself."

"Actually, I plan to be fucking Charlotte soon enough."

That has him thrashing against my brother's hold.

"You can't kill me. Charlotte will hate you for it. And Demetri will kill you because it's not an ordered hit." He tries to smirk, like he has me.

"Charlotte won't hate me because she'll never know." I look at my missing finger. "And I've never been afraid of a little pain." The pinky finger is a waste of space, anyway.

My brother hits him over the head and he falls to the ground. "Why did you do that?"

"What the fuck happened to your hand?" I sigh at his question, not wanting to get into it. "You had all your fingers at your fight the other day."

I ignore him and redirect the conversation. "I wanted to question him more." Harder than necessary, I toss a shovel at



my brother and he catches it.

“Let’s see if you can do the same thing.” He tosses the shovel hard as Hell at my bad hand. It’s late, I’ve been up almost twenty-four hours, and my hand is throbbing. My good fingers miss the shovel and the handle hits my wound. Pain shoots up my arm and I blow a deep breath out, keeping my pain on the inside, and trying not to show any weakness.

“The women you’re hanging out with are rubbing off on you. You’re turning into a gossiping pussy like them.” I bend to pick up the shovel. I hate digging holes.

An hour later, sweat spots my forehead, and the sun will be rising soon enough. “How hard did you hit him? He should be up by now.”

My brother walks over and checks his pulse.

“Is he dead?” I ask, stopping what I’m doing.

Headlights stop me from walking toward Klaus. Dante quickly pulls him into our hole and shoves some dirt and garbage into the ground. “We need to leave,” my brother whispers, looking stressed.

“You sure he’s dead?” I double check since he never clarified.

“Yes, let’s go.” Hesitantly, I walk off with my brother. I hate leaving any job half finished.



HEAD BACK HOME to my shitty hole-in-the-wall apartment.

**I** *could* afford something flashy. Demetri was true to his word, he continued to pay me while I was in jail. I have more money than I know what to do with. But what would I do with all that wasted space in a larger home?

With one hand, I take off my clothes and step under the cold spray of my shower. It's strange to have access to a hot shower after all these years, but I can't bring myself to do it. I'm already used to the cold; it seems like a hassle to get used to the heat.

Still wet, I sit on my toilet and re-bandage my hand. I can't help but think back to how her skin felt under my fingers. I'd lose a lot more than my pinky for her. My good hand opens a bottle of painkillers and I pop three in my mouth.

I'm so fucking tired, I stagger to my perfectly-made bed and flop on top of the sheets where I fall into a deep sleep. A luxury I rarely allow myself.

I wake up startled, expecting the blare of sirens, and glare of flashing red lights. Maybe there's another uprising. I jump to my feet, ready to fight if need be. Slowly, my brain registers the fact that I'm at home and no longer in prison.

Grabbing my gun from under my pillow, I stealthily creep toward the noise and glance at my front door. It's not broken. There's a good chance I didn't lock it. I didn't think anyone was brave enough to break into my house. This community knows better.

My fridge door is open.

I raise my gun, ready to shoot as soon as they close it. Charlotte screams when she comes face to face with the metal in my hand.

“What the Hell are you doing?” I holler.

Her hand rests on her chest as she gathers her breath. “Your front door wasn’t locked. And I knocked three times. If you’re going to be waking up with a gun and scared of small noises, maybe you should try locking your door.”

“That mouth of yours is going to get you in trouble one day.”

“You’re the one marrying me, you might as well learn now before we say I do.”

Her eyes travel down my naked chest and I remember I didn’t put any clothes on after my shower. My morning wood is half deflated, but it still points up toward her. I stay still, watching her take me in. When she doesn’t stop staring, I ask, “Like what you see?”

Her eyes fly to mine and her cheeks turn pink. “Go put on some clothes while I finish up with breakfast.” This is the first time I notice she has eggs in her hands.

“I don’t have eggs in my fridge.”

“I see that. How do you keep a body like that and eat out all the time?” I smirk at her comment. “Oh, shut up and get dressed.” She smiles as she says the words and turns her attention back to my stove.

I'd much rather her stare at my cock, but for now I'll do as she requests. When I come out, she has scrambled eggs on a paper plate with a plastic fork. I didn't see any point in buying reusable stuff when I rarely eat here.

"Where's your plate?" I question.

"It's ten o'clock, I ate hours ago."

My neck turns toward my clock. I never sleep this late. Must have been the pain killers I took. My eyes dart to my hand and I'm reminded of the dull ache.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of you breaking into my home?" I ask, digging into my eggs. They're delicious and my stomach grumbles with having been fed. Come to think of it, I'm not sure when I ate last.

"I brought you antibiotics, but they need to be taken with food." She places the small, clear bottle in front of my plate.

"That was thoughtful."

"I can't have my fiancé dying on me before the wedding."

"Then why did you run me over?" I tease.

She shakes her head, smiling larger. "I can't have you dying unless it's by my hand. Better?"

I chuckle, shoveling another forkful of eggs into my mouth. She grabs a Coke can, popping the top as she holds her palm up with a small pill.

"You need to take this three times a day for the next ten days." I hold out my hand and she drops the pill into my palm

without touching me. I toss the white circular tablet into my mouth and wash it down with a large gulp of the soda she placed in front of me.

“How did you get my address, anyway?”

She studies me and I doubt she'll give me a straight answer. I can't see her father allowing her to come to my house unsupervised.

“Why were you outside last night? You left the house an hour before I went out.”

“Looks like we both have secrets.” I give her a tight smile and change the subject. “I have another fight in a week, do you want to come?” What I'm proposing is risky, and I can't believe the offer came out of my mouth.

“I'd love to.” She takes my empty plate and puts it in my garbage before lifting herself onto my counter. I would have thought she'd look out of place in my apartment, but she looks at home. Maybe she isn't the spoiled princess I had thought she was.

# CHAPTER 17

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**CHARLOTTE**

I SHOULDN'T BE AS excited as I am to be picked up by Savio on a dark, deserted street. The car he described slows down and the passenger door opens. He walks out in his jeans and V-neck T-shirt. I would question whether he should be fighting with the wound he has, but he's not the type who cares about small details like that. Which is completely different from my type-A personality.

He moves the car seat forward and I jump into the back. The same man who talked to me at the last fight turns around. "We meet again. I'm Dante, this guy's brother."

"You're going to need to change into these." Savio tosses some material into the back as he turns to sit in his seat. He looks almost too large to fit in such a small space.

"Where is the rest of it?" I ask, looking at the scraps of clothing.

The car starts and I'm pushed backwards from the acceleration. Savio turns to me. "Here's the thing..." He huffs out a breath.

"I'm not going to like this, am I?"

He gives a shrug as if to say maybe, maybe not? "You're going to have to pretend to be a whore." My mouth hangs open, not believing what I'm hearing. "You're going to have to walk in on Dante's arm, because I can't be seen with you."

My eyes slide toward his brother and he's looking straight ahead, as if our conversation isn't happening.



“Why can’t I walk in on your arm?” My fingers fiddle with the soft material in my hands.

“I’m a taken man, not even married yet. I can’t go around with other women,” he states matter-of-factly.

I huff in disbelief and study the clothes again. Looks like if I want to go, I have no choice. “Where do I put these on?”

“Back there. Dante will keep his eyes on the road, or he knows he’s a dead man.”

I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this. The sad part is, I’ve been looking forward to this all week. I never get the chance to go out like this. I’m either home or building my company. I have no social life to speak of.

I wiggle out of my tight jeans—so much for the new outfit—and my eyes glance at Dante and then Savio. Both are facing forward.

The fabric hardly covers my ass and I think my vagina might be showing. The hot pink dress has a few holes in it and the material clings tightly to my body. At the top, it separates into two small triangles that act as a top and loop around my neck. “How is this going to stop people from recognizing me?”

Savio turns around, his eyes roaming over me. His eyes dilate with what looks like lust and it has my heart speeding up. “Trust me. No one will suspect *you* of being the Pakhan’s perfect daughter.”

“Put this on.” He hands me bright red lipstick. It’s not even close to my color, but neither is the dress.

We park in front of the same location as last time. I climb out of the car and feel a draft on my backside. *Am I really doing this?*

Savio walks behind Dante and I. I can feel his eyes on me when Dante loops his arm around mine, bringing me snug next to him. He’s far from happy about letting me hold on to his brother’s hand, so I don’t understand why he made this plan. I get a few lingering looks when we walk in, but no one pays much attention to me. The waitresses glance at me and I see brief flashes of pity in their eyes before they switch their focus from me to Savio’s brother.

Dante gives the same waitresses his smile and they quickly turn their heads, refusing to look in our direction. It’s obvious people are skittish around both brothers. Allowing myself to look Dante over, he looks like a preppy college boy. He has no tattoos, perfect smile, no scars that I can see.

“This is Savio’s world. Think you can handle it, Princess?” Dante says in my ear for only me to hear. The slither of his voice sends a chill down me.

Savio walks by and pauses. “Protect her,” he demands of his brother, then moves forward like we don’t exist. It would be nice to get a little reassurance from him. He disappears into the changing room and I’m left in a room full of strangers.

This is part of the underbelly of their world, my world. “Never underestimate your opponent,” Dante whispers into

my ear.

I shrug as I continue to take everything in. There's excitement in the air and I think I could get used to coming here. The fights are a little gruesome, but I like the energy.

When Savio enters the cage, the room erupts. His opponent is double his size.

Dante nudges me. "Your dad must be mad at Savio for something."

"Why do you say that?"

A brave waitress steps in front of us, interrupting our conversation. "Do you need a drink?" She looks at Dante, then me. The annoyed growl has her snapping her eyes back to him.

"Two beers. Tabs not open."

"You know the rules," she argues, but the look in his eyes has her shutting her mouth. "Two beers coming up."

Our beers arrive, and Dante pops the tab for me. "Are women regularly drugged here?"

"I have no idea, but I can't take the chance with you," he replies while staring at his brother as he measures up the guy in the cage with him. Savio easily dances around his opponent, tiring the man out before he begins his beating. His one hand is soaked from blood and I wonder if it's his or the other guy's.

I turn my head just before I hear the sick crack of bones. "I need to go to the washroom." I hand Dante my beer and pause when he matches my step. "What are you doing?"

“Coming with you.”

I place my hand on his chest. “I’ll be fine. I don’t need a sitter.” I give him a forced smile.

“Sorry, Princess.”

“You better not be coming in.” He gives me a look like he plans to. “You can guard the door.”

He rolls his eyes and I hope he doesn’t walk in with me. When I open the door, he stays beside it. “Thank you.”

The door swings back and forth as it closes with a squeak. Two of the waitresses are in here applying touch ups to their makeup. Their eyes move from their lips to me in unison. I give them a tight smile before I hurry to use the toilet. I sit down, not knowing why my heart is racing all of a sudden.

Closing my eyes, I attempt to relax enough to pee, but it’s hard knowing people are able to hear me.

“Don’t be shy on our account.” One of them says to the fact I haven’t peed yet. *Not helpful.*

It takes a few more seconds before I’m able to relax enough for anything to happen. When I come out to wash my hands, they’re staring at me. *Do they know who I am?* I swallow, dipping my chin closer to my chest, hoping they don’t recognize me.

“Girl, if you’re in trouble, I would run a hundred miles from here, otherwise your life is as good as gone.”

I stare at them, confused. They're worried about me. I can see it now, and the pity in their eyes.

"Are you offering to help me?" My eyes dart back and forth to them. One of the girls raises both hands.

"No one can help you now."

The door opens and both girls jump and act as if they weren't talking to me. Dante walks in, looking at them before me. They scurry away as fast as they can.

"What did they say to you?" he asks in that spine-chilling way. It's not the same voice he uses when Savio is around.

"They wanted to use my lipstick." I pull it out of the cleavage of my dress. He stares me down, not believing a word, but doesn't call me on it. He opens the door and holds it for me.

As we step back into the main room, the crowd cheers and I see Savio's hand being pushed up as the winner. His eyes search the crowd and he gives me a smirk when our eyes meet. It has my stomach fluttering. I hate not being able to go to him.

My hand stays looped around Dante, even in the parking lot, but the moment we get back into the car, Savio leans between the seats and pulls me close before his lips press against mine.

"If you're going to be making out, get your own car," his brother complains.

"We're celebrating, dipshit." That's all the attention his brother gets before his focus is solely on me. "We're headed to

Dante's and we'll hang with his crew. You can put your other clothes back on."

"Dante's crew?" I ask.

"They're loyal to him, and their lips will be sealed."

More excitement worms its way into me. "So, we're going to a party?"

Dante looks at me like I'm crazy through the rearview mirror. "Yes, and you don't have to pretend to be mine."

I bite my lower lip. I've never been to a real party. Only fancy balls my parents bring me to. Not that I would admit that to these guys.

I easily slip my jeans under my dress, and toss the rest of the outfit over my head before putting on my own shirt.

We pull up to a house that has a DJ outside in the front yard. There have to be a hundred people either milling about the lawn or dancing. "This is your house?" I ask. The house is huge and is lit up like a palace.

"Yes," Dante answers.

Savio pulls me from the back seat and the brothers get a few nods as we make our way toward the front door.

"Let's get a drink." Savio leads me away from his brother to the keg on the lawn.

"Savio, I didn't realize you were allowed to show your face on Italian land." An unknown man with a slight accent—or

he's drunk too much, causing his tongue to be loose—says from somewhere behind us.

Instead of responding, Savio spins and lands a punch to the middle of his face. It takes less than two seconds before someone is pulling the guy away and he's no longer an issue for us.

“Doesn't take criticism well. Noted.”

He pulls me to his side. “Never said I did. I'm more of an act-then-think type of guy.”

I shouldn't be attracted to someone as brutal as him. Or anyone who my father approves of, yet here I am. I wonder what he would think of the rival business I've created. The thought has me wondering about Klaus. I haven't seen him in a week.

Savio's hands roam up the length of my hips. My nerves tingle from his touch while my heart races.

“Why don't you show me the house?” We've stayed on the outskirts of the yard, hidden in the shadows. I can't tell if it's because it's safest for me, or if Savio has no interest in talking to anyone.

“The house?” he asks. His eyes slide behind me and I wonder if he compares where he lives to his brother.

Taking my hand, he leads me through the sea of people outside. We enter the kitchen and find it empty.

“Is no one allowed in here?”

“Only the trusted. Everyone else has to deal with the elements out there. Dante keeps his circle on the patio upstairs so he can sit like a king over his people.”

“Is it okay that we’re in here?”

“It’s safe with me.”

“But not by myself?”

“If you’re under my protection, you’re under Dante’s,” Savio says darkly, and there’s more than a hint of finality in his voice.

“But if I was some girl off the street, I would not be safe,” I state while trying to figure out who or what his brother is.

“You might be the only woman safe here.”

He walks toward the fridge and opens the door, holding out a beer first. I shake my head and he hands me a water, keeping the beer for himself.

Standing in the house with no one around has my nerves jittery. “What would you like to see?” he asks, popping the tab of his beer.

I want a place where I can kiss him and not feel out in the open. Instead of being brave enough to act on my impulse, I respond, “Does he have a game room?”

Savio places his hand on my lower back as he guides me through the large house. We enter a room with a large TV that covers an entire wall. There’s also a pool table, arcade games, a couch, and a bar. The room is magnificent.



Savio's hand stays resting on my back. "Shy Charlotte is just as appealing as sassy Charlotte," his low voice rumbles in my ear.

"Excuse me?" I fake innocence, but my blush rats me out.

His fingers slip through my hair and move it behind my ear before he turns me to look at him. "What are you thinking?" he asks.

"I want to play a game of pool?" It comes out like a question and I want to kick myself. Savio's presence is overwhelming. I've never wanted to throw caution to the wind before, but all I can think about is our moment in the bathroom and how his hands felt on me. And those lips that kiss like a king. I want to feel that again. I want to lose all sense of right, and that's exactly what happens every time he touches me.

# CHAPTER 18

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**SAVIO**

C HARLOTTE'S BLUSH CREEPS UP her neck and along her cheekbone as she looks up at me. I'm not used to her being anything but confident, with no sassy comebacks, but this version is just as sexy as the other one. I have a difficult time not being hard around her.

I lean toward her, my lips barely grazing her earlobe. "Do you want to play pool, or is this what you want?" I kiss her and she easily melts into me. Her soft fingers sprawl over my shoulders, her chest rising rapidly against mine as my lips work her mouth just how she likes.

This girl overrides every sense I have. The fact that we're to be married doesn't mean I get to be kissing her. Old fashioned rules dictate that her first kiss should be at the wedding. Demetri has sheltered her, and I know he's expecting her to remain pure until the night of her wedding.

As much as it pains me, I release her. We're both out of breath. "Have you played pool before?" I ask.

She shakes her head no. *Good.* I take the pool cues that are hung on the wall and place one in her hand. My hands adjust her fingers so she is holding it correctly and her body easily follows my lead as I show her how to place her hands on the table.

My front rests over her back. I'm not ready to let her go just yet. My hands move hers in a practice shot. Today is the first

day I have my pinky unbandaged. It looks hideous, and it's right in the open for her to see.

"Just like that?" she asks breathlessly. I'm shocked she hasn't been grossed out by it touching her.

Her head turns toward me, her breath fanning across my cheek. Her hand moves, but we stay looking at each other. No woman should ever hold such beauty, yet, I don't think Charlotte realizes how stunning she is.

"The ball went into the hole. I think it's your turn," she says with a half smirk. I look back at the table and she's right. Taking my time, I let her go, even though it's the last thing I want. She giggles and looks away as a small blush begins at her chest and rises into her neck and cheeks.

I line up my shot, keeping an eye on her. I'm still waiting for the look of disgust to cross her face, but it's like she doesn't see it. I'm completely distracted and miss the ball. She giggles again. That sound has my heart wanting to grow larger, but I know better. Good things never stay long in my world.

I focus on the ball and it hits a few other balls, but nothing sinks. All I want is to have her in my arms again.

"How do I do it again?" Charlotte asks. She bends down, her ass right out for my viewing pleasure. I force my groan down my throat. *I'm a fucking saint right now.* My cock is harder than steel, and she's being all coy and innocent.

I help her position her hands once again, but this time, she turns in my arms and the pool cue tumbles to the ground. My

heart hammers in my chest. “I don’t want to play pool, I want you to kiss me.” What little blood is left in my head rushes straight back south. All of my willpower to not touch her disappears.

My hands slip down her torso, cupping her tight ass and picking her up. Her legs naturally wrap around my waist and I devour her mouth. The sensual moan that escapes her elicits this strange constriction in my chest.

Her hips rock and her core pushes against my restrained cock. I want nothing more than to bury myself deep into her pussy. I pull back and catch her gaze. The look in her eye reflects how I feel. I kiss her again, my erection at the center of her, and she grinds down harder, becoming braver.

I walk us toward the couch, needing to feel her skin under me. I lay her down and my hand slips under her shirt. She feels like heaven. Her body shivers at my touch as my finger pads glide their way up. *No bra*. This girl will be my unraveling. My hand cups her breast before I pinch her nipple. She moans, encouraging me to continue. My injured hand moves her shirt up to bare her chest to me. I want to see her. Her back arches, allowing me to continue moving her shirt, two perfect globes rising with each of her breaths. Small, pink nipples beg for me to place them in my mouth.

My tongue circles her nipple before my lips wrap around it. Her body shivers at the new sensation. “Savio.” The fingers of my good hand play with her other nipple, eliciting another moan. I live for each of her sounds. Her delicate fingers play

with the hairs on the back of my neck before gliding up into my hair.

I slide my hand down her breast, across her ribs, and slip it between her legs, my thumb brushing against her apex. She moves with my touches. My other hand undoes her jeans as she lifts her hips to help me shed her of the material coating her legs. The damn spot on her yellow daisy panties stares back at me. These panties scream innocence. I should stop everything now, but she's like a beacon, and the only way I'm stopping is if she says no.

My eyes are drawn to hers as she watches me remove her panties. She smiles, her eyes twinkling when she sees me place them in my back pocket.

I kneel between her legs and she tries to close them, but my hands move them wider. "This is my pussy."

I move them further apart before my mouth latches on to her soft clit. Her hips buck, slamming into me, and my hand has to hold her stomach down. I love her responsiveness to each of my touches. My tongue flicks at her sensitive nub before I lick it with the flat part of my muscle. I repeat the process, her hips becoming more frantic. She tastes like a forbidden fruit, one that I can't stop eating.

Her hips dart up hard as she moans my name. I could listen to her yell *Savio* all day long. My one finger dips inside her as her orgasm hits. Her pussy is soft, warm, and wet. My finger slides in and out, stretching her before I add another. She stills at the insertion of my second finger. She's so fucking tight.

Another reminder that she is mine. Her pussy will only ever know my cock.

“Relax. I’m going to make you feel good again.”

My fingers brush against her velvet walls as I stroke her from the inside. She’s so wet, my fingers drip with her arousal.

Her walls flutter around me, and I know she’s close again. I push my luck and stand back, undoing my pants. She watches me with wide eyes, but no protest leaves her mouth. My cock springs free and I allow my jeans to clatter to the floor, my belt metal sounding loudest as I step out of them. Reaching behind my back, I take off my shirt.

Her eyes take me in. I was expecting her to focus on the scars that take up residence on most of my body, but she doesn’t. Her tongue dips out of her mouth, moistening her lips.

I’m so hard it fucking hurts and precum coats the head of my cock. I press her body against mine, my cock at her entrance. She stills with hesitation. I kiss her, my engorged crown brushing her pussy back and forth. When her muscles relax once again, I slip into her slowly. It’s torture and only makes my cock hurt when I’m an inch in. She is the most amazing thing I have ever felt. It takes all of my willpower not to slam into her.

I bring my head back, needing to look at her while I’m fucking her body into submission. I slip in another inch, then another, until I’m fully inside her. She gasps and I stop, allowing her to slowly adjust to my length.



She trembles underneath me, her lips parted and pain in her eyes. I softly kiss her on the forehead and brush my lips over her lashes and cheek. Her tight walls squeeze my cock mercilessly and I fight off my impending orgasm.

“Keep going.” She rocks against me, and I watch, fascinated, as I pull out and light pink coats my dick. I’ve never had sex with a virgin before. Her slickness is proof of my treason, it’s sexy as Hell.

Taking my time, I sink into her again. I keep the slow rhythm, my body fighting against me the entire time. The pain in her eyes diminishes and is quickly replaced by the light of her pleasure. My good hand slips between us, and I rub her clit in time to each of my patient thrusts. I’m holding on by a thread. My balls tingle and it takes every ounce of willpower to not come first.

She gasps again, her core rocking hard against me. Her pussy clamps down on me and her eyes roll back, stealing the last of my control. I come at the same time, an animalist groan escaping me as my balls draw up and I become light-headed from the surging pleasure radiating through me. Sex has never felt like this before.

We lay in each other’s embrace, catching our breaths. I ease out of her and she winces. A beautiful pink glistens on my dick.

I stand up, going to the bar and running the water until it becomes warm, before wetting a paper towel. It’s the best I can do.

“What are you doing?” she asks as I sit between her legs.

“Cleaning you up.” Her face shows her hesitance, but she allows me to part her legs.

My fingers trail up and down her thighs as I clean off the pink from her skin. Charlotte looks happy and relaxed. Tossing the paper towel to the ground, I lie down and bring her on top of me. Her legs tangle in mine. “Maybe we should get dressed.” Her head looks toward the open doorway.

I press her head down to my chest. “No one will be coming in here.”

For once, the dark thoughts that frequently run through my mind have quieted. Maybe for the first time in my life, I feel at peace. The urge to watch my back is a faint thought at the back of my mind. We breathe in unison as I hold her in the quiet room.

# CHAPTER 19

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**CHARLOTTE**

I HAVEN'T HEARD FROM Klaus in two weeks. No one is acting like he's missing, but it's not like him to not check in with me every day.

"Where is Klaus?" I ask my father, walking into his office.

He closes his laptop and rests his hands on it. I know this look. "That's Bratva business." *Surprise, surprise.*

"I'm a Bratva princess, your daughter. He's my best friend. It's my business too."

My father stares at me, emotionless. "Best friend?" he repeats, his eyes narrowing.

"Yes." I stand up taller.

"Klaus is a life sucking monster. He's not your friend."

"He's the only person who has always been there for me."

My father flinches like I've slapped him. "Where was he the night you could have been killed?" His voice is full of tremors, like he's fighting to keep his composure. His full hatred for Klaus is on display. I don't understand why he had Klaus work for him if he hates him so much. "Klaus saw you as an easy target. He was never a friend. It's why I sent you away to college in the first place. But he continued to sink his claws into you," my father spews, disdain thick in his voice.

"Did you kill him?"

My father laughs in a deep, scary tone. "I didn't have to. Savio saw what he was and acted on your behalf. Klaus will

never lay a hand on you again. You should have come to me, Charlotte. You're my daughter. No one gets away with treating you with disrespect."

My ears ring with the news, and my cheeks flush with embarrassment that my father knows how Klaus treated me. *Savio killed Klaus*. Fury rages inside of me, but like my father, I show no emotion. I learned from a young age you can't show how you feel if you want to get ahead.

"I would have come to you, Father, but you refuse to see me as anything more than a daughter. You're irrational when it comes to Katrina, me, or Capree. It's bad for business."

"I have worked my whole adult life to keep you safe. I will never stop. You forget your place, Daughter."

"Which place is that? Your daughter, a woman? You clearly don't see me as capable."

His nose flares as I hit all the sore spots that rile him up. It's the same fight we always have. "If you could see past your unreasonable expectations, you would see a capable woman wanting to take over for you. Instead, you push me down into someone who can't fend for herself. Making all of us your greatest weakness instead of allowing us to rise up and make your empire more powerful. This will be your greatest downfall."

He stands, hitting his desk. "That's enough. I will not tolerate anyone jinxing the Bratva."

I spin on my heels to leave. I said my piece, like I have a hundred times before.



“**W**HO PISSED YOU OFF?” Capree falls into the outdoor lounge chair beside me.

“Everyone.”

“The more you fight with him, the deeper you both dig in your heels. He loves you and is doing what he believes is best.”

“He loves a little girl who thought the world rose and fell by his hands. I’m not that girl anymore.”

“Is breaking his heart worth the damage it will do to our family?” my sister questions with no judgment in her tone. She’s merely asking out of curiosity.

I lift my sunglasses to watch my younger sister. It has me wondering if I haven’t been as careful as I thought and maybe she knows.

“I want him to be proud of me, not break his heart!” I argue.

“You break his heart every time you fake your death.”

I rear back, hurt that she’s defending him. I love my sister, even though we’ve had a hard time understanding each other. She didn’t sit in her own mother’s blood as a baby. It’s not that I remember, but I swear my body remembers the feeling of it. She never watched her father murder a man, I did, at the age of four. She grew up with the perfect loving family from the start,

whereas I was raised by nannies for the first four years of my life. Everyone leaves me eventually. It's how my life has gone.

New anger surfaces about Savio taking away my friend. If anyone, it should have been me sending Klaus away. I should have done it, and Savio destroyed my chance. He's just like my father. They're the protectors I don't need. Soon they'll see they made a mistake by underestimating me. I will rise and be just as powerful, and no one will ever mistake me again.

My muscles are tight by the time Savio enters our house for family dinner. He and my father shake hands.

"Charlotte, you look beautiful tonight," Savio greets all polite like, as if he wasn't whispering dirty little nothings in my ear as he took my virginity. I narrow my eyes, refusing to smile. It makes both Savio and my father pause. I'm not in the mood for fake pleasantries. My head continues to battle my anger. One wrong move, and I'll spark like a lightning storm.

My mother looks confused, while my father wears his strained smile that looks like puppet strings are pulling at his face. Capree is smiling, enjoying the show and shoving bread into her mouth.

"I'm surprised you men have time to sit with the women when you have so much work to do." Katrina kicks my foot at my outburst.

"Mom, why did you kick me?"

Savio clears his throat. "Thank you for inviting me." He looks to both my mother and father with his perfect manners



once again. Everyone is being fake. Savio and I have seen each other enough to be past this small talk bullshit. Not that my parents know.

“As my fiancé, you will be required to come to a lot more of these dinners,” I dryly respond.

“What has gotten into you?” Katrina grinds her teeth, speaking for only me to hear.

From the stories I’ve heard about her, I doubt she would sit so perfectly if she were in my shoes.

“I’m just so happy about the wedding,” I reply for everyone to hear. Both men take a seat.

“I’m a very lucky man,” Savio says, taking a drink of his water. I wonder if he’s sweating in that seat right now. He gives nothing away.

“The wedding pressure has really been taken off of me now,” I announce with a smile and take a large gulp of my wine. Katrina tilts her head clearly not understanding what type of pressure I’m talking about. Or why any pressure has been removed.

“It will be a magical day and night,” Capree adds, her eyes darting to everyone, trying to understand what’s happening.

“You were pregnant with Capree when you two married, right?” I ask my parents. Tension coils around the room and Savio is still looking perfectly at ease. “Savio, could you imagine what Demetri would do if I was three months pregnant when we married.”

“Mom was nine months. She went into labor the same day,” Capree clarifies, the ever-helpful sister.

“I bet the wedding jitters really went away when you didn’t have the looming fear of the wedding night hovering over you.” I take another sip of wine, looking at my parents one by one.

“Charlotte,” Katrina hisses, and puts on a fake smile for Savio. He still looks right at home. All I want is a fucking reaction.

“Where is this going?” my father asks in a lethal tone.

“Savio was very helpful in popping my cherry to help keep wedding stress to a minimum,” I answer.

Savio places the water glass that had been at his lips down. “Fuck me,” he mutters. Even then, the reaction is disappointing. I was expecting him to jump up and beg at my father’s feet. Maybe a denial. His breathing is still calm and he turns to my father, who looks like he’s going to murder him.

My father pushes back his chair, his face red as he breathes hard through his nose. His gun comes up and points at Savio. Savio brings his gun up and instead of pointing it back at my father, he places it down on the dining room table. He brings another gun out and places it next to the first.

“I assure you, I treated her with respect.” My mouth opens as he owns up to what we did.

My father points at his missing pinky finger. “That was your first warning. I thought I made myself clear to you.”

“That wasn’t a random girl. I was hoping you would know me better than that. That night, Charlotte came to the fight with me.”

My hand covers my mouth as I realize Savio is missing a finger because he covered for me. My father shakes his head and presses the trigger. My scream pierces the room as my legs push me from the chair and I fly toward Savio, who’s clenching his side.

“What the fuck?” I scream.

Savio places his hand on me. “This is between your father and I. I deserve the punishment.” His other hand cradles my cheek. I don’t realize I’m crying until his thumb wipes a tear away.

“You have one minute to leave my house before I shoot again. Charlotte, get back to your seat.”

“I’m not leaving him,” I cry, real tears flooding down my cheeks.

“You can’t be the one to put the dagger in my back and the one who tries to take it out.” Savio’s voice is void of emotion as he talks to me. He doesn’t sound upset, sad, or happy. I stand up, my body trembling as I raise my hand. It’s covered in his blood.

I watch as Savio nods to my mother. “Sorry about ruining dinner,” he apologizes.

“Savio, I’m sorry.” I try to run after him, but my father keeps me in place.

Every eye in the room watches him leave with his head held high, taking full responsibility. When his back disappears, each of those eyes land on me.

“Charlotte,” my father begins.

“Don’t be a hypocrite!” I yell. He lets me go and I storm out of the room, needing space.

My pulse is pounding like it wants to bleed out like Savio. My stomach swooshes and I feel sick. All I want is for everyone to take me seriously and stop treating me like a useless woman.

I.

AM.

MORE.

My father storms up the stairs after me. “The marriage is off. I will not allow my daughter to be with anyone who is not loyal,” Demetri’s angry voice roars from behind me. Right now, he’s not the man who loved me when I was little; he’s not the father I grew up with. He’s Demetri Sokolov, the Pakhan.

“Last I checked, this is *my* marriage, not yours. They should be loyal to me, and the Hell with you!” I scream to get the last word in.

# CHAPTER 20

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**SAVIO**

**B**ULLETS ALWAYS HURT LIKE a bitch. I grind down on the leather in my mouth. “You fucked his precious, and he shot you,” Dante laughs. He digs around to find the damn bullet. The Bratva would have been no help to me, leaving my brother to be the last and only person who would.

“Keep talking like that and I’ll put a bullet in you.”

He digs deeper and produces the small bullet. He turns it around, admiring it before getting up to rinse it. “What the Hell are you doing? I could use a stitch or two.”

“I need to put this in your bullet jar.” He stands, leaving the room in search of my jar of metal.

“Why is it you keep the bullets that enter me and not you?” I ask when he reenters with the jar in question.

“Because I’m stealthy enough not to get shot. You, on the other hand, make a habit out of it.”

“What number is that one?” I ask, pretending not to know.

“That, sir, is number eight.” I hear the clang of the metal in the glass, and he shakes the jar.

I sit up and loop the fishing wire through the needle and begin to stitch myself up. If I wait for my brother, I’m liable to bleed to death.

“I’m excited to have you back in the family.” He slaps my arm and I grunt from the pain it sends to my wound.

My oldest brother, Romeo, walks into my house like he lives here. “This is clearly an act of war.” It’s been ten years since I’ve seen him face to face, but he’s clearly in boss mode right now. It has taken them years to rebuild the Mancini name among the mafia.

“You called him?” I turn to my other brother and pull my stitch a little too tight at the shock of seeing Romeo. An annoyed scoff rips through my throat. I’m the man who lives in the middle of being half accepted by everyone, but not enough for anyone to trust.

“Demetri has taken this too far!” Romeo raises his voice.

“Can’t say I blame the man,” I mumble.

“I should have never sent you there. It was supposed to be two years, and then you would come back home.” *But then I landed myself in jail.*

“I am being compensated for my time.” The thoughts of my *compensation* make it impossible to keep my face straight. That girl has gotten under my skin.

“I just don’t understand how you are so accepting. You’re Italian. Working for the Russians is an insult to you, never mind the fact you’re one of their top guys. It defies all logic.” Dante declares as I’m looping my third stitch, acting as if the three of us regularly get together.

“Everyone knows it was me who fucked the wife and not Savio. Romeo, apologize for trying to save face, then you two can kiss and make up. Then we can plan our battle.”



“Savio being the Bratva top man was the main purpose of sending him over. The Rossi family has their hands in every type of alliance. It’s time we do the same. We fight for Charlotte. I see no other way,” Romeo adds.

“I’m a disloyal traitor in the Pakhan’s eyes, now.” It puts a bad taste in my mouth. Not because I care about anything that Demetri thinks, but the need to see Charlotte crawls under my skin.

“That’s bullshit,” both my brothers say in unison.

“I was never a part of the Italian mafia world in any meaningful way,” I admit the truth. I didn’t hone my skills until jail.

“Not true,” Dante argues.

Romeo adds. “People have always been scared to fight you on anything.”

I shrug, cutting off the line. “I’ll deal with this the same way as always, by accepting my fate.”

“You’re willing to let her go?” Dante asks.

I scoff. “Hell no.” My feet touch the ground as I stand. “I have always owned my faults and half of yours. I’m not backing down on this. I’d rather die.”

“You have that look in your eye. Should we be calling Max back to civilization?” Dante asks. It’s been even longer since I’ve talked to our second-oldest brother than it had been with Romeo. He’s a hermit that likes to live in the middle of nowhere.

“I don’t need any of you to fight my battles.”

Dante’s hand comes down on my shoulder. “We’re brothers, we fight together.”

I need to figure out who this Charlie guy is. Maybe I can use him to my advantage. “You guys need to get out of my house. I’ll touch base in the morning. Everyone needs to take a day before we decide if it’s worth starting a war over.”

They nod, but don’t look like they want to leave. “Get the fuck out!” I lose my patience.

The whole situation is a colossusfuck. I glare at my brothers and they start to leave. I welcome the silence of my house. My couch is lumpy but comforting and the night noise is welcome. I hate sleeping in silence. Nothing ever good comes of it. It’s like the eye of the storm.

As I’m starting to doze off, my front door opens and I grasp my gun beside me and aim it at the door. A petite figure wearing jeans and a black hoodie walks in.

“You need to leave, Charlotte. I don’t need to be buried tonight. I was already shot.”

She uncovers her head and mascara is smudged under her eyes like she might have been crying. I look closer, but her eyes are dry now. Her timing could not have been worse tonight. I’m beyond furious.

“I wanted to check on how you are.” Her words have my dick hardening. It’s a fucking traitor. I should be kicking her out, but I can’t. I crave her too much.

I scoff. “I’m not the type of man who needs to be fixed or taken care of.” I take care of myself. No one has ever stepped up. Our mother took pleasure in mine and Dante’s pain.

“I’m sorry.” She closes the door and walks closer to me and even my grumpy attitude fails to discourage her. I close my eyes, her scent already taking over my small home. If she was smart, she would leave and never return. “I didn’t know he would shoot you.”

My eyes open at her stupid comment and my temper rages. “Are you fucking listening to yourself? I know you’re sheltered, but I also thought you were smart.” Her eyes well with tears at my harsh words, but I’m not done yet. “You did us both a favor. You’re more trouble than your pretty face shows.” The last sentence digs into my chest. I want to keep her. Her being here raises the stakes. She needs to leave before I decide death won’t stop me from claiming her as mine. My heart already thinks it’s true. To keep her, I’ll have to rip her world apart, and I don’t know if she could forgive me. And by that time, I won’t care.

“My dad said he’d find someone else to marry me.”

“No shit.” I lay one of my hands over my forehead, wishing I could have this argument without one foot in the grave. My fury rises. Demetri must already be planning my death.

“I want to marry *you*.” Her sweet soft voice has me cracking my eyes open.

“Why?” I ask, flabbergasted. “You didn’t want to an hour ago.”

“That’s not true,” she says defensively as she sits next to my middle, careful not to touch me.

An annoyed chuckle leaves my throat. *Does she think I’m stupid?* “So, you thought your dad would be happy that I popped his princess’s cherry? I bet he would really love that I did it on Italian soil, and at a house party, no less. It’s the exact special memory he wanted you to have.”

“I was mad at you, okay? I wasn’t thinking. You killed Klaus and didn’t even say a word to me.”

Klaus’s name has my blood pressure spiking. I wish I could kill him over and over again. He got off too easy. “Yes, I forgot you like sucking his dick.” I close my eyes but hear the sharp inhale of breath because of my words. My hands fist with that image popping into my head. Charlotte is mine. I refuse to share.

“It was never like that between us.” Her hand lightly traces up and down my naked chest. I’m only in my boxers because I wanted to be able to move with ease.

“Bullshit.” I study her facial expression, wanting it to be true.

“Fine, I had a crush on him. Happy?”

*Fuck no!*

“I bet he was your first kiss.” I take in a deep breath, hating the idea. The pain has faded more into the background as I argue with Charlotte. She has a way of making herself the center of my attention.

“He was a lot more than that.” Hurt laces her tone. I wonder how far Charlotte let Klaus go.

“I know. Klaus was the one you loved, and you hated that I was picked over him.” I could see it in her eyes that night. I wonder if Demetri is using his daughter to get to me. I close my eyes, trying to calm myself down.

“You nailed it, Savio. I can’t hide anything from you.” Sarcasm drips from her tone.

Her small touches have my dick hardening. I’m furious with her, and at myself for allowing her to have that power over me. I’m thirty-two. Woman drama is a young man’s game. I obviously like punishing myself, because I ask, “How many times did you suck his cock?” Killing Klaus was the best thing I’ve ever done. I would do it all over again in a heartbeat.

“Six times. Every Christmas when I came home.” I open my eyes and she’s looking at my chest and not at my face. She’s fucking lying. I can see it in her mannerisms. It angers me more, and turns me on knowing her lips have never touched another man. I wonder how far she will take the lie.

“Why are you here?”

She’s silent, her fingers tracing small shapes on my skin.

“I don’t want to be engaged to anyone but you.”

“It’s a little late for that.”

“I’m sorry Savio.” Her face lifts and she meets my gaze. Her eyes are glassy, full of emotion.

“Prove it.”

Her hand stops drawing on my chest, but her touch never leaves me. “How?” she asks innocently.

My cock is fully hard now as I stare at her luscious lips. No one has ever accused me of being a good man.

“Put my dick in your mouth. Show me how you would suck his cock.”

Her face looks stunned for a moment, but then she gets down on her knees in my living room and her delicate fingers pull my waist band down until my cock pops out at full attention.

Her movements are uncertain and it pleases me to no end that she lied about Klaus. Her hand wraps around my shaft, her fingers unable to touch.

“Wrap your tongue around it, then suck the tip before going all the way down,” I direct.

“I obviously know how to give head.” Her cheeks pinken and she stares at my dick like she has never seen one up close and personal.

Hesitantly, she does as I said. Her warm, soft, unskilled tongue licks my crown before she wraps her lips around it. It’s the most beautiful sight I have ever seen.

Her tongue swirls up and down my shaft. “Take off your sweater.” I want to see more of her.

Her lips let go of me and she gives me a teasing lick from my crown to base before her hands reach for her way-too-large hoodie. She's in a small spaghetti-strap tank top. Her nipples are puckered against the thin material. I love that she doesn't wear a bra. The thought of her naked breasts so close to me makes my erection painful.

“Pull your shirt down and show me your tits.” One strap at a time, she slips the thin material down her arm until both are bare to me. My hand reaches out and touches her torso. My fingertips rise until I can feel the underside of her tits.

My stitches no longer take precedence in my mind. She leans forward and licks me with another long stroke of her tongue. If I die tonight, I'll die a happy man. My hand easily cups her perfect tits with her leaning over me. My fingers glide up and pinch at her nipple. Her entire body rocks with my touch, mimicking her mouth's motion on my cock.

I wish I were more of a selfish man. I should be enjoying my dick being sucked and falling asleep. Instead, my hands wander down between her legs. My thumb brushes back and forth in controlled movement.

All I can think about is the so-called perfect Charlotte, Bratva Princess, sucking my cum down her beautiful throat.

My hips naturally move with her, and the motion pulls, sending a slight reminder of my wound. I don't fucking care, though. My hips accidentally buck hard and it touches the back of her throat. I can feel a stitch or two being ripped from

its place. My hand moves faster between her legs and she grinds against it frantically.

I'm fighting against the tingling of my balls and her moaning is music to my ears. She screams out, my dick popping out of her mouth at the same time her hand squeezes the shit out of my dick and strokes me twice.

I'm about to come when she places her hot lips over me and I release myself down her throat. I'm panting. This image is the fucking hottest thing I have ever witnessed. When her mouth comes off me, she swipes the back of her hand across her lips. *Gorgeous.*

"Why did you lie to me about Klaus?" I manage to ask. I'm still seeing stars from the orgasm she gave me.

Guilt lays heavy in her eyes. She stumbles over her words. "I don't know what you mean?"

"Charlotte." I'm tired of this game of hers. "I know you have never touched Klaus's dick before. Otherwise, I would have cut it off when I killed him."

Surprise flashes through her eyes. "I'm sorry. You have been my firsts for everything that counts." That honesty does something strange to my heart. It's like she just branded herself here.

"It's going to stay that way," I order. Demetri can go fuck himself if he thinks I'm letting his daughter go.

I grasp the back of her neck and kiss her. I would love to brand myself to her, like she has done to me. When I finish the



kiss, I allow her to pull away. “You’re bleeding,” she gasps.

My hand goes to my wound and I can feel the fresh blood. “It’s nothing I can’t restitch.”

She’s already up and grabbing a clean cloth to place on my injury. “I’m sorry,” she apologizes again.

“I know. If we get angry with each other, we need to talk it through. No more hiding from each other.” I never thought I would ever be saying these words.

“What about my father?” she asks with hopeful eyes.

“I’ll take care of him. Don’t worry.” Demetri is a dead man. She nods, thinking all we need is a little conversation. The time for talking is through. Tomorrow, I will plan out our war on the Bratva.

# CHAPTER 21

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**CHARLOTTE**

“CHARLOTTE.” I’M CALLED INTO my father’s office. He hasn’t spoken to me for three days. I’m shocked he didn’t escape to an out-of-town meeting to avoid me and the topic of sex. I desperately wish he could see past the fact I’m his daughter and take me seriously.

“I’m sorry you had to witness me shooting Savio the other night.” My father walks around his large desk and wraps me in a hug. Maybe this conversation will head in the right direction. I relax into his arms, remembering all the good times we have had with each other.

“You’re forgetting I first saw you shoot a man when I was four.”

My father rubs at his forehead. “Five,” he corrects with a sigh. I can see how this information tortures his soul. I wish he would embrace it instead.

“Seeing a man being shot doesn’t bother me, but I feel responsible that you felt the need to shoot my fiancé.” I try to be diplomatic.

My father growls and lets me go. “He disrespected you.”

“Papa.” I lift a perfectly manicured eyebrow. “He in no way disrespected me. I’ll be marrying the man, and I didn’t want that night to hover over me.”

“I should have known he would manipulate you. This time you’ll marry a Russian and then there will be no question about who my heir will be.” My mouth gapes open.

“If you had a boy, he would be your heir. Why can’t I be?”

He runs his hand over his puckered jaw line. “Why must we have this discussion? My world is no place for a woman. Especially my daughter.”

“I should be going to meetings with you and learning. I’m the first born, after all.” It takes everything in me not to stomp my foot. “You welcomed Katrina into your world. Your diamonds are shipped to her, after all.”

“She’s different than you. She thrived in the chaos of my world and she would have murdered me in my sleep if I didn’t.”

“Who says I wouldn’t thrive?”

“Fine,” defeat laces his tone but I don’t feel bad about it.

I open my mouth, shocked. “Really?” I question. I want to jump up and down, but I’m worried my happiness will be short-lived.

He nods. “Before we announce your new engagement, we will sit down with your husband-to-be and discuss how you can be involved with as little risk as possible.”

I sit down, realizing he’s not hearing me. I don’t know how many other ways I can express my wishes. I look my father in the eye. “I’m marrying Savio.”

“The Hell you are!” It looks like my father’s eyes are going to bulge out of his head as his temper gets the best of him.

“People are going to question why you are announcing a new fiancé to your daughter in such a short time.”

My dad scoffs. “I’m Pakhan, no one questions me,” he says egotistically. “Anyway, people will agree when they hear your husband will be my heir. Savio was a poor choice. With his Italian descent, he could never take over.”

“*I’m* questioning you,” I argue.

“Charlotte, know your place.”

I stand, raising my arms in the air. I’m over this conversation, there is no getting through to him.



**I** HATE DOING THIS to my father, but if I’m going to get him to listen, I have to hit him where it hurts. In a full black ski mask, my men and I plan to steal the diamonds that are being shipped to Katrina’s gallery in canvases. I watch as the canvases are being loaded onto the truck. They are continually being moved around, making this the closest stop before they land in our city.

I can’t tell which ones have the diamonds or not, so I have to take as many as I can. I watch as the men move the art wrapped in sheets a bundle at a time.

I nod toward my two men who will be my distraction. From afar, I watch as the first men on patrol are taken down. We’re using small doses of a fast-acting sedative, since I’m working very hard on not hurting anyone. These men will be mine one

day, but caring that they stay alive makes this heist trickier and more dangerous for us. I get closer to the trucks and check my watch. The other set of guards should be going down now.

My fingers tingle with wanting to touch the art, to have the diamonds in my hands, and hold part of my future empire.

I watch as the men place the last pieces into the boxy van. I could easily steal the whole truck, but my point in this is to show my father where he is lacking. I have everything envisioned in my mind. I will inform him it was me, then I'll tell him about our empires growing together. I'm giddy thinking about it. I know he'll be mad at first, but once he settles and Katrina talks reason with him, he'll see I am fit to walk in his shoes with him and after him.

I look at my watch. I have thirty seconds before the guards come back. Sneaking toward the truck, my feet feel light as a feather.

My hands grasp the blanket over the paintings just as I feel the cold nudge of metal behind my head before I raise my hands and slowly pivot around. Two semi-automatic guns are pointed at me. My reflexes are fast, but they won't help me in this situation. My heart pounds, beating against my ribcage. *I'm a dead woman.* All I can think about is my family's disappointment when they see it's *my* dead body. Without my side of the story, they will always think the worst of me.

The rumble of an engine comes closer. It's either one of my men or my father's, but it's a risk I'm going to have to take. I do a backflip off the truck and guns begin to fire. I keep my

head down and try to be as small as possible as I weave through the night and around the other vehicles at the drop. A figure on a blue motorcycle fires at the guards, killing them before it stills in front of me and I jump on.

My hands wrap around the large body, not knowing what my night and future will hold. The bike weaves in and out and my hands grip each other around the stranger's waist. I keep my face turned against his broad shoulders to keep the wind off my face. Each turn is sharper than the last. It would take me turning wrong with the machine's rhythm for the two of us to fall and become roadkill.

As the lights disappear and the view of the city retreats beneath the dark sky, the stranger stops. We both sit there, breathing hard. His back moves up and down with the same excitement as my labored breaths.

Slowly, I lift my stiff posture off the hot bike. The man does the same with much more grace than I had. His thighs are clad in dark denim that portrays how strong he is. He takes off his leather coat to reveal a tight-fitting shirt perfectly stretched across his torso. Thick arm veins stretch down his forearm.

I stand silently, watching him. If he was going to kill me, he would have done it already. I wait for him to take off his helmet. The anticipation unnerves me. He steps into my personal space and his hands come up. I hold my breath, waiting to see the face. Instead, he rips my ski mask off. I gasp, not expecting the motion, and he's able to turn me and



place me between the bike and him. His strong legs hold mine in place.

His fingers take their time undoing the strap of his large helmet. Its visor is black, not giving his appearance away.

The seconds seem to take minutes.

“Hello, Charlotte,” Savio rasps as his face slips from under the protective gear.

# CHAPTER 22

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**CHARLOTTE**

**F**OR ONCE IN MY life, I'm stunned silent with Savio's less-than-happy greeting. "Are you going to use this to get back into my father's good graces?" My father owns every man. They have all taken oaths to be loyal to him.

"Why are you betraying your own family?" His lips are pursed, and his eyes narrow at me. "This information would kill your father, and nothing has come close to doing that."

I scoff, my irritation growing. "I've never betrayed my father."

"What would you call it then?" His breath fans across my cheeks.

"I wanted to show them that they had a weakness and exactly where it lay. If I walked into my father's office, he would tell me not to bother *my pretty little head* over it. No one takes me seriously, most of all my father."

"And getting yourself killed by your family's men is the answer?"

"I wasn't getting myself killed. This is the least dangerous thing I've done this month."

His hand comes up and he twirls my silky strands between his fingers. "I'm sure it wasn't, Charlie."

My heart sputters, hearing the name I have been using. "What did you just say?" Now that I'm faced with the reality

of my decisions, I feel like a cornered feral cat that wants to claw its way out of danger.

“By your father’s word, I’m to find you and hang you from the hooks. I find the hooks very encouraging typically.” His eyes trail my face, down my neck, before he lets go of my hair. “It normally doesn’t bother me to rough up some perfect skin.”

I swallow. “I did what I had to do so my father would see me. Again, he refuses to see what I am capable of. I idolize the man, I want to be him, yet I will never be more than his little girl.”

“You’re right; backstabbing your family is the perfect way to get their attention.”

“I want our diamond empires to merge. We are stronger for it. It makes us diversified. I want to show that when we have port problems, it doesn’t have to have a crippling effect.”

“Nothing cripples your father.”

“Except my betrayal, right?”

“Marry me.” His voice is raspy and strained. “Tonight. Tomorrow. As soon as it’s possible.”

He pushes his body harder into me and my hands are forced to hold on to the seat of the motorcycle as I lean back. My breath catches in my throat and I stare up at him. “Why?”

“I just saved the Bratva’s number one enemy. We’re in this together.”

“Save your Boy Scout honor for someone else. What are you really getting out of this?”

His hands wrap around my waist. “You are mine and I protect what’s mine.”

“This won’t stop them from killing you. Hand me over now and you might live to be an old man.” I want no one’s pity, least of all Savio’s. “I can take care of myself.”

“You have your father’s stubbornness.”

His pocket vibrates against my thigh. Keeping his eyes locked on me, he answers his phone. “Yes, Boss?” he answers.

“Did you find Charlie?” I hear through the phone.

I wish my heart would stop pounding so hard. I have a hard time believing Savio would go against my father for me. I expect to hear my father’s voice on the other end of the line, but it’s a voice I don’t recognize that is heard through the phone.

“Charlie is in my hands right now.”

Savio nods his head as he listens, but the voice is too muffled to hear what’s being said before he hangs up the phone.

“There’s no going back now,” I whisper.

Savio is staring at me with admiration. No one has ever looked at me this way before. “I was a forgotten son, looked down upon by my older brothers for what they perceived my life was like. I just wanted to be respected and appreciated. I

knew I could earn my position with your father. It's why I took the heat away from my brother. Dante has always been the lover, while I've always been the fighter."

His eyes glance down at my lips, then back into my eyes. I swear Savio was made for me. Having him stand behind me means everything. It's hard not to fall in love with him. Day by day, he has chipped away at the barricade that I have built around my heart.

He presses his lips down on mine, his hands pulling me impossibly close. His kiss is demanding and I willingly submit to his need. My mouth grants him access and his tongue slips in. A growl rumbles at the back of his throat as a small delicate moan leaves me.

"Take me back to your house," I demand between kisses.

Savio pulls away, looking smug before he places his helmet over my head. "You're going to be the death of me," he mutters, but a smile stays on his face. It's contagious and I beam back up at him.



## Savio

**S**TEPPING OFF MY BIKE, there's a new energy that radiates off us. I like that her expression doesn't change when she sees the crumbling building. I like the fact that I live on the shitty side of town. I like thinking I'm doing a service by keeping this area safer just by being here. I've never been cognizant of what someone else might think, until her.

There are going to be consequences for my actions tonight, but I push the idea of them down. All I want to do is get lost in Charlotte. Her light is a beacon to me that I can't refuse.

I keep my hand on her lower back as we enter the terrace of my building. There are a few men grouped upon a front porch who look her up and down, but as soon as their eyes land on me, they turn away like she doesn't exist. It makes me smile. If any one of them had cat called her, they would have to deal with me once she wasn't around.

I twist the handle to the door of my place and push the door open for her.

"You honestly don't lock your door?" She sounds confused.

"I don't need to." I shrug. This neighborhood looks after one another.

"No one is invisible."

I close the door behind us and turn her into me. "You most definitely have never been invisible." I've watched how the men near her force their eyes to the ground, yet keep her in



their vision. If Demetri wasn't such a scary bastard, she would have to be shooing men away like flies. Her eyes search mine, looking for truth. "You have this radiating personality and beauty that draws people in. I know I can't stay away from you."

Her fingers draw up my arm with a slight touch, innocent, and it hardens my cock.

She gives me a shy smile and I'm starting to believe she knows what she's doing to me. "I'm shocked you returned after I ran you over," she teases. "But you didn't bring me here to talk, did you?" A light rose color brightens her cheeks.

"Show me what you want." My voice is gruff. Charlotte will soon be Charlotte Mancini.

She takes my hand then slides it over her navel and up her shirt. My hand cups her bare breast. I fucking love that she doesn't wear a bra. My fingers twist at her nipple before circling the underside of her boob. A shiver runs through her.

Her facial expressions are never hidden. I love watching them when I touch her. The fight between needing to kiss her and wanting to watch her rages within me.

"Now what?" I ask.

Her hand slides toward the top of her black leggings. One finger dips between her legs. "I want you to kiss me here."

My knees bend without hesitation. This girl drives me crazy. I would love to rip her clothes off her and take her hard and fast, but I know a woman like her deserves to be savored.

I kneel in front of her and kiss her pussy through her leggings. “Like this?”

I give her my innocent face. Her brow rises before she answers, “I want you to kiss me with no barrier.”

I drag my finger to the back of her leggings, her soft skin warm against my callouses. Inch by inch, I bring her form-fitting pants down until they reach her knees. My lips kiss their way down her stomach and I place a kiss over her white panties. They’re sensible and cover her entire ass, but on her, they are the sexiest panties I’ve ever set eyes on.

I look up and watch her face as I slide the white material down to her knees. I could make a living out of worshiping her body.

Her pussy is already glistening for me. She is perfection. I place a soft kiss on her labia.

“Not that type of kiss.” She smiles.

“No?” I wait for further instructions from her.

“I want a French kiss.”

My cock is straining against my pants as I kiss her pussy again before my tongue slips between her folds. Her fingers naturally dig into my hair and she moans. She tastes like candy; sweet and soft. I lick her again, loving the reaction I get out of her. I do it slowly, teasing, before I grip her legs and toss her over my shoulders as I stand to my full height.

She giggles and that does something strange to my heart. I walk us into my bedroom and toss her onto the bed. She

bounces and I can't take my eyes away from the way her tits bounce with the rest of her body. Her legs stay together, her leggings and panties restraining her, and it's a sight to behold. Her shirt has risen and the fabric lands just underneath her breasts, amplifying her round globes.

I rip my shirt over my head and pounce on her, the bed sliding a few inches with my sudden movement. I lick, kiss, and nip her skin on my way up her body. I have never seen anything so unblemished before. Most of my skin is either raised with scars or covered with smooth white patches that refuse to tan in the summer.

My nose pushes up her shirt before my mouth lavishes her peaked nipple. She groans and shakes her head as her long fingers hold on to my shoulders.

"Do you want to come on my cock or my tongue?" I ask, lifting my head to watch her answer.

"Both," she answers right away.

I move my hand down and slip a finger between her folds before I push it into her. Her pussy is wet and tight, begging for me to take it.

"Want to know a truth?" I question as I finger her.

She makes some semblance of an *mmm* sound.

"I love that you will only ever come on my cock." She rocks her hips, causing my finger to go deeper.

"That's because your cock belongs to me now."

I lick her clit while I continue to finger her. “You mean your pussy belongs to me.” Her walls flutter around my finger and I suck on her sensitive nub.

“You own more than just my pussy.” She moans as her walls grip my finger like a vice before she cries out. A thrill shoots through me knowing what we have isn’t one sided.

I slip off my pants and move her pants to her ankles, giving me just enough room to shove inside her. She cries out and I still, allowing her a moment to catch her breath and get used to my size.

I support my weight on my elbows that rest on either side of her head. When she starts moving, I rock back into her. I try to go slow when it looks like I might be too much for her. It takes all of my willpower to not slam into her. She moans with pleasure.

“Don’t hold back,” she pleads. “Just fuck me.”

I grip her hands with one of mine and hold them above her head. Her shirt is around her neck and her tits rub against my chest.

“When I realized it was you trying to steal those paintings, I lost my mind. I no longer focused on my job because I knew the only thing that mattered was keeping you safe, no matter the cost.” Each thrust heightens the sensations overwhelming each nerve in my body.

She writhes underneath me, whimpering with pleasure. I never thought I believed in Heaven until now. I know this is

what it must feel like. I shudder and groan at how good we feel together. Her walls clamp down and her fingernails rake down my marred back.

I thrust harder and deeper, the sound of our sex takes over the room. She screams out her release, her head thrashing as her orgasm washes over her. In awe, I watch her face change into pure bliss. I can't hold back anymore. I push as deep as I can and come so hard my dick pulses for several minutes.

I roll off her and pull her in to me, our hearts beating a mile a minute. I look down and my cock has a light pink coating on it again. I smile at the reminder that her virginity was mine. The thought of being with a virgin never appealed to me until Charlotte.

I kiss the tip of her nose and she snuggles in closer to me.

I can't sleep. I close my eyes and listen to Charlotte's even breathing and the sounds of my neighborhood. I hold myself to a high degree of honor, and I still stand by my choice of choosing Charlotte, but I can't help but wonder about the true ramifications of that decision. Demetri is not a forgiving man. My ring finger brushes against the nub where my pinky had once been. I breathe Charlotte in and I know I made the right decision, even if that decision might cost me my life. What's the saying? "It's better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all."

Charlotte stirs beside me, and I continue to pretend to be asleep. The bed dips and her warmth leaves me with just the

cold air of the room. I can feel her standing over me and I wonder what she is thinking. Her soft lips touch my cheek.

I never took her as a girl who would run out in the middle of the night. Before her, I would have welcomed this.

When I don't feel her presence anymore, I open my eyes as I hear the front door close.

I get up, tossing on my boxers, and watch her leave to make sure she's safe. There are still a few people outside because this area never sleeps. I smirk when no one walks up to her. A tinted-out sports car pulls up and picks her up. It has me wondering who it is, and a pang of possessiveness courses through me. It can't be any of Demetri's men, so I can only assume it is someone loyal to her.

My small home is too quiet with her gone. I can't stand it. Throwing on some clothes, I head out. It's not like sleep will come to me now. I go toward my parking spots and choose my sports car to use for tonight.

I drive aimlessly around the city I have helped Demetri grow. When the sun peeks over the horizon, I head out of Bratva territory. As the miles rack up, my fingers tap the steering wheel faster. My heart pumps in time with the rhythm of my fingers.

The driveway I pull into is gravel, even though the road is paved. The house looks like it's been abandoned, but the curtain inside moves. *She's still alive.*

The door is already open a crack as I step onto the creaking porch. I wait to fall through the rotten wood. “Savio.” My mother doesn’t sound pleased to see me.

“Mother. Here, I thought you would be happy to see your son.”

She spits at my feet. “I’m ashamed to say I birthed you. All my sons are traitors. Your father must be rolling in his grave. At least your brothers kept their Italian roots. But you...” She points her finger at me. “Go, before someone sees you here.”

I take a seat on her worn couch and dust poofs into the air as I sit. Calmly, I remind her, “You are alive because of me. Dante wanted you gone, Romeo and Maximus wanted to visit you and father at the same headstone.”

“The Mancini name is forever cursed.”

I shake my head. She’s one of the reasons I’ve never wanted love. I can see how it changes you. Before my father’s death, she was kind, beautiful, and loving. After he died, everything changed. She no longer cared about anything. For all intents and purposes, she died the same day as my father.

She begins to laugh hysterically. “You have fallen in love,” she tells me, and grabs her cross that she used to beat Dante and I with.

I don’t even know why I came here. This is the first time I have seen my mother since Romeo accepted Dante and I into his life. Maybe it’s to prove to myself that not all women are

like my mother. I look at her and feel nothing. She is the reason why I never thought I would ever fall in love.

“If you love the girl, leave her alone. Your father had the same hands as you and Max. They’re killer hands. No love has ever or will ever come from them. She will hate you in the end.”

I force my eyes upon my mother, refusing to look at my hands that hold the death of over a hundred men. She begins to laugh like a hyena, her chest rising like she can’t breathe because of her laughter. “I can see in your face you know what I’m talking about. Maybe you will understand why I think you boys are all better off dead. I should have killed you and Dante when I had the chance. It’s a pity that your father needed an heir, otherwise the other two would have been dead long before you came around.”

The desire to strangle this woman is overbearing and a bullet to the head would be too kind. I can’t remember why we decided to keep her alive as I pivot on my heels and stride toward the door.

“You will only bring her misery,” she calls at my back.

I don’t stop moving.



# CHAPTER 23

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**CHARLOTTE**

I HATE DISAPPEARING ON Savio in the middle of the night. I look down at his sleeping face, wanting to say goodbye as my phone vibrates again in my hand. Reluctantly, I step away from the bed, gathering my clothes before I leave his house behind.

My driver rolls down the road precisely as I step out, and a while later, I'm in my warehouse inspecting my father's diamonds. My men were able to finish the job for me while I was with Savio.

The metamorphic rocks glimmer brightly as the door to my office opens without a knock. I glance up to see the man I placed in charge of the raid in my absence. I swallow my retort about him needing to knock and decide to give him a chance.

He strolls in, stopping in front of my desk. "We sent Demetri a diamond as a consolation for his trucks being robbed, along with a picture of his dead guards."

I place the diamond down and slowly stand to meet him eye to eye. "That was not the plan," I try to calmly say. My molars grind against each other as I walk around the table. "I don't want to pit us against each other."

My man chuckles arrogantly. The sound scrapes up my neck in annoyance. "I don't find anything funny about this. Please, tell me what you find funny?"

His chuckles die on his tongue.

“What was my number one rule?” I ask. My lips are pursed, my eyes narrowed with anger.

“No one is killed.”

I nod at his answer. “And you thought we should celebrate by taking pictures of the dead guards?”

I breathe through my nose, trying to keep my frustrations from clouding my judgment. I’ve never killed a man before.

I lean over my desk and press the small button under the surface. Pavel begins to stutter. “Well... I...I thought you would be happy, all the other men are proud of themselves and happy...”

My head of security, Joe, walks in. “Joe, do I pay you to be happy?”

“No.” Joe answers with a straight face.

“Do I pay you to be proud?”

His hands are linked behind his back, his feet spread, but his body is rigid. Joe is always on alert. “You pay me to do my job.”

I turn to Pavel, “Did you do the job I paid you to do?”

“It did not go as you planned.” There is a whininess to his voice.

“That is true.” Pavel’s body relaxes. “But the dead guards had no bearing on the job I gave you. In fact, the dead guards made it easier on you, and *still* you want to be childish and take pictures of men that you didn’t even kill yourself.” He’s

back on alert. My father would have put a bullet through his head by now. I can't let his insubordination go without punishment, but to kill after one mistake? It seems like overkill.

“Remove his pinky,” I order Joe.

I turn my attention back to Pavel. “Your pinky will be a reminder that we don't ever stray from the plan. Next time, I won't be so kind.”

Pavel kneels to the ground, bending in front of me. “Thank you, Charlie.”

I glance behind me as Joe grabs him, forcing him to stand up, and takes him away. I close the door behind them, dropping my forehead to the wood. My eyes sting when I close them and I have to fight the urge to not rub at them. Straightening, my limbs are heavy from my lack of sleep. I glance over at my phone and want to call Savio, to tell him about what just happened, but I just can't. Not yet.



**M**Y FOOT VIBRATES UP and down as I wait for Savio on his doorstep. I feel bad for leaving without saying anything last night and I don't know what to expect when he sees me here. The same three guys have been watching me for an hour. They stand far enough away that I'm not *too* worried about them, but their gazes have not left me. I hate that it makes me nervous. I should be stronger than that.

The roar of his car has my back straightening. The three guys must also hear it since they stand straight from their leaning stance against the fallen down fence. They're on their feet before I even see Savio. I watch as they shake each other's hands and all four sets of eyes turn to me. I lift my hand awkwardly.

I don't know if I should stand or stay sitting, but my fingers tuck a stray piece of hair behind my ear then run down my jeans, trying to eradicate the clamminess.

"Where have you been?" I ask when he gets close enough. From behind, I watch as the three guys disappear from view. Almost as if they were keeping an eye on me until Savio returned.

Instead of answering, he takes my hand, pulling me toward him. "I missed you." He holds me in a hug that smells of exhaust, dust, and a hint of wood. "Let's go in before the whole neighborhood is out to watch us."

I look out and notice there are more people out on their doorsteps than there had been half an hour ago. Savio walks me in but his demeanor is more silent than normal. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Maybe he's changed his mind about us. It could be that he would rather be in my father's circle, or maybe it has everything to do with our families traditionally not liking each other. Katrina and Demetri's marriage has ceased any fighting or wars, but it's more like the Cold War, where no one physically fights but the looming threat is always there.

Me being here could be that strike that ignites the Italians against the Bratva. Maybe he decided I'm not worth the risk.

“I just want to feel your skin on mine and forget about the outside world. Right now, I only need you.”

His eyes flare over me. It's a slow and thick perusal despite me wearing nothing fancy, only jeans and a hoodie. Without him asking, I take off my sweater, revealing the crop top underneath. It rests an inch under my breasts.

I step into him, my breasts molding to his hard planes before I grace him with a soft kiss. Our lips barely graze each other. He tries to kiss me harder, but I move away before nipping at his lower lip, teasingly.

Savio doesn't take kindly to me trying to be in control and pushes me against the wall of the entryway. I wiggle against his strong body that has maneuvered me to his liking. I'm aware of his every touch, it lights me on fire. All I want is him.

In his arms, I'm free from any restraints I've placed upon myself and lean my head back as Savio's hands cup my breasts. His erection presses into me and I arch my hips against it. My hand slips between us, moving up and down his length.

He pushes me back into the wall. “You are every man's sinful fantasy wrapped in a delicate package, and I'm the lucky bastard who gets to fuck you while everyone else only dreams about it.”

His hands tug at my pants, stripping me of the protective layer before lifting me up. My legs wrap around him. “You’re the girl legends are written about. I can’t wait to see you reach your fucking dreams and I get a front row seat.”

My heart bursts at his words. He grabs my head and crushes our lips together. My back lifts off the wall as Savio blindly walks us through his home. We’re all hands and tongue, unable to get enough of each other.

I pull at his shirt, and we fall and I’m caught on the top of a couch, my back against the wall once again.

He steps away and undoes his pants, his thick cock springing out. “I love how your pussy glistens for me.”

Kneeling on the couch, his mouth latches onto my nipples before his fingers enter me. “You are the sweetest thing I’ve ever tasted. I’d be more than happy to start a war for you.”

I’m so wet; I can feel myself dripping onto his fingers. His thumb presses on my clit, rubbing it ever so slightly.

I can’t take it anymore. I push him down, straddling his hips as he falls back onto the side of the couch. I position myself just above his cock and rub my pussy over it. My juices coat him as I slide up and down, teasing both of us.

I need more. I push down on his cock and it slips into me. I moan unladylike as he enters me. How can I feel so stretched every time his cock enters me?

My hips rock and my clit brushes his perfect abs with each motion. My breasts bounce with each thrust and he cradles



them in his hands, tweaking my nipples as we go.

“I can’t wait to see my cum dripping out of you,” he murmurs, sitting up, kissing my neck. “You feel so damn good and tight.” His voice is deep and low. Like an intoxicating lullaby that demands to be heard. His hips circle beneath mine as I push up and down. “Tell me you’re mine, beautiful girl.”

My orgasm builds and my movements become more frantic. I surrender to him completely as he starts fucking me fast and hard. I hold on to his shoulders, his chest scraping at my peaked nipples.

“You kneel for no one. I will worship at your feet until the day I die.” His words, his touch, everything about him has me screaming in ecstasy.

“Savio!” My walls contract and his dick grows thicker in my pussy.

I’m panting and trembling all over as my orgasm doesn’t let up. It hits hard and continues to roll through my every muscle until I’m limp and lying on the couch with nothing else to give.

Savio pulls out and replaces his dick with his fingers, pushing his cum even deeper into me. “Fuck, this is a beautiful sight.” He pulls his fingers out and places them into my mouth. “Suck,” he demands.

My tongue wraps around his digits before I suck on his fingers, tasting him. “Gorgeous.” My pulse is going crazy and I love every second of it. I’ve never felt more alive. I want this

feeling to stay forever, I'm addicted to it. I feel more powerful than I ever have in my life.

My head is light and my entire body is slack, unable to move from how Savio has exhausted it. "I went to go see my mom earlier." Savio mentions among the silence. I had almost dozed off to the sound of the steady beat of his heart under my ear.

My elbow pushes me up so I can see his face. "Why do you say it like a bad thing?" I never met my birth mom, but Katrina has never made me feel unloved. Sometimes I even feel guilty for feeling like I didn't miss out on much not having a bio mom growing up.

"I think she resented the time us boys took away from her day-to-day life. Or that our father still beat her more than he did us. And that's saying something." I know my father is ruthless, but he would never lay a hand on Capree or me. I have only seen love and adoration between him and Katrina. I can't imagine anyone having to go through that.

My fingers glide up his jaw to cup his cheek. The scruff prickles at my fingertips. "Stop looking at me like that," he whispers.

His hand cups mine and he places it over his beating heart. It's beating at a regular pace. "My heart stopped caring when she almost beat me to death with her favorite cross. It's an old brown wooden one. She hangs it in her living room. If you look close enough, you can see the old blood stains that grip

its edges. After, she told me I shouldn't cry because Jesus was left to die on the cross and I was crying about a small smack."

I can't even imagine living in a home like that. It makes the fights between my father and I seem childish now. "She told me that if I loved you, I should let you be free." His words have a chill racing through my body.

"Is that what you want?" I force my breaths to come out even, and tell myself no matter his answer, I will be okay. I am Charlotte Sokolov, I don't need anyone but me. A small part of me questions if I should have let him in and know my biggest secrets. I know better than to trust anyone but myself.

"I want to marry you and you to birth my children," he answers. "I never want to be away from you. You calm the darkness that once ran freely through my veins. I need you in my life."

I lay back down, my head resting on his chest. His beat is steady. "You are the only thing I have been certain about in my entire life," he says, brushing a few stray hairs away from my face.

"I love you." The words slip out without me realizing and I still, my nerves on pins and needles, waiting to see his reaction.

His chest stops moving in an even rhythm and his two fingers lift my chin up so our eyes meet. "You are the first woman I have ever loved. I can honestly say I have only ever cared about Dante, even though I have older brothers. You have turned everything I know upside down, but I would never

change it. I love you,” he declares. His eyes are lighter than I have ever seen them and they look warm and welcoming for the first time ever. I scooch up and place a soft kiss to his lips.

His hands capture my head and intensify the kiss. It’s like he’s trying to suck my soul into his. We’re in this together, but what if we both don’t survive?

I wake up to my phone ringing repeatedly. I groan and flip my arm over my eyes, rolling over, but I’m met with a warm solid wall. Savio. It takes me a second to remember we fell asleep in each other’s arms in his bed.

I sit up and lean over Savio, grabbing my phone on the bedside table. “Hello?” My eyes are still closed from being half asleep. Savio’s hands roam up my legs and he lifts me so I’m straddling his lower half.

“Charlotte, where are you?” My father roars into the phone. My perfect bubble bursts hearing his angry voice.

Savio steals the phone from my hands. “She’s with me, Sokolov.” My eyes widen in the dark. “She’s not coming home tonight. Or any other night.”

I can hear my father’s furious voice spit through the phone, but Savio simply hangs up on him.

“You sure know how to make friends,” I tease. His length hardens under me and I grind down on him.

“As much as I want to bury myself in you, I have no doubt your father will be here soon to drag you home. We should get you somewhere safe, at least until the wedding.”

Excitement flows at hearing he still wants to go through with the wedding. “I refuse to hide from my family. We stand together.”

Worry laces his features. “I can’t have you in the middle of a war on my doorstep.”

“This is my war, too.” I stand tall, refusing to leave. “By tonight, my father will know who I am.”

# CHAPTER 24

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**CHARLOTTE**

THE ROAR OF APPROACHING engines can be heard in the distance, growing ever-closer like an invading army. Dante and Savio have ammoed up for the possible fight against my father and my leg won't stop bouncing as I watch the brothers from the couch. My fingers pick at the skin around my thumbnail, peeling the skin away until the area begins to bleed. The sudden sting has me placing my thumb into my mouth.

I've seen how my father is. There's a reason men fear him, and I'm no different right now. Savio has made a stand against my father, all for me. The pounding of my heart pulses in every inch of my body. I have to force my saliva down my dry, sticky throat with an awkward clicking sound.

Romeo Mancini walks in while Savio is strapping guns to his body. He has enough ammo to blow this community block to pieces, but his brother just nods to him before glancing at me.

"So, you're the reason for the fuss." Romeo smiles kindly at me.

"It's not much different from how you gained your wife," Savio replies, still strapping stuff on.

He turns to his brother. "Yes, it is. I tricked my wife into thinking I was her fiancé when her real one was at home."

"Let's compare stories later," Dante interrupts, tossing a gun to Romeo.



“I have snipers on the roofs and a few more scattered throughout the neighborhood to make sure this goes smoothly.” My foot taps faster as Romeo goes into business mode.

Not being able to take my leg shaking anymore, I stand. “What do I do?”

“Stay beside us. No matter what,” Romeo answers my question to Savio.

My eyes lock with Savio’s, not bothering to acknowledge his brother. He comes to me and picks up my hand, flipping it over to kiss over top of my rapid pulse. “I’m right here with you. Your father won’t let any of his men harm you, and my brothers and I will protect you if they try. Are you ready?”

I nod, my voice failing me. We walk out together. I’m a half step ahead because my muscles refuse to slow. I check beside me and all three of the Mancini men have my back with scowls on their faces. They’re not hiding their displeasure at my father showing up.

We come to the middle of the property, away from the houses that have boarded up their windows. Overgrown hedges stand on one side, and a dumpster on the other.

My ears ring with the extra blood rushing through me. I take another step and Savio grabs my hand, pulling me a step back. I look up and spot a sniper on a nearby rooftop.

My father walks toward us, his feet shuffling slightly when he sees I’m standing with Savio and Dante. His grim face has

never looked so scary before. His eyes are flat and cold, his puckered scars look to be rising noticeably with his irritation.

I try to shrug Savio's hold off, needing to walk to my father on my own, but his fingers stay woven through mine. The protectiveness is fierce in his stance.

"Savio, the girl wants to talk to her father." Demetri gestures with his hand. I flinch at hearing him refer to me as anything but his daughter. I suppose it would make him look weak in a situation like this. "Unless you're afraid she won't come back?" There's an evil gleam in my father's eyes as he taunts Savio. It sends a shiver down my spine.

I step forward and this time Savio allows our fingers to slip apart.

One step. My father smiles.

Two steps. I glance behind me.

Three steps. I take a calming breath.

A few more steps and my father takes two of his own. He looks much too pleased with himself.

For an area that is typically never silent, not even a bird can be heard. The only noise seems to be that of my own breathing. "Father."

His lips pucker, not replying.

The tension is unbearable. I wait to see if he makes any effort to come closer. Every man I can see has their fingers hovering over the trigger of their weapons.

I hate that we have come to a silent standoff. “I can’t be that little girl you shelter anymore.”

He looks past me toward Savio. The act drives me crazy, as if I’m too innocent to do anything on my own. I’m about to open my mouth when a gunshot bursts the silence. A bullet from a roof sniper rips through the air. I watch Klaus enter our circle, while my body continues to react to the gun shot. My frazzled nerves jump at the sudden loud sound and both my father and Savio leap toward me, but it’s too late.

Klaus holds me by the hair, yanking me so hard I’m sure he’s left with a handful of my strands in his palm. My feet stumble over each other until I slam into his body. I’m forcefully pinned against him, with his other hand wrapped around my torso. I can’t move on my own, my struggling is useless. The pressure on my hair releases and is replaced with a knife positioned at my throat. My mouth immediately dries.

“Klaus, I can kill you before you get a scratch on Charlotte,” Savio coldly states, but stays where he is.

My father stills, his eyes large, and tries to reason with my once friend. “Klaus, we’re family.”

“That was before you refused my marriage proposal to Charlotte.” My body is forced back and forth as Klaus pivots between Savio and my father.

“Let her go, Klaus. You’re not walking out of here alive. I won’t make that mistake twice.” I face Savio and Klaus’s knife nicks my throat as I try to hold in my swallow.

“How are you enjoying the way she kisses? I’ve been grooming her for years. They’re a little sweeter than I like, but I always enjoyed knowing I was the first one.” He laughs, kissing the edge of my lips. I try to yank my head back, but his grip on my hair keeps me in place.

“My father was right about you, Klaus,” I grit through my teeth.

“Charlotte, Charlotte, Charlotte. You have always been a means to an end. You were so starved for anyone’s attention. Truly, you made it way too easy for me and everyone else involved.”

The sound of multiple gun safeties being disabled ticks around the area.

“Before you kill me, know it will never silence me. I have made many friends along the way.” I twist my head to try to look at him, confused and unsure what he’s referring to. He chuckles, smiling at my father, and looks out over the crowd of his men. There are three times as many Bratva men as Italian ones. My father came ready to use his force and power.

The street fills with the dings and vibrations of everyone’s phone going off, including the one I have tucked into my back pocket.

“Go on, check it out. Don’t wait on my account.” Klaus pushes his hand harder on my breast and his breath hits my ear. “This is the fun part. Wait for it,” he whispers.

The phones are pulled out. Murmurs spread through the space. Penetrating stares slowly find me in the crowd. It's enough to have my father hesitate. He holds his gun out strong, but the bullet stays in the chamber.

One of his men walks up and shows him what is on everyone's phone.

"What the fuck is this?" My father hollers, his eyes lock on Klaus and then me. Pain radiates through his eyes, and I wish I could see what everyone else had.

"Go on, Charlotte. Grab your phone," Klaus demands, allowing the limited movement needed for my hand to slip behind my back to reach for my phone. His knife doesn't stray from my jugular.

My hands shake as I pull my phone out to see a message with a video. I play it, watching as a young, scared-looking Katrina holds her head up with confidence. A man I've never seen before speaks to my now-mother.

I already know this is the reason my father has all his scars. I've heard the story about Katrina being kidnapped and my father having to race into a burning building to save her.

The video is grainy and the volume low...but I hear every word as if it were playing in surround sound. Every single word etches itself into my memory as my life explodes around me and the truth rings through the blood pounding through my veins with the force of my racing heart.

The unknown man brags to Katrina that my bio mother was in love with him. My heart sinks for my father, just before he proudly says that I'm their child. The air in my lungs freezes.

*It can't be true.*

My eyes lift to Demetri, the man I have called father my entire life. It feels like I've been kicked in the gut and all the air whooshes out of me.

"Is it true?" I demand. Everything I have ever done was to gain his respect, and love. My whole purpose in life was to be him.

My father refuses to meet my eyes and I know the video didn't lie. I've been living a lie, in a family where I never belonged. Not only is Katrina not my biological mother, I came to terms with *that* years ago, but to learn that Demetri isn't my father? That the man on the screen is my biological father?

It takes a second for everything to click into place to realize the man in the video is the name no one is allowed to utter because he betrayed my father. His fate is the cautionary tale people tell when warning to never backstab the Pakhan.

"Ironic. I'm the daughter of a traitor." My voice shakes as I address my father.

"That's the best part, but it's not all." My stomach cramps knowing what's about to come out of his mouth. "I have been waiting for this moment. You have no one but me now, Charlotte." He lowers his voice for only me to hear. "How do

you think Demetri will react when he finds out you're killing his men...? How will the Bratva take to the news?" His words crack through me like whiplash. "After my reveal, the only person to accept you now will be me. But now that Savio has ruined you, there's no point in keeping you for myself. You will be the prize for any man who has done a good deed for me. They don't care who they fuck. Spoiler alert, they like it when you scream."

My hands are clammy and sweat lines my hairline as I wait to be thrust in front of the firing squad.

I may have never met the man who is my father, but I know of him. He's the cousin who betrayed Demetri. The rumors of his vicious revenge attempt have circled the Bratva my whole life. I'll only prove that bloodline is everything, that I'm the traitor's daughter, and I've followed in his footsteps. But that's not true. I'm desperately trying to prove myself the only way a woman can in this way of life.

Family history has a way of playing a role in the Bratva. We can be punished for the sins of our fathers.

"Say your last words." My father glares with hatred.

Out of the corner of my eye I watch Klaus's smile grows into an ugly full-teeth snarl. My stomach drops, already knowing what Klaus is about to say.

"I'm Charlie!" I yell, wanting the truth to come from my own mouth. The gun in my father's hand falters. "I wanted to prove to you that I am worthy. I want you to be proud of me,

as proud as you would be if I were a man. I can be your heir, Papa.”

Demetri looks pain stricken. He lowers his gun slightly, looking at me like I’m a stranger. My view of him becomes cloudy as tears force their way over my irises. “Katrina is pregnant with a boy,” he replies, deflated.

My mouth opens into an *O* shape. I hadn’t realized they were even trying for more children. The topic had never come up, ever in my life. A lone tear floods over my lashes on both sides.

“It keeps getting better.” Klaus laughs, enjoying himself. “Savio...”

Sound explodes around me and echoes off the buildings. A sudden burning sensation sears my side and Klaus falls forward onto me as his feet stumble. His knife slips and easily scratches the surface of my neck before another shot is fired. Savio places a bullet in the middle of Klaus’s forehead. He drops and my shoulder shrugs his weight off before he falls to the ground.

“No one threatens Charlotte,” Savio announces.

I used to think my father would love me no matter what... but how could Demetri love me after everything I’ve put him through when he’s not even blood related to me? I’m the daughter of his enemy.

The man in question scoffs, his eyes brimming with anger.

Savio wraps his arms around me.



*My father is having a baby boy.*

No, Demetri is having a baby boy. He knew I wasn't blood related, that's why he constantly pushed my ideas of wanting to rule away. Instead of telling me the truth, he lied. He allowed me to idolize him, when he knew nothing could ever come of it.

Everything makes more sense. The reason he didn't try to marry me off to a Russian. I might have had some sort of claim on being the heir had that been the case. Nothing is ever going to be the same. Demetri refuses to look at me, his face is full of disgust.

I take comfort in Savio. I can't face my father right now. "I want to go."

His fingers thread through my hair. "We're done here, Demetri. Charlotte chooses me. You have no claim on her."

From the corner of my eye, I watch as Dante and Romeo step in front of us, and Savio turns to walk me back to his apartment.

# CHAPTER 25

---

**CHARLOTTE**

**T**HE SUN IS PEEKING up and over the horizon, starting to shine over the world. Savio and I must have forgotten to close the blinds in the room Dante set us up in. The brothers had decided it wasn't safe to stay at Savio's with it being in Bratva country.

I've only had a few hours of sleep, most of which I tossed and turned through, the adrenaline from the night still coursing through my veins.

Not to mention Dante's house is silent compared to Savio's. It's unsettling.

Savio's cold hands fuss over the remaining redness on my neck and back. The light touches have me stretching beside him in the bed. "I'm fine, you need to stop worrying," I tell him for the tenth time and turn my head to look at him.

"I should have waited to shoot him, but seeing his hands on you was making me crazy."

"I'm not hurt, they're scratches." His hand brushes against the heat of the burn from the bullet that grazed me before entering Klaus. I watch as Savio's face twists, his expression disagreeing with me. "If it wasn't for you, I could be dead."

"I should have known better. I could have taken my time lining the shot up." He shakes his head, disgust written all over his face. I wish I could make Savio see that he saved me. "I'm so much better at causing pain than anything else..." His voice

drifts at the same time as Dante interrupts by walking into the bedroom without knocking.

“Time to get up, love birds. He’ll be here in ten minutes,” Dante says, smiling at us and not making any motion to leave. I bring the sheet up closer to my chin.

“Who will be here?” I ask.

“The Priest, to marry us,” Savio answers and my eyes move to him.

“Like, right now?” I want to kick off the covers to get a jump on getting ready, but Dante is just standing there.

“I need five minutes to freshen up.” My hand touches my hair and I don’t need a mirror to know I look like a mess.

“Dante, get out. I’ll be in the kitchen to see you in a second.”

Dante laughs, shaking his head, before doing as his brother commanded.

Savio rolls on top of me. “I love you.” His hands thread through mine above my head.

He pulls the blankets off me and cooler air dances its way up my body, sending goosebumps across my skin. He kisses my breast, then my lips. “Today is going to be a great day. You have three minutes to get ready now.”

My eyes grow large. “I need a shower.”

“There’s no time for that. You’ll look gorgeous no matter what.”

I stare at him in disbelief and realize the brothers are serious. I jump out of bed, naked, and run into the bathroom. I have to slip on my clothes from yesterday. It's hardly fitting for a wedding, but I have no other choice.

I stare at myself in the mirror. My cheeks are flushed, my hair a disaster, but I have a smile on my face. My eyes look more alive than I have ever seen them. I wish Demetri could see how happy I am. I wish he could understand it.

I can't help but think about him on my wedding day. He's always held me at arm's length and now I know why. I'm not his real daughter. Growing up, I never felt I belonged. I clung to wanting to be like Demetri, needing him to accept me. A lone tear escapes the corner of my eye. *I will not cry.*

I was never one of those girls who dreamed about her wedding. I'm relieved that it won't be in a fancy church with hundreds of people staring at me. A small pang wishes Katrina could be there to see me, she would understand because she did an eloping type of thing with Demetri.

For once, I have a chance to belong. Savio wants me.

I untangle my hair with my fingers the best I can. I know Savio will think I'm beautiful, no matter what. Staring back in the mirror, I wait until the glassiness of my eyes has cleared before leaving. It doesn't matter what my appearance is. The important thing is, I'm marrying Savio.

I walk out and hear the murmurs of the brothers talking. Their words have heat behind their tone and I worry that maybe Dante doesn't approve. When I enter the room, both of

their heads come up and they smile at me. It's not forced. They genuinely look happy to see me.

"You're making my brother one happy man," Dante says before checking his phone. "The priest is here. I'll go get him."

"How are you doing? I'm not forcing you into this, am I?" Savio asks.

I shake my head no and neither of us says another word in the otherwise silent room. We can hear the footsteps coming forward until they appear in the room.

I look around Dante's house and wonder where we will stand. "Can we be married in the games room?" It seems fitting.

Dante nods and we all follow him to the room where I lost my virginity to Savio.

We stand in front of the pool table and repeat after the priest. "I, Charlotte Sokolov, take you, Savio Mancini, to be my wedded husband. With deepest joy, I receive you into my life that together we become one.

"I promise you my love, my devotion, and tender care. I pledge to you my life as a loving and faithful wife." My voice shakes as I say my vows. I would have never thought I'd be emotional over some pledge, but my eyes begin to well up with tears.

"You guys need a ring," Dante interrupts, just as I realize we don't have any. Not that I care about a piece of jewelry.

I'm about to say so when he rushes out of the room. He quickly comes back with a small-but-elegant diamond ring.

"I can't have that. It's yours to use." Savio refuses the ring being handed to him.

*Could it be their mother's?* "Is that a family ring?"

Dante scoffs. "We would never jinx you with one of those." He pushes the ring into his brother's hand. "I'm never going to use it. It's been silly for me to keep it all of these years."

When Savio accepts, the brothers hug for a quick moment. My hands tremble with all the emotions racing through me as I watch Savio place the most beautiful diamond on my finger. It fits perfectly, like it was made for me. A small diamond sits in the middle of rose gold petals, each tipped with two dainty emeralds. I have never seen anything quite like it before.

Savio repeats the same lines I had earlier. His voice is controlled and strong, unlike mine. I wish I could have produced a ring for him.

"With the power vested in me, I pronounce you as man and wife."

Savio brings me flush into him and lifts me. My legs wrap around him as I give him my everything. I kiss him back with equal passion until we hear Dante's voice, "You guys are giving me a hard on watching you."

I pull back, embarrassed, and Savio is reluctant to let me go. The sound of beer bottles being opened fills the space and



Savio eventually allows my feet to touch the ground as we are both handed a drink.

“Want one?” Savio offers the priest, who shakes his head as he’s already walking toward the exit.

The three of us clink the bottles. I can’t believe I’m married. Mrs. Mancini. It has a nice ring to it. I know marrying Savio has upped the ante, and my father won’t be pleased. Assuming that they care, of course, but if the look on Demetri’s face last night is anything to go by, he’s done with me now. Just like Klaus said he would be. It’s obvious Katrina and Demetri don’t want me. Why else would they have been trying to have a boy? It feels like everyone was ripped from me within an hour. The only person I have left is Savio. What if he thinks I’m not enough and leaves me too?

“Demetri is on the cameras,” Dante tells Savio.

It’s strange to think of Demetri as anything but my father, and I consider that a moment before responding. “What does he want?” My voice is low and my body hums with the need to hide in a corner. It’s easier to ignore my issues than to face them head on.

“I just want to speak with my daughter.” We can hear his voice through Dante’s phone, which he flips around to show my father standing at the entrance.

I swallow the saliva building in my mouth.

“No fucking way,” Savio and Dante say at the same time.

I stand. “I have to talk to him.” Savio growls beside me but I place a hand on his chest above his heart. “He won’t hurt me.” He looks at me with skepticism.

“I’m coming with you. Dante, you good for another fight if it comes to that?”

His brother jumps up. “I’m on it. You won’t see me, but I’ll see you guys.”

My legs are jittery. I honestly gave myself no time to process anything. Standing up to my dad—Demetri—has always been the hardest thing for me to do.

We open the door and find him standing about thirty feet away. “You need to come home, Charlotte. Katrina is beside herself over the events that have transpired.”

I wait for him to say how he feels. *Silence*. “Tell her she needs to think about her little boy, and to stop stressing.” My gut turns. I will love this little boy because he’s innocent, but little does he know that he’s the one who has stripped me of everything I ever wanted.

“You belong at home.”

I shake my head at his demand. “No, Demetri.” He flinches before he quickly recovers. “I refuse to settle for second best. You have taught me that. You can decide if both of our clientele are fair game or if we don’t contact each other’s clients, but that’s the last decision you will ever make on my behalf.”

“You can’t be serious. You’re going to go against your own family?”

“You’re not my father. Katrina is not my mother. That makes Capree and I not even distantly related.”

“I am your father!” he bellows. “Everything I have ever done was to keep you three girls safe.”

“Let’s be honest. You can’t even say aloud that you want me home. *Katrina* wants me home. You’re only here because you always give her what she wants.”

“Savio isn’t a hundred percent who you think he is.”

Savio tries to step forward from behind me but I sidestep him. I can fight my own battles.

“Then why have me engaged to him?”

“I had no choice!” Demetri roars, his face turning red. He steps forward closing the distance between us.

“Demetri. Stop yelling at my wife or I’ll be forced to remove you.” There’s a stark brutality in my husband’s voice.

Demetri looks down at my hand and grabs it, staring at the beautiful ring. I’ve only worn it for a short time, but I’m already attached to it. His hand lets go of mine and grabs his chest as his knees buckle. It’s very theatrical, considering he can’t even say he wants me home. His eyes are wide as he looks up at me. Something is wrong. He falls to his knees before he slumps over to his side.

“Papa!” I scream.

Sudden movement rushes toward us, and two gunshots are heard before a visual contact is made. “Demetri!” Katrina steps into my view and she’s clutching her side, blood seeping through her fingers.

“Call an ambulance!” I yell. “They both need help.”

I’m hyperventilating. My feet go back and forth from my dad to Katrina, not knowing what to do. I don’t want to reign over our throne of diamonds like this. I wanted to earn it. I should have known better. Something bad always happens when I’ve done something I shouldn’t have. If I hadn’t married Savio, none of this would have happened. It’s easier to not feel remorse or loss when you have no one. It’s why I always kept my friends at a distance until I had none. I think I only became friends with Klaus because I didn’t even like him that much. You can’t be sad over a friend you didn’t even like.



## Savio

I WRAP CHARLOTTE'S ARMS around her and hold her tight against my body. She's screaming and thrashing as she tries to get to her parents. Demetri's bodyguards are coming in from the front and this is about to turn into a bloodbath.

"Let go of me!" she yells. Her legs kick, hitting me in the shin. I half-carry and half-drag her back toward the house to keep her safe.

"You need to calm down!" I kick the door closed, and it automatically locks behind me. Keeping her secure with one arm, I move my hand to cover her mouth, hoping I can reason with her. She bites hard between my thumb and finger, drawing blood.

"Her screaming is not helping the situation." Dante is back beside me. "He only has two guards; he must have left everyone at home."

Charlotte screams into both our ears. Ringing explodes into my head. "Sedate her so we can fix this before we're all dead."

He hands me the syringe and her beautiful large blue eyes widen and she shakes her head no.

"I'm sorry." I poke her with the sedative, and within seconds, she is limp in my arms. I hate the feeling of it. I want to at least place her in a bed, but there's no time. I'm forced to lay her on the hard floor before we rush outside.

The guards are moving both Demetri and Katrina into their cars. They don't miss anything and pull their guns when we get close.

I place my hands up in surrender. "I want to call a truce until Demetri is better."

"May you burn in Hell," Katrina yells, attempting to spit at our feet.

My head pounds. I may not have been the one to shoot her, but she was shot because of me. They race away, but I know it won't be the last time we see them.

"Don't you look before you shoot?" I push my brother, my frustration overflowing. Every nerve is on fire, wanting a fight. I need somewhere to direct my anger so I can feel like I'm doing something.

Dante pushes me back. "She could have been carrying a weapon. I grazed her as a warning. If I had to choose between her or you, I will always choose you, brother."

Without thinking, I slug him in the face. He stumbles back from the brute force of it. It takes a second before he stands straight and wipes the blood dripping from the corner of his mouth. "I'm not going to fight you just so you can feel better about yourself."

He's right. With fisted hands, I tap the side of my head back and forth trying to get my cool. It's not helping. The urge to destroy something is fierce. Needing to get rid of the aggression, I punch the side of the house. I feel the skin tear

and see the bright red of my blood on the stucco, but I can't stop my other hand from swinging and I hit it again. Repeatedly, I punch into the side of the house until I'm out of breath. Blood drips down my wrists as I bring my hands up to inspect them. They're bloody, ugly, and full of violence.

I go around the house and turn on the hose to wash my hands off as my mother's words ring true in my memory. I don't know the first thing about love if it doesn't involve some sort of pain. I turn off the water and head in. Charlotte is still lying where I had left her, drugged at my hand and unceremoniously dumped on the floor. She deserves so much better than me.

We haven't been married a day, and I already drugged my wife. Her perfect skin is blemished, and I couldn't even place her in a comfortable position. My knuckles ache as I pull at my shirt collar. The thin material rips, releasing me from its chokehold, but it does nothing to help the tightness in my throat.

I can't stand the look of her on the cold ground. I scoop her up into my arms and her head lulls from one side to the other. *I'm a fucking disgrace.* I place her in the soft bed like I should have done the first time. My hands tuck the covers around her and place her hands over her chest. Her wrists are red and already have bruising from my grip on her earlier. I didn't think twice about the pain I caused her in the moment. My stomach flips and I'm afraid anything I have in it will revolt to escape.

I put those bruises on her. I hurt her.

I lift her wrists and place my lips over the dark coloring of her creamy skin. As the minutes tick by, I pace the room. Each second, I watch her chest slowly rise up and down. *Why isn't she awake yet?*

Dante pokes his head into my room. "How's Sleeping Beauty?"

"Not fucking waking," I raise my voice, worried. I can't trust myself around her. I was born to kill and cause pain. I told myself she would be different but, once again, I proved everyone in this world right about me. She's not safe from the misery I cause to others. She's the one who's at the highest risk from my wrath. I was stupid to ever consider she would be safe in my arms.

"How much did you give her?" My brother leans against the doorway, looking relaxed, while each of my muscles feel like a brick.

"The entire needle."

His head tilts to the side and I already know I'm going to hate what he's about to say. My pulse beats so fast it feels like one steady beat with no lulls. "She's going to be out until tomorrow. Come watch a movie with me."

There's no way I can sit still at a time like this. "Watch her while I'm gone." There's only one person who can keep her safe from me.

I push past him as he asks, "Where are you going?"



“To talk to Demetri.”

# CHAPTER 26

---

**SAVIO**

I PACE OUTSIDE THE hospital with a cigarette between my lips. I don't normally smoke, but I have to do something with my hands because I can't fight. I don't know what to do with myself. Demetri is in surgery for his heart, making my trip here pointless.

Blowing out a puff of smoke, I head back home; my head still a mess with all of my conflicting thoughts.

I stare at my brother's house. It taunts me, as if asking if I'm scared to walk through its doors. I can't go back to my apartment with it being in Bratva territory. I have support in the area, but it won't be enough anymore.

This feeling that is crushing my chest is similar to the one I felt entering jail for the first time. I thought I knew how difficult jail was, but I never realized that it would almost kill me. Many of the scars on my body were never meant to heal. They found sepsis in my blood once, and I only survived by a miracle.

My arms are heavy, protesting against the door as I open the car. Each foot seems to weigh a hundred times more than before. The house is filled with silence, my most hated sound. I walk into the bedroom where I left Charlotte to find Dante sitting against the doorframe on his phone.

"Don't be making any rash decisions right now; you're not in the right frame of mind."

I can't voice an answer to my brother. Instead, I close the door behind me. Charlotte is still sleeping. I take her hand and press two fingers above her pulse. It flickers against my skin. My shoulders sag, and I take a seat beside her.

My thumb circles over the soft flicker of pressure against my finger pad. I stare at her beautiful face unsure what to do. Guilt continues to swarm deep inside of me. A woman like Charlotte deserves so much more than what I can offer.

"Savio?" her groggy voice questions. Her hand rises and rubs at her eyes as she begins to stir. I come into her line of sight as her eyes open more and she brushes her fingertips against the stubble on my cheek and jaw. "What happened?"

There should be no pause. The truth should easily flow from my lips. The words stick to my throat, threatening to be sucked down before they have a chance to escape.

"Your father had a heart attack, and I shot at..." I pause, knowing my lie but not wanting to throw my brother under the bus. Do I call Katrina her mother or by name. "I shot Katrina, and she's carrying the Bratva heir." I wait for her to hit me or yell at me. Maybe the drugs are interfering with her ability to process information. I can hear a clock tick, but I can't see one. I hate the rhythm, it's almost worse than complete silence.

"Is the baby alright?"

"I didn't bother to find out."

She moves her hand from under mine and swipes at her hair. The bruises catch both of our attention.

Then her hand goes to the side of her neck where I drugged her. “What did you give me?” She sits up straighter. The way she’s looking at me is different than it was a second ago. It’s like a dagger is driven through my heart.

“I had to keep you safe. You refused to calm down, I had no other choice.”

“No choice?” she huffs. “What part of me shaking my head and biting you gave the impression I would be happy over this?”

She closes her eyes in what looks like a fight to prevent tears from flowing over her lashes. “All I needed was time to process.”

“There was no time.”

“Bullshit!” She takes a breath. “The life I once knew was ripped out from under me. I deserve a chance to process.” She wipes her eyes before any tears are able to leak through.

My heart is beating a mile a minute. I stand, needing to move. Needing to distance myself from the pain that’s etched onto her face.

“I want to tell you I’m sorry, but I can’t. I had to make a split decision. I was trying to put you first.” I glance down at her bruise.

“You and everyone else in my life. I just want everyone to treat me the same. I want to be able to make my own decisions. I want us to be a team. This is not how we go about that.”

“What are you wanting me to say?” I could easily lie and tell her everything I think she wants to hear. I could lie to her and tell her that everything will be okay, but it would be all empty promises. I grew up in a household built upon those. Every time I got hit, I was told it would never happen again. Until the day she got tired of lying about it. I appreciated the truth more than all the empty apologies.

I’m a product of my own upbringing. I don’t know how to break the cycle. I thought I could. I was so stupid to hold out hope. I’ll eventually end up hurting her again. That’s the worst fucking truth that slams into me.

I can’t keep this rage building in me. My self-hatred grows by the second.



## Charlotte

Savio paces the bed in front of me. He starts off like a caged lion, unable to control his muscles. His shoulders continually roll back as he stalks up and down the carpet. The more I call him out on my issue the less he looks at me. His eyes flatten, his voice sounding more defeated.

My lips pinch together, mirroring my forehead as I watch him shut down. A light pulse forms at the front of my head, the pressure makes it hard to focus.

“I’m going fucking crazy. I need to clear my head before I say anything I regret.” He turns toward the door.

“Running away from a fight won’t solve anything.”

“That may be so, but if I don’t knock someone out, I’m going to explode. I think the best with my fists.”

“So every time we disagree, you’re going to run to the cages?”

He marches over to me, his face close enough to be a threat if I so chose to take it that way. It’s the hatred in his eyes that has me flinching though, not his proximity. His expression is cold, and uncaring. “Last time I checked, it’s better than beating your wife.” He looks me up and down before scoffing. “I can’t sit here, looking at what I’ve done to you. It makes me sick. I want to kick the shit out of myself.” With that, he leaves, slamming the door behind him.



My hands cover my face. The look in his eyes stays in my memory. For a second I feared him. He looked so different from the Savio I fell in love with.

I stand, going to look at my neck in the mirror. A small dot can be seen from the needle. I struggle with this more than I like. I was shaking my head no and he still gave me the sedative.



**I**T'S AFTER NIGHTFALL THAT I hear what sounds like an elephant moving throughout the house. Savio sways side to side bumping into everything. His hands are crusted with dried blood and the shadows almost hide the sight of his black eye.

I try to help him walk, but he pushes me away. "If I hurt you again, I won't be able to live with myself." His movement to get me away has him falling into the wall.

"Stop being stubborn." I grab his hand and his entire body flinches away.

"I love you too much, Charlotte. It's not good for us. I'm driving myself crazy," he slurs. I slip under his arm, and help him up. "It would be so easy to mar that perfect face of yours."

"We both know you never would." I help him walk toward our room. We zig zag our way, his weight heavy on me.

"That's where you are wrong. I *don't* know. That's the problem. It's a slippery slope. The first time is a bruise on the

wrist, a sedative to shut you up. What will it be next time?"

"There won't be a next time," I try to make him see reason.

"That's what all domestic abuse partners say. He loves me. He's sorry. He won't do it again."

I sit him on the bed, trying to place my arms around his neck, but he grips my hands, removing them. "No, Charlotte."

"Look at me," I demand.

"You expect too much from me."

"You're being ridiculous."

"Klaus is fucking right. He's been grooming you to accept behavior like this. Listen to yourself."

It hurts me so much listening to the way he's talking. My chin trembles, as I try to think of the right thing. He won't even let me touch him. I'm his wife and he looks disgusted each time we touch.

"I love you, Savio."

"This would be easier if you just let me go." A crushing weight lands on my chest from his words.

"Fuck you. You're allowing your demons to rule your life. *Our* life. It takes a lot of strength, strength I *thought* you had, to face your fears." My voice cracks, and my heart breaks when he shakes his head. He's refusing to fight for us. My hands grip his shoulders and shake him, trying to make him see what he's doing.

He flips me over him and onto the bed. His body straddles mine, his knees at my hips touching me with the dip of the bed. He's breathing hard. I slap him, wanting a reaction. Anything is better than this sad defeated mood he's in.

His nose flares and he growls. "Instead of fighting for me, fight for yourself. Stop trying to find happiness in how others view you. If we're talking about demons maybe you should face yours. Your self-worth has nothing to do with the people around you."

My stomach knots. His hands are tight against mine. I try to push him off, but he pushes me deeper into the mattress.

"Now are you scared of me?"

"You're hurting me." Tears fall over my cheeks.

"This is what I do. I thrive on violence."

"That's not what I mean. You're hurting my heart." He lets me go, and steps off the bed. "Savio," my voice breaks on the word.

He stumbles back out of the room, mumbling to himself. I'm left to watch him leave me, as if I am nothing to him.

I shake as I cry over the sense of loss, allowing the salty drops to flow. Wrapping the covers around me gives me no warmth.

When I wake up the next day, Savio is no longer in Dante's house.

# CHAPTER 27

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**SAVIO**

I FIND DEMETRI BESIDE Katrina in a hospital bed. Even though he had surgery three days ago, he refuses to be away from his wife. He has guards posted throughout the hallway, but he must have forgotten to tell people that we're no longer on speaking terms. I wave a hello, and I'm allowed through without question. Demetri is getting old. A younger version of him would have never made the slip up.

I silently enter the room. His back is hunched over his wife, who has her eyes closed. My feet are light as I get closer, but before I can place a hand on his shoulder, he slams me against the wall. I want him to hit me. I wait for the blow wanting the pain but it doesn't come.

"Why are you here?" he seethes, cutting off the flow of oxygen to my brain with a heavy hand around my neck.

"I'm here to make you a deal." The sentence comes out wheezy.

"I should kill you right here." He adds more pressure, and if I wanted to form any words, I wouldn't be able to. I welcome the familiar pain. It's better than everything that is swirling in my heart.

He steps away, allowing me to breathe once again.

"If you don't want to lose Charlotte, let her become a fifty percent business partner with the diamonds." This will make her happiest. I wanted that job, but I know better now. My life was never built with someone else in mind.

“What are you giving up, Savio?”

“Her.” Confusion mars his forehead. My heart beats so hard I’m worried I’ll have a heart attack. The next part refuses to leave my mouth. I swallow the heavy lump in my throat and try to continue. “I will have it so she will never want my name uttered in her presence again. And you get your daughter back.” The words feel like razors being sliced through me. This has to be the right decision, if I’m feeling this tormented and shitty about it. It would so be much easier to be selfish and keep her. But my mother’s warning rings deep in my heart. I will never allow her to be right about something like this.

“What are you getting out of the deal?” He eyes me suspiciously. Demetri is a stubborn motherfucker. I have to ask for something or he will think I’m out to get him. On the spot, I can’t think of anything I would ever want from him.

I glance down at my hands that only know how to cause pain. “I want a one-time favor, whenever I decide to ask.” Rumor has it; the only other person to ever gain one of these from him is Luca Rossi, the head of the other Italian mafia family.

We stare at each other in a silent standoff. Maybe I should have asked for more.

“You shot my pregnant wife and you want a favor.” He scoffs. “I just had a heart attack, but I’m not stupid.” I remain silent, observing him. He doesn’t look like he just had surgery. “I killed Katrina’s father; I don’t know what makes you think you’re invaluable to me.”

Then it occurs to me. Dante was the one to give me the news of his operation. He lied, so I wouldn't barge into his room days ago. "Careful, your little boy is going to grow up with enemies all around. It might be good to keep a few frenemies."

"I always treated you with respect and you made a fool of me."

"Is that what this is about? How I hurt your feelings? I'm sure you hurt her father's feelings"—I nod toward Katrina—"before everything worked out." I lift a brow.

"And you're here trying to return my daughter while I did what I had to do to keep Katrina mine. We are nothing alike. I have honor. I'm not giving you a favor. Tell me an amount and I'll cut a check."

The thought that he's buying Charlotte from me twists my gut, but I know this is what I have to do.

"One year's profit of Charlotte's side of the business."

"Done." We shake hands, sealing the deal.

"I'll have her on your doorstep before midnight." I walk out of the room, knowing what I have to do now.



**W**HAT I'M ABOUT TO do is everything I said I would never do, but it's the only way to keep her happy and safe from hurting at my hand ever again. The task itself is insignificant. I never thought twice about a woman's opinion



or feelings before. Now, knowing what I'm about to do, her opinion and feelings have me on edge like never before.

I walk into my brother's home, distracted.

I don't see him until he talks. "You're letting her go, aren't you?" Judgment laces his tone. He slowly shakes his head, his frown staying firmly in place.

"I don't need advice from a man who's never had a healthy relationship in his life. You buy women for a living."

"You have never wanted to hear reason in your life. Look at the scars on your body. It's the same reason I have a bullet jar for you. You thrive on fucking your shit up. You can't handle it going to plan because it scares the shit out of you."

My brother is a fucking moron. "Says the guy who had me kill a man for hurting the one girl he loved, yet she never loved him back." I glare at Dante, our fight lighting my veins on fire with the need to fight once again. It's the only time my head is clear. All other times, I have too many conflicting thoughts running through it. It's too much to deal with. "Funny, how you never once had an issue with me fixing your problems, but now you want to get in my face with something that has nothing to do with you? Go down to your strip club."

"This is what you do, Brother. You are going to regret this, and there will be nothing you can do about it."

I may regret this, but he doesn't understand I am doing this for her. This is what she wants most in the world. I would sell my soul to keep her happy.

I head back into our room, surprised she's still here after last night. She stirs hearing me walk in.

She sits up. "Savio?" Her hand pushes her hair out of her face and the bruises look ugly on her skin. They shouldn't be there. I lick my lips, needing to pull the Band-Aid off, so to speak. "I sold you back to your father. He has promised you your section of the diamonds."

She startles at my harsh words and tone. "Excuse me?" Her legs move under the blankets, and she's standing a few moments later. That fire I love about her roars within her eyes.

"You have no right to sell me," she says, as if she doesn't believe I would say such a thing. "We love each other." She's in front of me before I see her move. Her hands grip my face and she's kissing me as if her life depends on it. I want to kiss her back. I want nothing more than to pick her back up and throw her back on the bed.

"I did, sweetheart." I pull her arms from my skin. She flinches at the pressure I place on her purple wrists. "And I'm a very rich man because of it." I force a laugh and smile through my teeth, even though my gut feels like a thousand boulders are landing in it.

"You're lying." She narrows her eyes. "My father picked you for me..." Her voice is low, almost as if she's questioning herself.

"Don't beat yourself up over it. I forced him to. He should have known better. After all, I was sent to him because I knowingly fucked another boss's wife, hoping to raise my

position in our ranks. It worked, but I had to work for Demetri for it. Should you really be calling him your father, though?" I'm trying to push all of her buttons. I want her to hit me, hate me, and forget about me entirely.

"Let's face it, Princess; every man loves the thrill of a virginity chase. Being the first one in there is like Heaven on Earth." She slaps me across the face, the sting nowhere as close to how much I'm hating myself for those words.

"What are you scared of Savio?" She pokes at my chest and my heart thunders against my ribcage.

"Nothing. I'm the only man with big enough balls to go after the most precious thing to Demetri. You. But the fun is over now. You can't give me anything else."

The blackness that thrives on coating my heart begins to creep in. It cuts off my emotions. The effect is calming and my pulse immediately slows. This is how I survived eight years in prison.

"You are nothing but a hot piece of ass, Charlotte. I only played the game better than Klaus. Mark my words, he wanted the same thing I did."

Tears glisten in her eyes. She believes every word I say. "Your mother is right about you. You're a waste of oxygen." Her voice is unsteady, but clear as day. "The reason why people don't want to keep you around is because you have no thoughts of your own."

She pushes past me, not sparing Dante a look as she storms past him. My feet are welded to the ground as I hear the front door slam shut. “Make sure she arrives home safe.”

“I could do one better,” he offers backhandedly.

“If you so much as touch a hair on her body, I will murder you.”

He laughs at my outburst and shakes his head. “You’re going to be a real joy to be around.” I take a few steps forward and he picks up his car keys. “Each day will get better.”

“You don’t think about her anymore?” I ask.

“That’s not it. You just learn to deal with it after a few years.” Dante disappears outside and I’m left in his silent house that I hate.

# CHAPTER 28

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**CHARLOTTE**

I SIT IN THE car that Savio forced me into, my hand wiping across my tired eyes. I instantly recognize the car as being one of my father's. Demetri got to Savio. Everyone chooses to leave sooner than later. I used to blame myself, but I'm starting to think this has everything to do with my father. He can't stand anyone being close to me if he can't control every facet of the relationship.

The car drives down our driveway and I have no doubt my father has been notified of my arrival. My face frowns as I watch our house come closer, wondering what his true intention is. Why does he even want me home? Will I be held prisoner, forced to be hidden for the rest of my life?

My hand rests on the door handle, wondering how hurt I would be if I flung myself out the door and ran away. But then where would I go? There's no way the great Demetri will be so accepting all of a sudden. My fingers put pressure on the silver handle and the door refuses to budge. I'm locked in like a child.

Removing my hand, my fingers strum against each other in the same rhythm as my bouncing legs. Will I get Demetri the Pakhan or the angry father figure?

The car stops and I stare up at the house I've lived in most of my life but only a few months at a time. From the time Katrina arrived in my life, I remember Demetri moving us around constantly. Every month or two we would go to a new home, but this place stayed the one constant.

Demetri is standing on the doorstep waiting for me. He looks so much older than he had even just a few mornings ago. For all of his faults, he is the only person who has never left me completely, even though he's never around. Maybe that's the key. No one can get too close to me. *Have I been the issue all these years?*

I step out of the car and we stand in front of the house awkwardly, each waiting for the other to be the first to say something. The silence is overwhelming and I'm the first to break. "Shouldn't you still be at the hospital?" I ask walking closer, glancing around to make sure this isn't some type of sick ambush.

"The doctors seem to think so. I only came back to see you home, then I'll be returning to Katrina's side. I can only imagine the manipulation those poor doctors are being subjected to in my absence." He rubs at his bloodshot eyes.

More awkward silence. It has me shuffling my feet back and forth.

"So, diamonds are your thing," he states, as if he were discussing the weather.

"I've been trying to tell you that since I was sixteen."

He walks down our front stairs and embraces me in a hug. This used to be the one place I felt safe in the whole wide world.

"I know." He sighs and lets me go. "You and Katrina are so much alike, it scares the shit out of me. I often forget that she's



not your biological mother.”

“Were you ever going to tell me about my bio dad?” Since we’re opening up, might as well ask. I may never have the courage after today.

“No,” he says flat out and takes a seat on the steps. His hand pats beside him and I sit like the obedient child he always hoped for. “You have always been mine. I felt it here.” His fist hits his chest above his heart twice.

“The only thing in the world that frightens me is the safety of you girls. Before you came along, before Katrina and your sister, I feared nothing. I went from fearless to weak in one breath. The only way I thought I could overcome it, was to be more ruthless and to fight harder in our territory. But that led to me not being around much.”

Demetri never gets emotional, but here, as he speaks, I feel the love. It breaks my heart to fight against it.

“All I ever wanted was to be you.”

He places his arm around my shoulders. “I should have listened harder. This is what I’m trying to do. I want us to be partners.”

I stare out onto our drive, trying to not to be that difficult daughter. I’m usually the cause of my own demise.

“Even though you don’t believe in artisan diamonds?”

“I’m a big enough man to realize when I’ve overlooked something. I should have listened harder, but I let my fear get in the way. I’m sorry.”

This news should make me ecstatic. Demetri is finally hearing me. This is what I have been working toward my whole life. But my heart doesn't speed up. There's no smile on my face. I still feel defeated. Maybe I'm still waiting for the other shoe to drop and everything to turn upside-down again.

"Mom is home!" Capree screams, running past us just as I notice the black car coming down the long driveway. My father frowns and looks at his watch.

"I told them to observe her for one more night," he grumbles, not looking pleased.

He stands up, worried. My first question should have been, "How is Katrina?" *How selfish am I?* I shake my head, hating the thought. The car stops in front of us and the driver comes to open the back door. To my relief, Katrina climbs from the car with a wide smile. She slips off her heeled shoes as soon as she enters the house and we all trail after her.

"You need to be in bed resting." Demetri hugs her and looks like he wants to shelter her from everyone.

"Oh hush, Demetri. I am fine, it was a small scratch." She tries to wave him off, but he refuses to let go of her. I'm suddenly jealous of what they have together. I want someone to care about me like that.

My eyes drift to my ring. I should have taken it off and thrown it at Savio, but I can't bear to part with it.

"Now move so I can hug my girls," she demands. It's almost comical. Katrina is a tiny woman compared to Demetri.

Reluctantly, he lets her go, but refuses to give her much space.

Capree barrels into her and hugs her. Both Demetri and I make a worried grunt sound. “Come here, Charlotte.” Her hand holds mine and pulls me into a group hug with Capree.

My eyes tear up in response to the warm feeling of love wrapping itself around us. I was so worried that I wouldn’t have this anymore. Part of me thought that if I came home, no one would want me.

“I’m so sorry,” I apologize on behalf of Dante and Savio, even if they might not want me to.

“You’re not at fault, Charlotte. The Mancini’s have only ever looked out for themselves. They have never been like any of us.” I wonder how Katrina’s sister, Gia, feels about that statement, since she did marry one. “I’m sorry you were part of their little mind games.” She glares at Demetri as if to say he knew better.

We all step in sync as Demetri begins to lead Katrina to their bedroom.

“He saved her life at the New Year party, Katrina.” My proud father says in defense of Savio.

*Father...*

My heart still hurts from him never telling me the truth. It’s hard to let go and forgive. “We can talk about this later. Let’s have you rest.” He ushers her away toward their bedroom.

“I want that one day,” I sigh, glancing over at my sister.

“They went through a lot of pain to get what they have. Everything worth having in life comes at a cost,” she replies, slipping on Katrina’s heels.

“Where are you going?”

“While they’re distracted, I’m going to go out and have some fun.” She closes the door in my face, not waiting for me to scold her.



“I DIDN’T REALIZE YOU knew about this place,” Demetri replies, looking around at the warehouse I had built right under his nose. It’s strange, I’m still not sure if I should continue calling him Papa or Demetri.

“Your biological mother loved this land. I never had the time to enjoy it. Then everything happened with Mikhail.” I watch him struggle to say my bio dad’s name. “I didn’t want to have to face what had happened here. I always said I was going to give you this land.” A small laugh of disbelief escapes him. “And here you are using it anyway.”

“I wanted to show you so badly.” I don’t know if my confession helps or not. “I’ve imagined this every day since I was sixteen and knew I wanted to do what you did.”

I enter my safe haven with my father trailing behind me, but it doesn’t have that same luster it had before. I thought this would be more exciting, but it’s actually pretty anti-climatic, all things considered.

My men freeze upon seeing their Pakhan. I try to glance sideways to see what Demetri is feeling, but I can't gauge any emotions from him. With us on display and others watching, he's back to being the boss and not the man who raised me.

His hands are relaxed behind his back as I take him through the process and describe everything. He nods at all the right places, never interrupting. It has my nerves on fire. I wish he didn't seem so complacent with it all.

"You did a good job," he finally compliments at the end, when I'm the only person in ear shot.

"Thank you. I worked very hard for this. It took years to perfect."

"Is this why you were always blowing up your room as a kid?" A genuine smile graces his lips for the first time since we arrived.

"Yeah, it's one of the reasons. It's also why I was outside the ball at that New Year's Eve party." His smile slips from his face as I place a reminder of that day—and Savio—back in both of our minds.

Or at least it's back in *my* mind.

"I am proud to say we work together, Charlotte. I still worry though. The mentality of the Bratva has never been a good place for a woman. I believe in you, but I can't have you as my heir, even though I would be proud to call you that. The men would revolt, and your safety...I can't even imagine what

might happen. I hope you can find it in your heart to not hate me over that fact.”

“Don’t worry., I will love my little brother.”

“I’m not worried about that. I worry for your happiness.”

“I’ll be okay. I always am.”

His hand lightly touches my arm. “I don’t want you to be happy because you think I expect it. I want you to be happy because you actually are.”



**I**T’S BEEN A WEEK, and I finally get to do what I have always wanted to do: work with my diamonds and do so out in the open with the support of my father. I should be grateful, ecstatic even, but I can’t get out of this funk I’ve been in since I arrived back at home. The ring on my finger feels heavy, but I can’t bring myself to take it off. I even remind myself that I could make myself a bigger diamond to wear, but it’s this one that my heart has grown to love.

“Why do you continue to mope around?” I startle hearing Katrina’s voice. She barely has a protruding belly and I still haven’t been able to bring myself to congratulate her or ask how far along she is. *I’m a bad daughter.*

I stand from my desk where I’m inspecting the quality of my diamonds and she gives me a hug. “You look beautiful,” I honestly compliment.

“I thought this is what you wanted...” She takes a seat, glancing at the diamonds on the black velvet cloth between us.

“It is.” My lips pull up as I force a smile.

“Have you told your father that you love Savio?” Her eyes hold a sad, knowing glimmer.

“It doesn’t matter. He never loved me.”

“Charlotte, I have eyes. I saw that man. He loved you.”

“It doesn’t matter. I have what I have always wanted.” I pick up a diamond and look at it under the microscope.

“You and Demetri have always been stubborn. Go talk to the man.”

My hand pauses while I reply, “Oh, he already had plenty to say. None of it was pretty.” I let out a shaky breath. “He sold me back to Papa.” I fight against the tears that well up in the corners of my eyes. My eyes blink, trying to push them back before they spill over my lashes.

Silence stretches between us for a long minute. “None of those Mancini boys ever had it easy. I don’t like how everything transpired and went down, but I can see you’re hurting. Only you can change your life. Talk to Savio, and your father. I’m sure they can figure something out. I think in some twisted way, Savio is trying to be noble.”

I grunt, hating that she’s taking *his* side. “I suppose you would see it as noble, considering you still married the man who killed your father.” She flinches at my harsh words and I

immediately regret them. Katrina has always been kind and loving towards me. “I’m sorry,” I apologize softly.

“I understand you’re hurting, Charlotte, but I won’t be anyone’s punching bag. Get your head out of your ass and stop moping. You are the only person who can make a change in your life.”

I put the diamond down when she walks out of the room. My fingers tug at my hair, my limited concentration fully shot now. Maybe if I could get a glimpse of Savio I would know what to do. *He has a fight tonight.* It would be easy to go...



# CHAPTER 29

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**SAVIO**

THE CRACK OF MY fist against the cartilage of my opponent's nose sounds sickly but I don't have time to think about it as my other fist is rounding for another hit. The bell rings and I get in my final two blows I had planned out. Arms hold me back and I'm pushed against the bars of the cage.

I only stop struggling when I realize they have me pinned and I can't move. Four guys to my one, hold me. My eyes dart to the bloody mess in the corner of the ring. He's not getting up.

Demetri is in the corner and money is going back and forth between him and the gamblers. I wonder if he was hoping I would lose. I don't remember the last time he entered this room. I don't think he liked that it was considered neutral for all.

"I think you killed him." I recognize Dante's voice at my ear and turn my head toward my brother.

"It's what I'm good at. It's why I was asked to fight tonight." I shrug off the men. "I need to change." When I look back, Demetri is gone from the crowd.

Reluctantly, they let me go, but they block my access to the bloody mess I left in the ring. I look at my hands and see the blood on them. *Fucking Hell*. I don't even remember most of the fight. My instincts took over, and the next thing I knew I

was being pulled off the man. I can't count how many times this happened to me in jail.

When I walk out of the changing room, I'm not in the mood to celebrate. Fighting used to be a way to calm my nerves, make me feel more in control and soothe my inner demons. Today, it has me more amped up. I can't settle myself.

I go to the bar and Dante already has a drink waiting for me. I place my back to the ledge and bring the bottle to my lips. "You used to love fighting," my brother says, refusing to look at me when he says it.

I scratch at my forehead before slipping my hand into my front pocket. "Here's the money for the ring." I bring out a wad of cash and slap it into his hand. "Sorry I lost it." The crowd cheers over my words as a new fight begins.

"I don't want your fucking money." Dante refuses the cash I try to give him and shakes his head. "You didn't fucking lose my ring. You gave it to the woman you love. Trust me, I would have been happy to be able to do the same thing. Instead, I held onto an unwanted ring for years. Stop moping around and being an idiot."

"I'm hardly moping. My life is fucking grand right now." We both know I'm lying. I'm miserable, and everything that used to keep me happy and complacent now does nothing for me.

"Let's go celebrate my win."

He eyes me, his frown deepening the lines on his forehead. “Let’s go then.” Dante shrugs and I pat him on the back before we walk out of the dodgy building.



## Demetri

I WOULD LOVE NOTHING more than to light this building on fire. *Neutral ground, my ass.* I set the whole damn place up myself. Its only reason for existing was for me to find the best fighters out there and make them mine. It's how I found Savio and created a situation where he would be forced to serve under my empire.

Just as easily as I made him, I can make him fall. And he *will* fall tonight. No one insults my baby girl and gets away with it. Without Savio around, Charlotte can't hurt because of him. Problem solved.

I watch as he and his brother leave the fight. In a few hours, everyone at this week's rendition of Dante's famous after party will be dead. I won't spare anyone who associates with the man who broke my daughter's heart.



## Savio

“**R**OMEOWANTS A QUICK word before the night gets too late,” Dante says as we drive back to his place.

I try to fight against the stiffening of my muscles. He’s my brother, no matter how fucked up our relationship is. “Is that so?” I look out the car window to prevent Dante reading me too easily.

The party is in full swing when we arrive and I wonder how my brother does this every weekend. “It’s all part of the job.” He answers my unspoken question. I turn and find him studying me. Opening the car door, I grunt out my response.

We walk shoulder to shoulder toward the house, an unified front, and the crowd parts for us. I used to get a kick out of stuff like this. Romeo is waiting out on the patio, so we can pretend we’re kings above our people.

“Where’s your new bride?” Romeo asks, cocking a brow. “I never thought you’d let Demetri win.”

Dante sits down in a lounge chair and places his legs up, his arms moving to rest behind his head.

“I’m not letting him win. I dumped the—” It’s on the tip of my tongue to say bitch, but I can’t. I’m fucking embarrassed that I even accepted money from her father. I plan to burn the check in front of his face.

“Dumped the what?” Charlotte steps out from the shadows and lowers her hood to fall around her shoulders. “If you’re going to be calling me names, at least have the balls to say it to my face.”

Tension radiates through her frame, but all I can think about is how beautiful she looks. My heart sputters out of control.

The ground shakes and I watch in slow motion as Charlotte is thrown to the side and hits the railings of the patio. It takes a few seconds to register the explosions happening all around us.

My ears ring from the force of it and I launch myself toward Charlotte. I quickly cover her body and try to cradle her under me as much as possible. She wiggles and her hands attempt to push me off her. “Don’t you dare move!” I shout over the commotion around us.

Screams of hysteria take over for the music that no longer plays. Below, people are running every which way, confused and trying to find safety. More bombs explode and the house rattles. The patio shakes and suddenly drops several inches before it stops. I hold Charlotte tighter. Looking around, the patio has fallen down on one side. Keeping my body cradled around Charlotte, I pick her up and move inside.

It’s obvious we’re under attack from someone. Smoke fills the room, and the sounds of shouts from inside filter through the haze. The door busts open and I watch as a man tosses something inside. My feet rush toward him and I use my shoulder to push him over with Charlotte still held in my arms,



needing to escape. We're all thrown forward when the explosive detonates and parts of the house fall in on itself.

I gasp for a breath, never letting Charlotte go. My body hurts everywhere and my arm is leaking blood.

"It's over, Savio." Demetri steps in front of me. "You can't hurt my little girl and get away with it."

"This is because of you?" I sneer. Charlotte doesn't say a word and when I look down, I realize she must have been knocked unconscious. Demetri doesn't even recognize his own daughter.

"No one is leaving this party alive. It will serve as a reminder of what happens when you hurt what's mine."

"Do you ever think before you ever act?" I ask in disgust. "Charlotte could be lying dead in my arms and you're here trying to attack me in her honor. Maybe you should have made sure she wasn't here first."

His eyes grow large. "No..."

I push back the hood she's wearing, her blonde hair spilling out from under.

"Why would she be here?" he asks, as if I forced her.

"I didn't have time to ask before the explosions."

He steps forward, and I turn my back to him to keep her away. He could stab me in the back and I would never see it, but she's worth the risk.

"Give me my daughter."

“I did that once and look where it led us.” Gunshots are beginning to pop off and I already know it’s going to be a bloodbath before anyone can do anything to stop it.

“Look at what’s happening around here. This is all because of you. If she stays, she will die here. I’m not calling my men off. If you’re going to do one good thing in your life, do this Savio.”

I look down at her beautiful face. I never wanted to cause her any harm. Deep down, I had hoped I could be the one to bring her joy. I look back at her father, then down to her once more. The guns sound closer, inside the home now. I place a kiss on her forehead before I hesitantly transfer her to Demetri. I still can’t quite let her go.

“You have done the right thing.” He pulls her from me and steps back before leaving the room.

I don’t *feel* like I’ve done the right thing. I stay, staring at the doorway even after she can no longer be seen. Three of Demetri’s men walk into the room and I don’t even have a gun to protect myself with.

# CHAPTER 30

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**CHARLOTTE**

EVERYTHING IS SOFT AROUND me. I move and it feels like feathers tickling my skin. Slowly, the light from somewhere has my eyes fluttering open. I'm back in my bedroom.

Suddenly, I remember the explosion. I sit up and my head rings from the sudden movement. "You're safe now Charlotte." *It wasn't a dream.*

I turn toward my father's voice. "Savio?"

He shakes his head. "You are better than him, Charlotte, but the awful fact is that he doesn't want you." I suck in a breath at the awful truth. "He could have never kept you safe. He has too many demons and enemies."

"What happened?"

My father's face looks grim. "The Mancini's were attacked. Savio was one of my men for a long time. Someone unaware of what has happened in the last two weeks informed me he didn't make it. I'm sorry."

I choke on my own breath and am immediately hit with an onslaught of tears spilling over my lashes. I can't keep them back. The harder I try, the faster they fall.

"Don't waste your tears on him." He pats my back awkwardly, trying to be the loving father.

I don't bother to wipe my tears. I allow them to mourn what could have been but never will be.

“With him gone, you will be free to choose your own husband in your own time.”

“I have my diamonds. I don’t ever want to marry.” I snuffle between tears.

“I understand.” He stands up, kissing the top of my head. “I love you, Charlotte.”

“I love you too, Papa.” It doesn’t matter that he’s not my bio dad. He’s all I know and has always tried his best to keep me happy. If I don’t have him, then I have no one.

Over the next few days, footsteps constantly walk by my bedroom and stop, but I don’t have the energy to open my eyes to see who it is. Soon the whispers become more apparent at my doorway.

“Char?” Capree’s voice floats into my room. My bed dips down beside me and I try to pretend to be asleep. “I know you’re awake. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry you are hurting.” I open my eyes and see a sadness that I’ve never seen on her before.

“Rationally, I know I’m being silly. People come and go out of our lives all the time.” The words come out of my mouth but my heart refuses to believe what I say.

“You don’t have to downplay how you’re feeling to me. It’s okay to hurt.”

“I just feel stupid. He didn’t even love me.” Those words bring a fresh batch of tears to my eyes.

I close my eyes and the bed shifts back before my sister walks away. When I know she has gone, I get up and go to the bathroom. I keep the lights off as I splash water on my face, scared to look at my reflection.

Who have I become? I'm stronger than this. My hand quickly flicks on the light and I don't recognize myself. A stranger stares back at me in my reflection.

# CHAPTER 31

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**SAVIO**

**W**E SURVEY THE DAMAGE done. Our people, men and women, lives so casually blown away. We've paid off the cops that have stepped onto our property. Our cleaning crew is doing their job. Other than the house being in shambles, soon no one will be able to tell a massacre had happened here only hours before.

"I don't think Demetri likes you anymore," Romeo mentions, casually kicking a bullet shell with his foot.

"Can you be done with Savio so I can get the bullet from him?" Dante pokes at my wound.

"Fuck!" It hurts like a bitch, but he only laughs at my expense. I would have been dead if he didn't stumble down in time. They got one shot in before he took the three of them out.

"How is it that it was three on one and I killed them all, yet you got shot and killed no one?" I glare as he gloats.

With a huff, I reply, "I didn't have a gun."

"It's ironic that I, the lover, had a gun on myself, and you, the fighter, didn't."

"I hope you get poisoned one day," I respond dryly, enjoying the banter.

"The likelihood of that is quite high. I did the stats on it one day. Women are more likely to use poison in their killings.

And I figure if I'm getting killed, it will be by one of them one day."

"Can you both shut up? This is a big fucking problem," Romeo scolds like the annoying big brother he is. "Come on, there is nothing more we can do about this mess. Let's get Savio fixed up and plan our retaliation."



**R**OMEO PACES IN FRONT of Dante and myself. "Demetri needs to be whacked," Romeo demands. I groan as Dante digs in with his tweezer-like tool to grab the lodged metal from within me. "This can't go unanswered."

"Demetri is a proud man. Set up a fight to the death between us. If I win, I get Charlotte. If I lose, it doesn't matter because I'll be dead."

Romeo considers it. "If he lost, it would leave the Bratva scrambling. They would be weak, and at everyone's mercy."

"Katrina is pregnant with a boy, right?" Dante asks.

"We're not hurting women or unborn children," I snarl and Dante shrugs. "That boy will grow up one day."

"No." Romeo ends the conversation on that topic.

The sound of metal on metal has me tuning my head to see the newest bloody bullet in the jar. I wonder what the record is for the number of times being shot, and living to tell about it.

"You think you could win?" Romeo asks.

Demetri and I have sparred enough to know each other's weaknesses, but he's in exquisite shape for an old guy. "It would be close. I won't be walking out of the ring healthy, but I can win."

"Do you have it in you to kill him?" I raise a brow. "You worked for the man for a number of years."

"Because of you," I remind him.

Romeo raises his hand and continues, "You would be killing your wife's father. A man who you were close to, and a man your wife loves."

"You're forgetting it's what I do best." Romeo stops pacing and studies me. "I have nothing to lose," I say.

"Everyone has something to lose." He crosses his arms, staring up at me like somehow it will give him all of his answers.

"I have lived through Hell and come out the other side. My body is covered with its evidence. I've learned to turn off pain because that was the only way to survive."

"I'll let you know if he accepts." Our oldest brother nods his head. "I'll see if Max will come out from the woods to see the fight." Max, our second-oldest brother, is like a phantom. No one ever sees him. He comes out to do his jobs but refuses to be seen in society. Regardless of his absence, his legend as The Butcher continues to flow through stories in our circle.

My temple throbs, I'm stiff and fucking tired. "You got anything that will knock me out?" I ask Dante.

“I thought you are above shit like that?”

“If I’m going to fight to the death, I need sleep.”



## Charlotte

**T**HERE'S A STRANGE TENSION in our house when I finally decide to come back to the land of the living. I sit down at the kitchen table. Capree is there already eating her breakfast and she pretends to pick up a newspaper that she's never read before. No one is looking me in the eye and it puts me on edge. Even Katrina, who's always calm and collected, is off. She drinks her coffee leaning against the counter. My father walks into the kitchen and moves to sit down in front of his newspaper, but once he sees we're all watching him, he walks out of the room.

“What's wrong?” I ask.

Capree studies the paper with fascination and hides her face.

“Is it me?” I ask, confused. Katrina and I have never lied to each other before, so she gives me a sad smile and pats her stomach. It's another reminder that my brother will be the heir one day, no matter what. I'll have to push down my reactions and love him anyway.

Katrina's forehead furrows with a forced lopsided half-smile. “Your father is under a lot of stress right now.”

“Because of me? Because of the diamonds?” I thought this would bring him less stress.

“No.” She shakes her head and does a half eye roll. “It's men being men. Nothing for you to worry about.” My fingers

dig into my thigh at that statement. It's the same line of thought I was brought up on and hated.

I glance at Capree and she brings the paper back up. I don't get her. *How are we sisters?*

"I'm heading into the office where I do...*woman* things," I snidely retort.

"You didn't have any breakfast." Katrina points out while rubbing at her almost-flat stomach.

I want to ask how far along she is. *Another time.* "I've lost my appetite."



I TAKE ONE OF the fleet cars my father has and drive myself to work. I go slow, being extra careful; since this will be the farthest I have driven before. My warehouse has double the number of men around it as usual. I step out of the car and walk to my head guard. "Why the extra security?"

"The Pakhan sent them over," he answers, looking straight ahead.

"Do you work for Demetri or me?" I cross my arms over my chest.

"I work for you, Boss."

"Are you loyal to the Pakhan or me?"

The answer is not as immediate as the first one. "You are my number one priority." It's a safe answer, but tells me

everything. These men are loyal to Demetri first. As long as he is okay with what I'm doing, they will be here for me.

“Send the extra men home. I don't want them.” Joe, my head of security, gives me a curt nod. I walk past him and into my building.

My muscles are pulled tight. Something is off and I hate it's being kept a secret. It has each of my nerves frazzled, causing my concentration to falter. I blow out a breath, keeping my head held high as I inspect everything. I can't afford one mistake. I have to reexamine the same diamond twice and even then, I can't trust my judgment.

Something's going on and I have to get to the bottom of it.

I sit in my small room, wondering who would tell me the truth. After making one quick call, my head of security walks into my office.

“Have a seat.” I motion to the chair on the other side of my desk.

“I prefer to stand. It keeps me sharper.”

“Very well.” I walk around the desk and lean onto the top to partially sit.

“What don't I know?”

His jaw tightens, and I watch as his back molars move his jaw up and down. “Your diamond business is running smooth and there are no issues.”



“Omissions are the same thing as lies. You have one more chance before you become an issue I have to deal with.”

He eyes me, clearly not wanting to say it. I lift a brow, waiting.

“Your father has accepted an invitation to fight in the cages.”

“Go on,” I wave my hand as if to say hurry up. “That can’t be all of it.”

“It’s a fight to the death, Charlie. Nobody has ever challenged your father to the death before.”

My eyes widen at the shock of the news. I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t this.

“So why are people being weird around me?” My eyes narrow, and I watch his Adam’s apple bob.

“Savio is alive and it’s him, right?” I should have known better than to take Demetri’s word at face value. My heart stutters waiting for confirmation, but I don’t need it. I already know.

I cross my arms, waiting.

“Yes, Boss.”

“How many people know he’s alive?” I ask flatly. My lips purse hating to be lied to.

“Everyone thought he was dead. It wasn’t until the Mancini’s contacted Pakhan last night that the truth was

learned.” His voice is strong, but his eyes dart away from me, going to the ground.

I swallow thickly, trying to mask my emotions. My head spins with the news. I don’t dare to try to stand fully. “I see. Why was I not updated?”

“I was already on my way when you called me.”

“When will this fight take place?”

“In one month.”

I nod, my entire body feeling jittery. “This conversation is confidential. No one is to know we talked.”

“Thank you, Charlie.” He sounds as if I am doing him the favor. My heart doesn’t know what to do with this news. On shaky legs, I stand to walk around my desk and fall into my chair.

Savio is alive and my father lied to me.

# CHAPTER 32

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**SAVIO**

THE NEWS OF THE fight between Demetri and me has the underground world buzzing. I half expected to see Charlotte at some point. There's no way anyone in our world would be able to avoid the topic. It's anticipated to be the highest revenue for bookies in this decade. Some are saying in the century.

I arrive an hour early, and the place is packed. There will be three smaller fights to get the crowd hyped before Demetri and I go on. Walking into the locker room, Demetri is already in there, kissing Katrina like this will be their last kiss. They're so wrapped up in each other they don't notice me. Demetri ends the kiss, only to lift her shirt up and place a kiss on her bellybutton.

I clear my throat and they both turn toward me.

"I hope you took a good picture for your mother to use at your funeral," Demetri snickers, while looking me up and down. The move is meant to intimidate me, and it works. Not that I show any flicker of emotion on my face. Demetri is looking strong, and I know he's a cunning fighter. There's a reason why neither of us ever wanted to have a real fight against each other. Our sparring matches got intense enough.

"And I hope your wife took an ultrasound to use at yours," I barb back.

I have to force myself to turn my back to him. He won't kill me until we have an audience. I close my eyes and cheers

erupt outside. By the sound of it, a fight has broken out in the room before the scheduled one.

The thrill of using my hands and not holding back seeps into my bones. I jump a few times, soaking in the feeling. There's a good chance we both die tonight. That is how I would have bet.

I turn around and Demetri is fucking kissing Katrina again. "This isn't a Motel 8. Stop playing and let her go, or fuck her already so I can get a good show in first."

He growls and Katrina walks out of the room. I wish Charlotte was here. I would love nothing more than to kiss her like that. The problem is, I wouldn't have the strength to let her go like Demetri had with Katrina.

The time flies by fast and the rowdiness of the crowd is clearly heard from within the room. Dante walks in. "Time to play, boys." He claps his hands together, but the stress lines show on his face.

Demetri and I walk into the arena, shoulder to shoulder, neither one of us allowing the other to be the first. The crowd cheers and the sound of breaking glass fills our ears. Everyone is on their feet, chanting one of our names.

Dante says something to me, but I can't hear him over the roar of the crowd.

We step into the cage. "Only death will tell who the real winner is." The announcer has to shout into his microphone to amplify his voice over the noise.

Katrina steps up to the cages and gives Demetri another kiss between the bars. It only pisses me off more. I should be kissing Charlotte right now. I scan the crowd, which is cheering so loudly it hurts my ears. My body responds to it, automatically loosening up, ready to fight.

I'm hoping for one last glance of Charlotte, but she's nowhere to be seen.

Demetri and I step forward when the announcer calls us and hit our fists on top of each other twice. The room erupts in cheers, louder than before. I crack my neck to the right and to the left before all the background annoyances fade. It's only Demetri and me in the cage. Nothing else matters. My natural instincts take over.

Demetri steps forward to test my reactions. I don't bother to step forward or back, silently taunting him, waiting for him to make the first move. I'm not running from it. I embrace it with everything I have.

Demetri smirks and bounces forward, faster this time. I duck under his swing and charge toward him. He gets a good punch into my healing wound. I undercut, getting his jaw as we separate, staying light on our feet.

Demetri spits blood from his mouth and I smile. I'm sure there's a wager on who makes who bleed first. I won that one.

I advance on Demetri and he headbutts me, taking me by surprise. That's not a move of his and it catches me off guard. Stars swirl around my eyes and I stumble back.

“I’m going to enjoy killing you,” Demetri yells into my ear before pulling me back to my feet by yanking on my ear.

I punch him in the kidney, one, two, three times, before he lets go. His leg comes up to kick and I duck before I charge again. My eyes are fixated on him. We tumble to the ground, rolling, and punching.

“I’ll enjoy knowing we’re both dead and you will lose everything you’ve worked for your entire life,” I yell into Demetri’s face and I put him into a choke hold. He struggles against my arms, but I don’t loosen my grip.

Demetri’s face turns a red shade for a few moments before it begins to turn a slight purple. I could easily break his neck, but I want him to know he’s about to die.

The fight in him diminishes slightly and I can feel eyes burning into me. I can’t help myself and look up. Charlotte is standing front row, her eyes glassy as she watches. I expect to see horror and disgust written all over her face as she sees who I really am on the inside.

Sadness washes over her face a split second before she’s pushed forward. I watch as the crowd becomes unrestrained, pushing each other to get to the front to see Demetri Sokolov fall to his death. Charlotte’s eyes dart to the side and I watch her mouth open to scream but I can’t hear what comes out of it.

I hold tighter with my grip as I watch people scream and fall as the front gets pushed down. A person has managed to climb on the bars, cheering for our death. Demetri grows in strength



the same time my concentration leaves our fight to focus on Charlotte. She's knocked around by bodies struggling to move closer. Her eyes are wide, looking worried. My irises trail Charlotte making sure she stays on her feet. With effort, she manages to fight through the crowd to the other side and I see Katrina fall to the ground. The crowd moves over her to get to the front.



## Charlotte

I CAN'T BREATHE. EACH violent move has me pushing forward to get to the front. The crowd is going crazy, out of control. Drinks have stopped being served and everyone is looking for a fight. I watch as Savio strangles my father, his face consumed with his task. It's almost scary how calm and in control he looks, like this is just another day in the office.

His eyes lift up and lock on mine. He stares at me, his normally soulful eyes blank, and I wonder if he even knows I'm in front of him watching.

No one in the crowd cares who lives or dies; they all want a good show. There's a fight that breaks out behind me and I'm jolted forward. Two men who want to pretend they are the men in the cages but don't actually want to put their life on the line tussle against the crowd, attempting to push their way forward.

I almost can't even watch. My eyes drift down to my father and I see him watching Katrina. I glance over and see her falling to the ground. My legs push forward through the crowd to get her. I try to protect her as much as I can, but I'm not close enough to do much good.

I look back to the ring as screams of disappointment echo throughout the room. Demetri's legs kick and fight harder than before, even as Savio lets go of his grip and jumps up, waiting for the next move.



## Savio

“**H**IT ME AND LET’S get this fight over with so I can protect my family,” Demetri hollers.

“I’m not fighting you. Go save them.” I nod toward Katrina and Charlotte. Charlotte has Katrina back on her feet.

“I’m not forfeiting so you can say you won,” Demetri, the ever-proud man, argues.

“Then kill me. This crowd is going to kill everyone in this room soon.” The bars on the cage shake as hundreds of hands move, demanding the fight continue and feed them the blood they’re so thirsty for.

“Savio!” Charlotte’s voice rises from beyond the roar of the background noise. “I love you!” She screams. It’s all I need to hear. I won’t risk her life.

I move past Demetri to leave the cage. He can say whatever he wants. My hand reaches out as I feel a sharp stab to my backside. I turn to see a bloody knife in Demetri’s hand. “We’re not done yet.”

“Savio!” I hear her cry and see she’s being pushed to the ground.

Men have climbed the bars, hanging like angry bears. Their bodies shake along with the cage’s back and forth motion. Arms slip through the black, heavy metal, hitting the mats as they chant. “We want a winner! We want a winner!” The sound of the room pierces my ears and they ring back at me.

“This is me choosing her. I promised myself that I will always protect her, no matter what. This is me keeping that promise.”

I’m willing to die to protect Charlotte. I turn my back to Demetri once again, my anxiety skyrocketing and my strides long and purposeful.

I punch the first two guys at the cage door. They fall into the crowd and a few men stumble into the ring from the crowd. They practically fall onto each other soon as the door opens.

The crowd ignites with fury when they realize what is happening. They’re not getting their fight and fury within the crowd ignites, the building becoming one large coffin that I find all too suffocating.

I fight the crowd, trying to get closer to Charlotte. My hands reach out for hers and our fingertips touch, but I can’t get close enough. A few more stumbled steps and I’m close enough to pick her up, but I have to continue to fight through the crowd in an effort to protect her as much as I can. My body rocks back and forth as I fight to escape.

# CHAPTER 33

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**CHARLOTTE**

**I** DOUBT THE FOUR words *knight in shining armor* have ever been uttered about Savio, but here he is being mine. I look up at his face and realize he has thrown the fight to save my life. There will be repercussions for what he's done. No one will allow for it to go unanswered. I know the type of money that was hanging in the balance from it.

Savio looks fierce and determined as we leave the building. The kid from the parking lot, Miles, is waiting outside. "Thought you might need a car ready." The kid tosses Savio the keys.

"This isn't over, Savio!" My father has Katrina in his arms, trying to get her to safety too. The boarded-up window bangs and the other dirty window explodes onto the street.

"It's over, Papa," I call out. "I want out. You can have my diamonds. All I want is Savio."

"Don't be stupid, Charlotte." A few of the men spill over into the street.

"You told me Savio was dead. You lied to me. You have an heir being born. I no longer fit in your life. I choose Savio."

"Come home, Charlotte"

"I *am* going home, Papa."

Savio tries to place me in the front seat and my fingers loop around his car keys that he's holding, stopping him from unlocking the doors.



“You’re hurt.” My fingers touch where he is bleeding. My hand comes away from his side stained red, but he doesn’t show he’s in any pain. I’m not sure if he realizes how bad it’s bleeding.

“It’s nothing but a scrape. All I care about is that you’re safe.” He unlocks and opens the passenger door, but I refuse to enter.

“Then let me drive.” I attempt to slip past his large frame but his hands rest on my hips and he looks into my eyes.

“No, I need to be in control.” Pain and pride radiate through his irises. I glance down at the red seeping through his shirt.

“You *need* a hospital.”

“I’ll stitch myself up like I always do,” he grunts.

I swipe his keys. “If you won’t go to the hospital, I’m driving then.”

“Not a chance” His hand goes for the keys just as a window is broken with something being tossed through it.

The distraction allows for me to move past him, and I slip into the driver side, leaving no other option for Savio. He jumps in and I press down the pedal and the car jerks forward. I glance over and Savio has his glove box open and is placing a large white bandage over his wound. A small smirk lifts my lips, I’m happy to see he’s at least trying to care for his wound.

His eyes move to mine and he places his hand on my leg once the bandage is on fully.

“Why did you leave the fight?” I whisper, placing my hand over his on my leg. My other hand holds the top of the wheel tightly as I swerve in and out of traffic.

“Everything I have ever done is to keep you safe. I love the thrill of a fight, but my mind can’t focus on anything but you when I think you’re in danger. I was born to protect you.” His fingers slide against my legs. I’ve missed his touch. It’s hard to concentrate knowing he’s right beside me and safe.

The month away from each other was way too long. He continues speaking while his hands keep touching me. “It’s taken me a while to understand it. My hands are the deadliest tool I can wield, but around you they only know how to protect. I was so scared I would hurt you. I let my mother and my fears cloud my head. I should have never let you go the first time. Even if my heart was in the right place. I thought you needed your family. But now, I can’t let you go. I’m too selfish. I don’t want to live if it’s not with you by my side.” He plays with the ring on my finger. It twists back and forth. “By all odds, I should be dead. But I’m here with you instead.”

The car slows and he leans in. His nose glides up my neck to my ear. “I can’t give you back. You are mine and I will fight Heaven and Hell to keep you.”

I turn down an exit ramp, driving away from the fight, but with no specific destination in mind. “Put your seat farther back.”

Multitasking isn’t high up on my abilities while driving. My hand feels around, but I don’t know where the button is. I give

up easily, placing my hand back on the wheel so they're both helping me steer.

Savio leans over. He should smell horrible, but I can only make out the crisp, manly scent of wood and him. My heart races as his hand reaches over me and moves my seat back. My legs can just hold the pedal down at this length.

"I missed you, Charlotte." His lips press down on my neck and his hand slips between my jean-clad legs. "Spread your legs for me. I need to feel you, to prove to myself I'm alive and here with you."

"I'm not going to be able to concentrate." The words die on my tongue as his fingers swipe up and down against my apex. His lips continue to nip, kiss, and suck on my neck. The combination of his moves have me fighting to keep my eyes open and on the road.

His other hand pushes my leg down to add speed to my already-alarming pace. To have him touch me has my senses on overload. I never thought I would have this again.

"Lift your hips." I do as he says and he undoes my button and pulls my pants just past the seat. He bends down, his head just fitting between me and the steering wheel. I moan when I feel the smooth sensation of his tongue parting me. His hand goes up my shirt and tweaks my nipples.

My hips bounce up and down, my legs vibrating to keep the speed of traffic while driving.

"Faster, Charlotte, or I'll stop," he murmurs.

My attention is barely on the road. “Savio, this isn’t safe.” I moan, trying to protest half-heartedly.

“Who does this pussy belong to?” he demands.

“My husband.”

My head swirls with emotions and lightheadedness. The lights blur as we enter residential streets. I’m going three times the speed limit. The turns become sharper; the swerves from missing other cars are tighter.

My hips buck faster. My breathing is jagged, at best. “Savio, we could crash and die.”

“Then I would die a happy man. If I’m going to die, it might as well be while I’m eating your perfect pussy and listening to you moan my name.”

A street light turns red and my foot doesn’t budge from the accelerator. “Keep your eyes open, Charlotte. How does it feel to be this alive?”

His lips vibrate on my clit as he speaks. It’s my undoing. “Savio!” I moan, slamming on the brakes. The car squeals as the tires lock to stop. The smell of burned rubber infiltrates the car and I’m left breathless as my orgasm hits me hard. The car stills just past the stop line.

Savio rises, wiping his mouth, and places the car in park. My heart is kick boxing my ribs and I’m trembling everywhere from the amazing, mind-blowing, earth-shattering orgasm that rocked me to my core.

Savio pulls my head to his and places his hand over my beating heart. “This is how I feel every time I think about you.” He presses a soft kiss to my mouth. “You make my heart crazy.”

“I love you.” My hand cups his jaw.

“I love you.” A car honks from behind and Savio looks through the rear window, giving them the middle finger.

I giggle. “I think you can drive now.”

We switch places and I know if I stay with Savio there will be a real war between the Bratva and Italian mafia. Instead of losing my family, I will be forfeiting them. For the first time it will be me walking away instead of someone else walking away from me.

“This is me choosing you Savio, I’m jumping in with both feet,” I confess. “Nothing else matters.”

Savio’s fingers thread through my hair, and he pulls me in for a kiss. The kiss tastes of forever and promise. It’s different from all of our other kisses we have shared.

“I love you, Charlotte Mancini. I promise to make you proud.”

# CHAPTER 34

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**CHARLOTTE**

“IT’S A HEALTHY BABY boy!” Capree squeals in delight while trying to keep her voice down on our phone call. It’s official, the Bratva has an heir. There will be rejoicing and partying for the next week with the news. Ironic that he is born on my birthday. I’m happy for Katrina and Demetri, *I really am*. It’s what they have wanted for years. Maybe one day I will meet him.

I’m no longer on speaking terms with my family except when Capree can sneak a phone call to me. I chose a side that wasn’t theirs and it can’t be forgiven. The mafia and Bratva are in open war with each other.

I can hear the sound of a baby crying in the background and Capree immediately ends the conversation. The room becomes smaller and I need fresh air. I slip the phone away from my ear with the click of the other line disconnecting still echoing through my skull.

I look over the room full of people that are here to celebrate me. It won’t be long before the news of the Bratva heir circulates around. I wait for the sideways glances as people try to gauge my reaction.

Savio’s bruises and wounds have healed. He’s the enforcer for his brother Romeo now. Life has continued on. My new warehouse is almost complete, and I’ll be able to start creating my diamonds again. For the first time in a long time, I feel content and happy.



A large figure steps in front of me, and I crane my head up to see my husband. He's smiling down at me, his hand extended. "Dance with me."

I look around the room. "No one is dancing."

"That's because they are all waiting for you." He pulls me in, pressing a kiss to my lips before walking me to the middle of the empty dance floor.

I'm nervous being the center of attention in a room full of people I hardly know. "Keep your eyes on me." I drag my gaze away from the crowd and I'm instantly locked on Savio's intense irises.

We glide across the floor. With each graceful step, I become more relaxed, the news of my brother seeping away. My husband's hand draws small circles on my lower back in a soothing motion.

"You always know how to make me feel better," I say.

"That's because you were made for me." Like always, I melt into him. Savio is my safe haven. There's never any need to hide from him.

The song ends, and the room erupts in applause. Couples fill the dance floor, joining us as a new song begins.

Savio's hand slips from my waist and his posture stiffens. I follow his gaze and spot Dante entering the room, looking out of sorts. His tie is loose, his shirt not buttoned properly.

Our hands stay linked as we go to his brother. I've never seen him like this. He's always in control. Before we reach

him, I can smell the liquor saturating his pores and oozing out of him. Before Savio can ask what's wrong, he says, "She's back."

My eyes ping-pong between the brothers. I can only assume the *she* they are referencing is the one my ring was originally meant for. I look at my hand before putting it behind me.

Joe, one of the few men who followed me when I moved away from the Bratva, comes up to me. "Boss. I found the location of the IP address the video came from," he discreetly whispers.

I'm forced to move away from the Mancini brothers. Savio will fill me in later.

"And?" I ask. I can't stop wondering who was helping Klaus. "Was it Pavel?" I always wondered if it was him, but my father got to him before I could and killed him. As soon as I announced I was gone, anyone loyal to me was killed or they were lucky and escaped to come with me here.

"The location came from Italian soil. In Mancini territory."

"Are you sure?"

"I wouldn't have interrupted unless I was sure."

"Thank you, Joe. I will let you know how I want to proceed tomorrow." I'm distracted with wanting to make sure Dante is alright and now is not the time to be making important decisions.

My eyes slide toward Dante. Savio is leading him away from the crowd before he makes a scene. I nod at Joe,

dismissing him. So much for a relaxing birthday party.



I STARTLE AWAKE HEARING my husband enter our room. My heart is pounding, and I can feel the slickness between my legs due to the dream I was just awoken from. It takes me a second to comprehend it was a dream and only Savio is in our room. Dante is nowhere near us.

I blow out a breath, feeling guilty about my naughty imagination. Dante and I have always been platonic, and I plan to keep it that way. So, to have a dream about him and my husband puts me off kilter.

“What a night.” Savio pulls his tie loose from around his neck and comes toward our bed. I sit up onto my knees to wrap my arms around him. “I’m sorry your birthday wasn’t everything I promised. We should have been dancing the night away; instead, I only got one dance with my wife.”

“The thing that matters is that you’re here with me now. I don’t care about parties when bigger things are happening. How is your brother?”

“He’s wrecked. Not good.” He shakes his head. “I’ve never seen him like this before.” I unbutton his shirt and slip it past his shoulders to help him undress. “But I don’t want to talk about Dante while my wife is undressing me.” He smirks.

“Neither do I. I just want to lose myself in you,” I whisper, placing a kiss on his cheek, then another on his lips. It doesn’t take him long to take charge and remind me who I belong to.

# CHAPTER 35

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## **EPILOGUE**

## Charlotte

“IT’S A BOY!” THE midwife says.

Savio wipes my forehead with a damp cloth. “I’m so proud of you. You did so well.” He kisses my cheek before taking the crying baby from the midwife. “He is absolutely perfect!” Savio places our baby in my arms.

My smile splits my face. Our baby is the most precious thing I have ever held and I struggle to believe we made something so special together. “Can you send word to my family?” I look up from the baby to Savio, nervousness all of a sudden swarming my stomach.

He nods, his finger under the baby’s hand. “If that is what you want.”

I haven’t talked to my parents in three years and I have the strange, almost funny thought that my brother is only two-almost-three years older than my child. “Make sure they know we have a boy.” I can’t keep the anger out of my tone. I still haven’t been able to forgive my father. I wanted to, but when he never reached out, I eventually gave up on him ever wanting to repair our relationship.

Savio chuckles. “Don’t worry, the entire underworld will know of our boy. He will grow into someone amazing. Trust me.”

As petty as it sounds, it does make me feel better. I want all of our children to feel important, regardless of their sex.

“Have you decided what name you like best?” Savio asks, and I look at our boy. I bring him down and attempt to get him to latch to breast feed.

“Mikhail Savio Mancini.” Mikhail was never in the names we discussed, but it has a nice ring to it.

“You just want Demetri to be forced to remember how he hurt you.” Naming our son after Demetri’s enemy, my biological father, does seem a little spiteful.

“I can’t help it. I wish I was a better person and didn’t have this grudge digging into me deeper each day.”

“If that’s the name you want, I support it, but I think you need to sleep on it before you decide.”



“CAN I SEE CHARLOTTE?” I wake up to voices outside of my room. I look beside me and Mikhail is sleeping in his bassinet. I swear it’s Katrina’s voice I hear. I must be hallucinating.

“You’re up,” Savio smiles and walks in. “You have a visitor.”

Katrina is looking elegant as ever when she strolls in after my husband. I’m lost for words.

“Katrina?”

“Charlotte.” She smiles warmly. “Congratulations. I hope it’s okay I came. I couldn’t stay away once I heard you had a

baby.” She gives me a hug as I sit up in my bed before she glances at our boy. “He looks perfect.”

“Thank you.” Having her here has my eyes tearing, but I blink them away. I didn’t realize how much I missed her. I relied so much on her growing up; it was hard being pregnant with no one I could talk to.

“What’s his name?”

“Mikhail.” I watch her closely for her reaction.

She pauses and turns her attention from the baby to me. As quickly as the shock appeared on her face, it disappears. “It’s a strong name. If I had known you were pregnant, I would have come earlier. We all miss you.”

Silence stretches through the room.

“Would you like to hold him?” She’s staring at my baby with such love and pride I can’t help but ask.

“Oh, I would love to, but I don’t want to step on anyone’s toes.”

Savio picks Mikhail up and places him in Katrina’s arms. “I’ll just be in the living room if you need me.” My husband dips his head and gives us some space.

Katrina is cooing and swaying with my baby in her arms and, suddenly, the years that have passed don’t seem as important in this moment. It’s like they never existed.

“How are you feeling? Is there anything I can do to help?” she asks.



“I feel tired from feeding every two hours, but I wouldn’t change a thing for the world.” She nods, listening. “Savio has been great. He has been doing everything while I recover.” It’s so easy to talk to her, I just keep going. I can’t help myself. “Mikhail has given me a new purpose. I want to pass my diamond business to him one day. It has me excited about going back into the warehouse and getting back to what I love.”

“You have always been driven and ambitious. I always knew you would succeed in anything you put your mind to. I’m proud of you.”

I never realized how much I longed to hear those words from her. It has me smiling brighter.

“Thank you.”

Mikhail begins to fuss and she hands him over to me. It looks like she wants to say more but doesn’t. She just stands there watching her grandson as the seconds stretch into minutes.

“I should be going,” she says, the awkwardness seeping back into the room. “Can I visit again? I would really love to be in your and your children’s lives.” A small tear escapes her one eye. “You have always been my little girl, Charlotte. It breaks my heart that I have allowed so much time to go by without reaching out. I am sorry for that.”

I wish this wasn’t so hard.

I nod. “I would like that.”

“Maybe even one day our boys can be friends.” I give her a smile and she hugs me. “If you need anything. Please call.”

I hold on to her hand and squeeze. “Thank you for always caring.”

“I can see myself out. Thank you for allowing me to come today.”

This is the first time in three years I have a glimmer of hope that maybe we can all get along. Time heals all wounds, so they say. Hopefully ours isn’t too deep.



“**H**APPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU! Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday Mikhail!” Savio brings around the birthday cake and our boy smiles happily. I can’t believe five years have already come and gone. It seems like just yesterday he was born.

We watch as he blows out his candles and the front doorbell rings as I’m cutting the first piece.

“I’ll finish this, you can go get it,” Savio says. The only people not here who were invited are my family.

Katrina has been coming by more and more over the years, but we have kept it to just her and me. This is the first time I decided to reach out to my father and invite the entire family. I just assumed they wouldn’t come.

I wipe off my hand before turning the door knob. My father, Katrina, and Anton are standing there with a bunch of helium-

filled balloons. I'm speechless. This is the first time I've met my baby brother.

He's the spitting image of Demetri, and holds himself like a little man.

"You came?"

"Aunty Charlie, I am Anton." I tilt my head, glancing at my father, not expecting him to call me Charlie. He walks forward and offers his hand. I glance behind me, realizing the little boy in front of me is more man than boy.

I kneel to his level. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Anton."

"We are honored to be invited," he says, stepping back to his father.

"Thank you for coming." My dad steps up and gives me a hug, followed by Katrina.

We all stand in the entranceway not saying a word. I'm still shocked that they actually came.

"Oh, sorry, come in!" I realize I'm just standing and staring. "You came at the perfect time, we were just cutting the cake!" "Charlotte..." Demetri clasps my shoulder as the rest of his family walks in. "Thank you for including me in this day."

I give him a tight smile as years of hurt suddenly surface.

"I hope you don't plan to kill any of my men while you are here."

He sighs. "We both have tempers, you and I. Once you left, I couldn't keep men that were not loyal to me. I hope you

would have done the same. It was business, nothing personal. You have grown into such a strong woman. From what I hear, your diamonds rival mine.”

That has me cracking a smile. “Of course they do.”

We both chuckle and the tension lessens around us.

“Demetri!” Savio shakes his hand.

“It’s been way too long.”

“Yes, it has. Thank you for taking great care of my girl, even though I know she doesn’t need it.”

Savio rests his arm around my shoulder. This feels right. Rome wasn’t built in a day, but we have all the time in the world to rebuild our relationship.

**Keep reading for a link to an extended epilogue about Charlotte’s hot dream involving 2 mafia men and an excerpt from Sinful Vow.**

# CHAPTER 36

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**SINFUL VOW:**

## Chapter 1 – Luca

### Age 10

**M**Y HAND STRETCHES THE yellow-colored elastic that's attached to my homemade wooden slingshot. The sky is hazy with a wildfire thousands of miles away, giving the day an orange glow. There isn't a breath of wind to carry any of the smoke away or to fight against the rock nestled in my pocket.

I eye my surroundings. Two men are dressed in expensive suits, sitting at a cramped table outside near the perimeter of the brick patio. Their bodyguards stand with their hands behind their backs, watching over the street and not toward the bush I'm hiding behind. My hand is bruised and busted from a fight I got into earlier in the week. Each time I pull at the elastic, I'm forced to stare at the injury, causing my mind to be distracted with the way I'm forced to live right now.

My punishment for fighting is no dinner for the next week. They can't beat me—for the most part—because the bruises will show. I'm a lot bigger than I was a year ago. Each year, I become stronger, and soon no one will be able to touch me. At the age of ten, I've now been placed in sixteen different foster homes. It has come to the point when I run away, they don't search for me until a couple of days before the monthly inspection. I'm a scrawny, scrappy, mouthy, dirty kid who no

one loves. Not that I need love. I've become good at making the best out of my situation. I can take care of myself.

The two men smell of wealth, and I set my sights on them. Their gold rings and fancy cars showcase their money all the way from over there. I bet they have hundreds in their wallets. My stomach grumbles at the thought of what I could do with that money. Even once it's split three ways.

This street is typically packed with people, which is the reason why I picked it. Busy means it is easier to steal; it's as simple as that. Today, there are small clusters of people around, who seem to belong to these guys and no one else. The sidewalks are empty, and there is a weird vibe in town, similar to when a foster dad gets drunk and is wanting a fight. I don't have time to wait for a better time in the day.

My stomach grumbles, and my legs shake, making my accuracy less than ideal. My concentration is lacking, as all my brain wants to do is scream for food. Glancing back at the two men, I see they're still sitting at the edge of a patio, making it easy to get in and out. The edge of the building shields my two friends, while the green bushes act as a barrier for me.

These two kids who follow me around, I've made them my right-hand men. We all come from broken homes, making us the only family we have. I line my slingshot up, aiming an odd-shaped pebble. My friends are waiting to pickpocket the unsuspecting "too rich for their own good" type of guys as soon as they become startled and stand up. We've done this a



hundred times before. It should be like taking candy from a baby.

I have almost perfect aim as I line my shot up. It would be perfect if I had control over the rocks I could find. Some of them have a mind of their own. With their weird shapes and sizes, it can make even the best marksmen inaccurate.

Pulling the elastic back, I keep both eyes open, and the worn leather-like pouch sits next to my cheek as I aim my shot. Deliberately, my fingers let go, and I watch the rock sail through the air. It knocks the hat off the first man, making him draw his gun and stand up.

His eyes are searching, and my friends, Scott and Jay, freeze. None of us were expecting guns. I thought these men were the pushover type who would be frightened. These men don't appear to be panicked. I've never backed down from anyone. Instinctively, I grab another rock and sail it through the air, hitting the man in the back of his head.

The second man stands, moving his coat to show he's packing as well. His demeanor appears to be more amused than angry, unlike the other guy. But I guess it's because I haven't hit him with a rock yet.

Taking another pebble, I move my position and aim for the second guy's hat. They were both wearing brimmed hats, much like the gangsters do in the old movies I've watched. Maybe that should have been a clue that these guys weren't normal businessmen. Pulling the elastic farther back than

before, I sail my rock in the air, only for the man to shoot it like a flying clay object. It explodes in the air, impressing me.

His eyes follow the trajectory and land on me before replacing his gun to his side. By now, everyone has scrambled away, because they're all weak. I stand my ground, walking toward them with my head up. They haven't asked me to come, but I go with Plan B, which is to gain their respect. I recognize their type. They have power and money—both things I want to possess. They can't do much more to me than what the world already has.

The man I hit grabs me by the back of the neck and squeezes like you would the scruff of a dog. My arms come out swinging, hoping to hit him hard. I've got practice in fighting bigger men than me. I use my size to my advantage. Curse words are flying out of my mouth faster than most of my jabs.

“Mancini, let the poor boy go. You're making a mockery out of yourself.”

This makes the man named Mancini squeeze my neck harder. I refuse to slouch in pain, fighting harder, only to miss him each time. “No one disrespects me.” Mancini's words sound like they're caught on a growl as he seethes at me.

It's unclear if he's talking to me or the other guy. My eyes dart around, finding the street is bare. The shops have shut their doors and now have Closed signs on them. Nothing about this is our normal steal. Out of nowhere, my two friends are

being dragged toward us. Fear clouds their eyes as their feet drag across the pavement with the goons pulling them.

“Are you a coward who can’t do his own dirty work?” Scott yells, fighting the grasp the men have on him.

“It’s small dick syndrome,” Jay yells out to Scott. He’s stopped fighting the man holding onto him. I admire how he’s always brave, never afraid to mouth off. “I bet they all suck each other.”

Mancini raises his gun and shoots Jay without warning. I’ve never seen someone die in front of me before. I want to scream and fight, but I force myself to stay still.

“I didn’t realize you’re in the business of killing children,” the second man says calmly but dripping with coldness. Scott and I are ignored while the men talk. The other man’s posture is relaxed as he places his hands in his pockets. He shows no expression that he cares about my dead friend. A grin teases his mouth, confirming he rather enjoys provoking his friend.

“Rossi, your four daughters make you weak,” Mancini sneers, making it sound like a threat, even though he didn’t threaten anything in particular.

I watch Scott fight harder, fearful of the same fate. Without mercy, Mancini lifts his gun and shoots him too. I want to vomit, but I haven’t eaten in three days. This time, when the other man takes his gun out, so does everyone else. The safety on the guns sound like dominos as they fall.

“Leave my territory. Our meeting is over.” Rossi’s commanding voice vibrates around me, and I watch Mancini eye me like I’m a bug he would love to kill.

My shoulders tighten, scanning for an escape path if I need it. My eyes blink more than they should as they ping-pong between the men. Rossi is not a man to be crossed. Fear slithers deep into my bones until the sensation is overwhelming.

“You pull that trigger again, and I will put you down,” says Rossi.

“You’re choosing a homeless kid over our alliance?” He’s staring at me, the spit from his words hitting my face in a splatter. Disgust is written all over him as he returns his gaze to the one person who might be saving my life.

“I cannot approve of a marriage for my daughter to the son of a child killer. It has nothing to do with the boy.” He laughs like someone told a joke.

My eyes continue to bounce between them while contemplating if I should try to slip away. Rossi places his heavy hand on my shoulder as if reading my thoughts.

“Then give him to me as a symbol of friendship.” Mancini’s wicked smile chills me, and I silently plead not to be given to him. For certain, it would mean death.

“I don’t want your friendship. We are done here.” My savior grips my shoulders, but I refuse to show pain. I don’t think it’s his intention, but rather he doesn’t realize his strength.

“This is the beginning of the war.” Mancini points his finger at Rossi, who doesn’t seem shaken. He refuses to dignify the threat with a response, so I stand up taller, trying to mimic his stance.

# CHAPTER 37

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## **CHAPTER 2 – LUCA**

## Age 21

**M**Y HEART HUMS ITS constant beat that acts as a calming lullaby. My face stays stoic with my signature slight grin, not wanting anyone to be able to read me. Even with no one around, I keep up the appearance, because someone is always watching. The sky has eyes and ears everywhere. There is a reason why they call me Luca “Smiley” Rossi. I’ve heard people say that catching my smile while being looked in the eyes is a sign of death. I’ve never thought much about it. Never had a reason to bluff, I suppose. When your father is one of the most important mob bosses around, you have bigger things to deal with.

I push the man in front of me, causing him to trip on his feet. My hand hooks into his collar before he falls, hauling him upright. His shirt’s fabric rips, and he coughs from the weak hold it has around his neck.

Killing in broad daylight on a main street is how I prefer to take people out. I like the fear it instills in people. There’s no need for secretive cleanup, because it sends the message loud and clear. Killing up close makes it less of a sport and it’s too savage for my enjoyment. But it will be something I’m going to have to get used to. After all, I’m Nicoli Rossi’s only son and the oldest of his children. But that doesn’t make my four sisters weak. All of us kids were brought up similarly. Even the mafia needs an heir and a spare. My four sisters are the spares, in case something ever happens to me.



The abandoned oil refinery looms in front of me. It's busted-out windows with plywood coverings give the illusion it's vacant. What you don't see is the metal reinforcement inside that makes it bulletproof, nor the extra details, which prevents screams from being heard on the outside.

The massive building blends in with all the other out of date structures in the area. The area reminds me of a graveyard, each building another tombstone. Even the air has this rotting smell to it that never leaves, no matter the season. The area gives off this eerie vibe that *if you stay too long, you will be trapped in this ominous loop from which, there is no escape.*

If caught, a war will be brought down with its full wrath. These two families have been fighting since I came into the picture, which also happened to be the day Nicoli Rossi brought me home as one of his children. There was no discussion. He read me the rules and told me that if I disobeyed him, he would bury me himself. Afterward, he walked me into his home and introduced me to the rest of the family. Unlike everyone else, he gave me respect, and in turn, he gained my respect.

The man in front of me harassed my sister. He catcalled her like a common whore, calling her names and tried to touch her when she clearly wanted nothing to do with him. He's one of Mancini's men. Anyone under his control is deemed my enemy and our family's, but his actions led to this.

I have zero-tolerance for arrogant shits who think they can bother my sisters. Killing him in the building that Mancini

uses for his killings will send a message.

One day, I'll be taking over. I'm the heir who gets to continue my family's legacy. I need the men to respect me and to believe I have no fear. Respect is the most important thing to me. I have killed for it. There isn't much I wouldn't do for it.

I've come with no backup, which is stupid as hell. But the chance of being caught on my own is lower than if I had others with me. I have to take my chances. The thought of being seen does nothing to get my heart pumping, unlike the adrenaline right before a shot. I'm the perfect marksman. My father learned early on that I wouldn't become a family doctor or lawyer, or a politician. I much preferred to practice my aim and learn how to disassemble and reassemble his guns.

But that doesn't mean I can't have a cover job. My father still wants politics to be an option. All I need to do is keep my nose clean and stay out of jail. It's really out of my hands, so I keep on going as I please until the day comes I no longer have a choice.

The man in front of me doesn't try to beg for his life. He walks with his head up, with pride. The Mancini family is as powerful as mine. We both hold the largest territories, with the most loyal members. Even this guy won't snitch.

Coming to the main doors, I push his shoulders to turn him to me. "Kneel," I command.

He refuses, just as I expected. His kneeling wouldn't have changed his fate. But it gives me an understanding of how

loyal he is.

Bringing my handgun out, I take a step back. I don't want his blood splattered on me.

"Last chance to kneel before your true king," I say, trying to mess with him. I don't enjoy torturing; it bores me.

He tilts his head higher.

Taking another step back, I hold up my gun. It's steady in my hand, even with the blood rushing through my body. It takes one shot, and he falls to the ground. Placing my gun behind my back, I wait to hear any sounds that are not mine. The sound of traffic is in the distance, but not any louder or different from any other day.

Stepping away, I turn and notice a girl walking down the street. Her feet have stopped and her head is tilted toward the evening sky. Not a single bird has made a sound since the bullet left the chamber of my gun as if scared to move.

I watch as she starts walking again at an awkward pace. I consider if I should kill her from here. I could do it easily. She glances over her shoulder, her face clean of makeup, making her appear young. There is no doubt she's much younger than me. She seems to be about the age of my youngest sister, who just became a teen.

Her dark hair is raven-like, in a simple ponytail. Her eyes are wide, shining with innocence. She's wearing a skirt and a sweater that's one size too large for her petite frame. Her glasses are three times the size of her already wide eyes.

I'm intrigued by why a girl like her would be walking alone around this side of town. Staying in the shadows, I follow her, much like a wolf. Staying in the dark edges, I almost laugh, watching her react with awareness that she's being followed but still not trusting her gut.

Continue reading *Sinful Vow* (free with KU) here:

Want to know what Charlotte's hot dream was? Download today...

# CHAPTER 38

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**A** NEW YEAR AND a new series! I hope you loved this world as much as I do. The second book in the Mafia Throne series will be Throne of Sin, following Savio! Be on the lookout for his book coming this year.

I say this in every book, but my beta readers are some of the most important people to me. They take my rough, unpolished words, and provide me with their thoughts. I could never publish without them. They help grow my stories into what they are today. Thank you Linda, Krista, Chanel and Melissa. Your input is invaluable.

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# CHAPTER 39

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**OTHER BOOKS BY EMILY BOWIE**

# Dark Mafia Sins Series

( ROMANTIC SUSPENSE / MAFIA)

Sinful Vow: (Luca & Aly) kidnapping, forced marriage

Sinful Daughter : (Aria & Theo) enemies to lovers, mafia princess/cop,

Sinful Kisses: (Gia & Romeo) enemies to lovers

Sinful Bodyguard: (Fin and Luna) A mafia bodyguard romance

Sinful Queen, (Katrina and Demetri) A secret baby, mafia romance

Each book can be read as a standalone

# Steele Family Series

(Small Town / Romantic Suspense)

Stolen Moments (book #1) (Shay & Luke) Brother's best friend romance

Moonlight Moments (Book #2) (Kellen & Sloan) Insta love (fling to forever)

Bittersweet Moments (book #3) (Brax & Raya) Secret baby

Whisky Moments (book #4) (Rhett & Camilla) Enemies to lovers, Rock star romance

All books are designed to be read as a standalone. Although, characters do have a reoccurring role in each book.

Box set of the Steele Family series:

## Standalones:

(Small Town / Romantic Suspense)

Pretty, Twisted Lies (Kiptyn's book):

Kiptyn McGrath:

Kellie Dare was never meant to be mine. We existed in two different worlds. Mine was dark, dangerous, and unpredictable. Her's held prestige, wealth, and promise. I was never her white knight but allowed her to believe it until the day she forgot she was mine. I quickly became the villain who would stop at nothing to keep her.

# Bennett Brothers Series

(Small Town/Romantic Suspense)

Recklessly mine (book #1) second chance love

Recklessly Forbidden (book #2) small town romance

Recklessly Devoted (book #3) enemies to lovers, next-door neighbors

Box set of the Bennett Brothers:

# Oakport Beach Series

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Crashing Heart (Crash & Piper's story) Summer fling/  
falling for your boss romance

Southern Hearts (Danger & Haven's story) Friends to  
Lovers romance

Wild Hearts (Frankie & Deacon's story) enemies to lovers

\*each of these books is a standalone and can be read in any  
order.