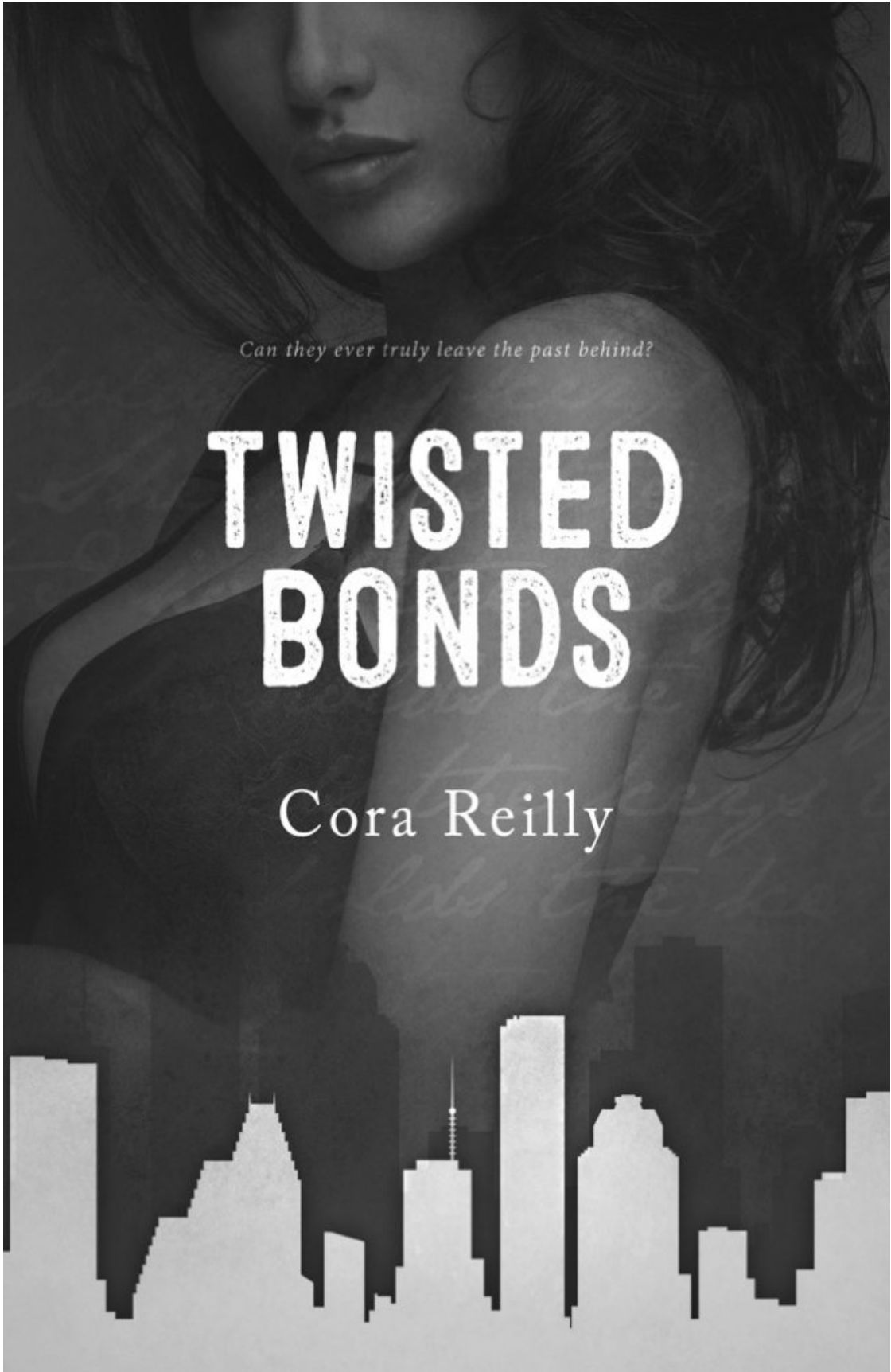


A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a dark, strapless dress and a large, ornate necklace, is looking over her shoulder towards the camera. The background is a city skyline at night, with illuminated buildings and a prominent tower on the right. The overall mood is mysterious and dramatic.

TWISTED BONDS

Can they ever truly leave the past behind?

Cora Reilly



Can they ever truly leave the past behind?

TWISTED BONDS

Cora Reilly

Copyright ©2019 Cora Reilly

All Rights Reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, businesses, events and places are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

Cover design by Romantic Book Affairs Designs

E-book design by [Inktain Book Design](#)

CONTENTS



[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Epilogue](#)

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

This book is *not* a standalone. Please read *Twisted Emotions* and *Twisted Pride* before you read *Twisted Bonds*.

CHAPTER 1



KIARA

I lay in Nino's arms, overwhelmed by his confession, our breathing ragged from...making love? We'd made *love*. Nino had told me he loved me, really loved me, no fake emotion, nothing false, just love.

Nino raised my hand and pressed a kiss to my wrist. "Your pulse picked up again," he said, regarding me closely. "Are you okay?"

I smiled, couldn't help it. It felt like a weight had been lifted off my chest, as if everything I hadn't even dared to dream, much less hope for, was suddenly in my reach.

"I'm just happy. For a while I thought it was something about me, something inherently wrong with me, why I couldn't be happy, why bad things kept happening to me."

Nino swiped his thumb over my pulse point. "Life doesn't work like that. Bad things are not fate, or punishment of an almighty power. Sometimes bad things just happen."

I shrugged. "I know that now, or I think I do. But when I was a young girl, Father always blamed me or Mother when something went wrong, and so did my brothers even when they had messed up, and I believed them. If you're told something often enough, you just take it for the truth. When Father hit me, I thought I deserved it."

Nino's body became tighter, his gray eyes sharper. "Your father got what he deserved. Luca didn't give him an easy death."

I pushed myself up onto my elbow. That was news to me. Felix and Egidia always told me Father had been killed by a bullet to the head. "Luca tortured him?"

Nino's dark brows pulled together, his fingers on my wrist tightening once more. "You didn't know?"

I shook my head. Nobody had bothered telling me the details. I wasn't sure if it was to protect me, or because they thought I had no right to know as a mere girl. I bet my brothers knew. "I thought Luca shot him."

Nino's mouth twitched, something dark and eager flashing in his expression. "He shot him in the end, yes, but before then Luca did what he does best."

I wasn't sure how I felt with the knowledge. My father hadn't been a good father, or a good man. He'd hit me and made me feel like I was worth nothing, had shot my mother, but other than Durant, who'd destroyed my innocence, I never wished for him to suffer. "You respect Luca for it."

Nino looked at me in surprise. "Of course. Luca destroyed an entire MC chapter by himself, chopped them to pieces, skinned them. He loves the personal kill, the close kill, and doesn't mind getting his hands bloody. It's easy to give a kill order or shoot someone from afar, but killing them when you feel their terrified breathing, when you smell their cold sweat, see the terror in their eyes, that's something entirely different. Luca crushed his cousin's and uncle's throat, how many people could do that? Not just on a physical level? When Remo and I were still on the run and our father was still alive, we'd sometimes talked about how we wanted to kill him, and Remo's dream was to do it like Luca..."

For a moment I only stared at the man before me. He looked so relaxed, so ... approachable. Not harmless, not nice, but not as monstrous as his words made him sound. They reminded me of his nature. Maybe that was why he had the tattoos of roaring flames and screaming grimaces, as a warning of what lay beneath his beautiful exterior. "That sounds as if you and Remo admire Luca."

"I wouldn't call it admiration, but he's one of the few men who might be able to kill me, and it wouldn't be quick or clean."

I touched his chest over the inked image of a screaming skull that seemed to be swallowing a knife, feeling his calm heartbeat, and wondering if only their past had turned Nino and Remo into what they were today, or if it had always been in them. Savio harbored darkness as well. Even Adamo had killed, and I wasn't sure if he was really bothered by it or only bothered by his lack of regret. Would our children harbor the same darkness? And even if they did, what would it matter? I'd love them regardless, like I loved Nino.

"Did your brothers ever hit you like your father did?" Nino asked, throwing me off with the change of topic.

"Father occasionally made it their task to discipline me, yes. They are seven and nine years older than me, so..." I considered Nino's expression. "Nino," I said quietly but firmly. "I don't want you to kill them because of what they did when they were children."

"They must have been teenagers, Made Men, when they disciplined you. Grown men, by our standards."

I pressed up to him, touched his cheek and shook my head. "Don't. Promise me you won't dish out punishment for me."

Nino's face remained the beautiful, cold mask. "Did they ever ask how you were doing here? Did they worry that I might abuse and rape you? Did they talk to you at all at our wedding, or since then?"

I swallowed. I tried not to think of my old family. All the memories connected to them carried the weight of hurt and sadness. "They congratulated me." I could only remember seeing them for a few seconds during the champagne reception when everyone had congratulated Nino and me on our marriage, but I didn't remember much else of the day. I'd been too caught up in my terror. They hadn't contacted me since, and it wasn't because I was part of the Camorra either—we'd barely seen each other when I'd still been part of the Rizzo household. "Promise me you won't hurt them. It should be my decision, not yours."

Nino released a low breath and finally nodded. "I won't hurt them."

“Remo either. And no one else from the Camorra.”

A small smile tugged at Nino’s mouth. “All right.”

I crossed my arms on Nino’s chest, scanning his beautiful face. A few strands of his hair had fallen down his temple and I pushed them back gently then ran my fingertips over the undercut. “How do you feel? So much has happened in the last few days.”

“Remo can handle himself, and he’s not alone. Fabiano will make sure my brother keeps his emotions in check.”

“I didn’t mean Remo leaving. I meant your emotions. Are you getting used to them?”

“After the first flood, it’s calmed down. I feel emotions, not always, not all of them, but they are there.”

I kissed Nino softly. “I’m always here. If you need me, I’ll help you.”

Still, I hoped that Nino wouldn’t have another breakdown like that one night, especially now that Remo wasn’t home to calm him down. “When will Remo and Fabiano be back?” I didn’t ask for details because if Nino wanted to share he would, but so far he’d been rather closed-off.

He sighed. “Hopefully in a few days, depending on the success of their mission.”

Curiosity burst through me, but I pushed it down.



“Go up to our bedroom,” Nino said, startling me as I lay curled up on the sofa in the game room. It was three days after our conversation.

“What’s the matter?” I asked. His expression was tight, as close to anger as I’d ever seen it. I set down my book and stood, putting my hands up against Nino’s chest. “Is it about Remo?”

Remo and Fabiano had been gone for almost a week. Nino still hadn’t revealed the details of their mission, only that it

had something to do with the Outfit.

Nino's eyes held a hint of weariness. "I'll explain later. Now I need you to go to our room, Kiara."

I frowned, feeling like I was being treated like a child. "I'm not weak. I can handle most things."

He touched my cheek and kissed me briefly. "I know. But this ..." He shook his head. "I'm not sure if it's something you should see."

My chest constricted. There was only one thing I definitely had a hard time handling.

"Don't ask," Nino said. "Not now."

I nodded reluctantly, grabbed my book and headed into our wing. Dread settled in my bones as I closed the bedroom door. What had Remo done?

The sound of a sports car pulling into the driveway caught my attention and I went to the window. I only saw a very small part of the front yard and couldn't make out anything. Despite my promise to Nino, curiosity gripped me and I went back out, creeping to the main part of the house and peering through a window facing the driveway. I froze, my pulse throbbing furiously when I saw Remo walking into the house. He was carrying a blonde woman, and they were both completely naked. The woman hung limply in Remo's grasp, either unconscious or in shock.

My throat tightened, my hands began to shake, and remnants of dark memories bit at my consciousness, wanting to burst forth and grip me.

That's how Nino found me. Still motionless before the window. "Damn it," he whispered. He took my wrist, his fingertips pressing into the soft flesh. His other hand tipped my chin up, forcing me to meet his gaze. "What did you see?"

"Remo carrying a naked woman," I said tonelessly.

Nino shook his head. "Come," he said, tugging me toward our wing. I resisted, needing answers.

"Nino, what's going on?"

“I’ll explain in our bedroom.”

“No,” I hissed, ripping out of his hold, breathing harshly. “Explain now.”

Nino regarded me, his arm still raised, surprised by my vehemence. Slowly he lowered his hand. I usually always tried to comply, to follow his decisions, but with this I drew a line.

Nino had said it himself; he wouldn’t get angry if I stated my opinion.

“Remo went to Outfit territory and kidnapped Dante’s niece. She was supposed to marry an underboss yesterday, but Remo and Fabiano caught her on the way to church and brought her here.”

I shook my head, unable to believe what he was saying—and even worse: how he explained it as if telling me about the weather. “What did Remo do to her?” I began shaking, wondering if he’d submitted her to the same horrors I’d gone through. I’d come to like Remo for what he’d done for Nino and his brothers, but for this I wouldn’t be able to forgive him—ever.

Nino held my wrist again, tighter. “Nothing. Now come.”

“Nothing?” I said incredulously, digging my heels into the floor. “It didn’t look like nothing. Why was she naked?”

“I don’t know everything yet. Savio mentioned that Remo stopped one of our soldiers from assaulting her and now she’s here. That’s it.”

“That’s it?” I snapped. “So he didn’t ... he didn’t ... rape her?” The word felt like thousands of cockroaches crawling over my back and I shuddered.

“No,” Nino said. “That’s not part of Remo’s plan.”

“Are you sure?”

Nino hesitated a heartbeat and that was too much. I tried to storm past him but he grabbed my arm. “Don’t. Let me handle this.”

“Let me go.”

Nino shook his head and pulled me toward our bedroom again, ignoring my protests. I had no choice but to follow. The second we were inside, he stepped in front of the door, barring my way. It was the first time he had used his strength against me, and it made me unreasonably angry.

“Stay here until I’ve talked to Remo.”

“I won’t let Remo hurt a woman like I have been hurt,” I whispered harshly.

“He won’t,” Nino said simply, trying to touch my cheek, but I took a step back.

“You knew about his plan all along, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did. The kidnapping is meant to bring us Scuderi in exchange for Serafina.”

I blinked back tears. “Serafina? You killed Durant because of what he did, but you allow your brother to kidnap an innocent woman?” My voice broke, but I didn’t let the memories of the past resurface; I was stronger than that.

Nino cupped my cheeks. Always so gentle when he handled me; it was at odds with the things he did to others. “Kiara, it’s not the same. I know Remo. Don’t compare Serafina’s fate to what happened to you. Trust me.”

I searched his eyes, beckoning and soft. I wanted to trust him and I did, but I wasn’t sure if I could trust Remo, not around a defenseless woman. Too much was broken inside him. “Okay,” I said quietly. “Talk to Remo and tell me exactly what he said. I need to know. No more secrets, please.”

Nino kissed me. “I’ll head downstairs and have a word with him.”

I nodded as he stepped back and left the room. The lock clicked and my eyes grew wide, realizing what he’d done. I couldn’t believe he locked me in. Storming toward the door, I rattled the handle, but it didn’t budge.

I paced the room, my thoughts whirring. Nino had kept Remo’s plan from me to protect me, but also because he knew

I would have tried to talk them out of it. I knew Nino and Remo had few morals, but Nino had to realize that what they were doing was wrong.

I wasn't sure how much time passed, but I was getting more and more agitated. When the lock finally turned and the door opened, I was close to exploding.

“Why did you lock me in?”

Nino seemed as if my anger startled him. “I knew you were upset, and I didn't want you to go into a confrontation with Remo like that.”

I turned around, still angry but also touched, because Nino was trying to protect me, care for me in his own way. I felt him behind me before he touched my shoulders. I said, “Don't lock me in again. I don't like it—it makes me feel powerless and trapped.”

Nino's fingers tightened. He leaned down and kissed the crook of my neck. “I won't.” He paused, choosing his words carefully, which in turn raised my worries again. “Do you have a few clothes and a white nightgown for Serafina?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Why the white nightgown?”

“Kiara,” Nino's voice was strained, carrying the unvoiced *please* with it. His eyes begged me to trust him.

Trust. I went over to my closet and took my silver nightgown out of a drawer. “I've got this.”

Nino nodded and took it from me. “That should do.”

I gathered a few floor-length dresses, shirts and shorts, and then hesitated in front of my underwear drawer. It was kind of icky to wear someone else's underwear, but I assumed Serafina preferred it to not wearing any at all.

Nino took everything from me. “Promise me to stay in this room and I won't lock it. I'll make sure the girl is safe, all right?”

“All right.” The word tasted bitter in my mouth, like a betrayal of the old me, like I was failing myself. Trusting Nino when it came to my wellbeing was easy. Without a doubt that

he'd never hurt me intentionally, but Nino didn't feel pity, even now. Not for others, never for others.



Nino was gone for a long time. My resolve to stay in the bedroom was slipping away with every passing second when he finally stepped back in, a deep furrow of displeasure between his brows and much of his hair fallen out of his short ponytail as if he'd ran his hand through it one time too often.

I asked immediately, "What's going on? What did Remo say? And what does he need the nightgown for?"

Nino closed the door. "Remo will keep her here for now. He thinks she's safer in the mansion."

"Safer? She's a captive. Who says she's safe so close to Remo?"

Nino didn't say anything. I could tell that he wasn't happy about this development, but he was loyal to Remo, nothing would ever change it. I doubted Remo could do anything that would make Nino ever go against him.

"You have to stop him, if he tries to force himself on her. Promise me," I said fiercely.

"Remo can't be stopped if he's made up his mind, not even by me. But as I said, I don't think you have reason to worry about that."

"What happens if the Outfit's Capo doesn't do what Remo wants? What is he going to do to her then?" I didn't know much about Dante Cavallaro, only the rumors I'd picked up when I'd overheard Felix and Egidia discuss the Outfit, or the few times Remo and Nino had talked about him in my presence. He seemed to be a logical man who based his decisions on facts, not emotions, and that didn't make me hopeful about Serafina's fate. It went *against* logic to exchange a mere girl for a Consigliere, a man who carried the secrets of the entire Outfit, and probably Cavallaro himself.

But Remo and Nino must know that, which left the question—why Remo had kidnapped the girl anyway?

Nino opened his watchband with steady fingers, getting ready for bed. “Kiara, this is Remo’s game. He hasn’t been as forthcoming with information as he usually is.”

“Are you sure? Or are you trying to protect me again?”

His face locked down as he put the watch on the nightstand. “I’m telling you the truth. And you have to remember that this war was initiated by the Outfit. They attacked our territory. They tried to kill all of us, even Adamo. Remo won’t stand back and have his territory breached like that. Dante will have to pay the price for it.”

“But he isn’t,” I said softly. “An innocent woman is.”

Nino didn’t contradict me. I wished he had.

“What about the nightgown? You didn’t answer my question. If it was only so Serafina had something to sleep in, he wouldn’t have asked for a specific color.”

“He wants her to wear it when he records a video message for her family tomorrow.” His emotionless eyes searched my face. “We ordered pizza, should I bring you some up?”

For a moment I could only stare. Sometimes I tended to forget how Nino dealt with matters, how easily he could push aside the bloody part of the business from his mind because they didn’t bother him. “I’m not hungry. I’ll take a bath. I don’t feel so good.”

Nino didn’t stop me when I walked into the bathroom, but his eyes followed me. I drew a bath, slowly slipping out of my clothes. When Nino had told me he loved me, I’d thought about bridging the subject of having kids. I’d started taking the pill before my marriage because I hadn’t been sure if I could risk getting pregnant as Nino’s wife. Now I knew that I and a baby would be safe in the Falcone mansion, well protected and even loved, but this new development with Dante’s niece raised new doubts. Nino had only recently discovered his emotions, and Remo had a woman locked in his wing.

Neither fact made me want to bring a baby into this world —this house.

I turned off the faucet and tested the water with my fingertips before I stepped in. Nino entered the room, his eyes roaming my naked body. I didn't hide myself from him. There was a longing in his gaze that went straight into my heart. I sank into the water, flinching at the hot temperature. "You can join me if you want."

Nino tugged his shirt over his head then slipped out of his pants and boxers. The muscles and colorful tattoos that had scared me not too long ago now brought a familiar warmth to my belly, but it was only a brief burst. I was too torn and emotionally drained to be up for that kind of physical closeness, especially not when a young woman was scared out of her mind in another part of the house.

Nino joined me in the bathtub, then opened his arms. I shifted until my back was pressed up against his chest and I was nestled between his strong arms. He kissed my throat. I could feel him growing hard against my backside, but I ignored it. Nino nibbled on my shoulder and his hand stroked my knee, then slipped up my thigh, higher and higher until I stopped him with a soft touch. I sensed his unspoken questions. Could he really not understand why I wasn't in the mood for sex?

"Don't you feel guilty?" I asked quietly.

Nino leaned back, his hand moving back to my knee and rubbing my skin lightly. "Kiara," he said tiredly. "I'm not a good man. I'm not a decent man either. I don't feel anything in regards to other people, which makes me so good at what I'm doing for the Camorra. And no matter what you might hope for, that won't change."

A small shiver passed down my spine. Nino didn't only supervise the finances of the Camorra, he was also responsible for many acts of cruelty. Fabiano wasn't the Camorra's best torturer even if he was their official Enforcer, that much I'd figured by now. I'd seen small glimpses of Nino's and Remo's

demons when they'd dealt with Durant, but it was only the tip of the iceberg. "But you care about me and your brothers?"

"I do," he murmured. "But that's the extent of my feelings."

I swallowed. "What about children? Would you care for them?"

It was awkward, but I turned in the bath to face him.

Nino became still. He nudged my chin up so I had to meet his gaze. "You mean *our* children?"

"Yes," I said quietly. His face stayed impassive. Could he ever love our children?

"You're taking the pill."

"I do. I'm not pregnant ... I was just wondering."

Nino nodded. I wished I knew what he was thinking, but his face didn't give anything away. "I don't know what I'll feel for children. But I think I'd care for them as I care for you."

I leaned forward and kissed him lightly, then retreated to turn and relaxed back against him. This was enough for now. My thoughts returned to Serafina. She must be terrified—how could she not be? I had been terrified when I'd been given to Nino, and I'd had time to prepare for my wedding. This girl had been taken by force, ripped away from her home, her family. What she knew about the Falcones, about Las Vegas, was likely even worse than what I had been told. After all, the Outfit and the Camorra were still at war, and after this kidnapping that would never change.

I shuddered.

Nino caressed my arm "Kiara," he said quietly. "Don't let this drag you back into the past."

"It won't, but it's difficult for me to bear the thought of the girl's terror."

I felt Nino nod, trying to understand my pity but unable to grasp the concept. He didn't care about Serafina. He couldn't.

I linked our fingers. I'd try to be our conscience.

The water soon grew cold and Nino helped me out of the tub then proceeded to rub me dry. His touch left tingles in its wake as always but I didn't allow myself to relax into it. We settled in bed, both naked, wrapped in each other. Nino was still aroused, but he made no move to initiate intimacy again.

I fell asleep in Nino's arm, marveling at the power of love. Despite what I knew of Nino, of what he was capable of, I loved him.

CHAPTER 2



KIARA

Nino stirred and gently untangled himself from me. I watched through half closed eyes him getting dressed in a black shirt and jeans, not saying anything. He threw a quick glance over his shoulder at me before he left for the video recording. The moment the door closed, I swung myself out of bed and threw a bathrobe over my nightgown. I had an inkling where the recording would take place. I needed to see Serafina with my own eyes.

Even more than that, I needed to figure out a way to help the girl without betraying my new family—because that’s what the Falcones were.

I crept through the corridor and made my way toward the door that led into the basement.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

I cried out in surprise and jumped away from the hot breath on my neck. Whirling around, I hit Savio’s chest hard.

A grin flitted across his face. “Ouch,” he said, rubbing the spot in exaggeration.

“You’re in an awfully good mood considering a girl is being tortured in the basement,” I said, turning and trying to continue, but Savio stepped in my way.

The amusement disappeared from his expression, which was a rare event. Savio always either smirked or grinned. “Someone’s always being tortured,” he said mockingly.

I couldn’t believe him. With Nino I understood why it didn’t bother him; it was his emotional disposition, but Savio didn’t have that excuse.

He sighed, running a hand through his usual impeccably styled dark hair. “The girl’s not being tortured.”

“Are you sure about that?” I asked, trying to sidestep Savio. He mirrored my move.

“I can’t let you go down there. Orders from Nino.”

Angry, I quickly ducked past Savio. His arm came around my waist and he lifted me off the ground. Tension shot through me and I sucked in a startled breath. Savio carried me a few steps then set me down and peered into my eyes. “Come on, no panic attack, all right? I touched your waist. No danger.”

I swallowed.

“Hit me again, if that helps.”

“What?” I asked, confused, and my panic subsided.

Savio gave me the cocky grin. “I know you enjoyed hitting me.”

I knew what he was trying, and under different circumstances I might have laughed.

“Let me pass,” I said.

“No,” he said. “If you try again, I’ll hold you.”

“I don’t care.” Once again I tried to walk past Savio and this time he grabbed my shoulders and pressed me against the wall, holding me fast. I squirmed, my body tightening, but he didn’t release me.

“Kiara, I won’t let you go down there. I gave Nino my word. Give up. I don’t want to have to restrain you.”

I shivered at his proximity.

“Fuck,” he breathed. “You know I’d never hurt you, right?”

I looked up into his face, into brown eyes that had held wariness in the beginning but were softer now. I gave a sharp nod and began to relax in his hold.

He let go of me and stepped back, then ran a hand through his hair again. He looked at me. “I really wish I could have

been there when Nino and Remo dismembered him.”

I knew who he meant and I was surprised by his admission. Savio and I had gotten off on the wrong foot, and I often still had the impression that he resented the new restrictions my presence had brought.

He leaned one shoulder against the wall beside the basement door. “Remo would never hurt an innocent woman like your uncle hurt you.”

There wasn’t the hint of doubt in his voice.

“How can you be sure?”

“I know Remo,” Savio said simply, for a moment again dropping his arrogant smirk.

Like Nino, he had unfailing trust in Remo. I huffed, wishing I could share their convictions. “I want to go into the kitchen, if that’s still allowed?”

Savio stepped back after a moment of hesitation. I walked past him toward the kitchen. He followed me like an annoying shadow.

I whirled on him. “Am I a captive in this house now too?”

Savio raised his palms. “This is Remo’s game, not mine. Talk to him, if you don’t like what’s going on.” He smiled in a way that suggested I wouldn’t. Maybe the arrogant smirk was his protection. They all wore different masks, Nino his lack of emotions. Remo his anger, and Savio his arrogance. I wasn’t quite sure about Adamo’s mask yet, but he was wearing one too, I was sure of it.

I turned on my heel and continued into the kitchen, wondering why these twisted Falcone men wormed their way into my heart a bit more every day.



After a quick breakfast, I moved into the library, pointedly ignoring Savio who leaned beside the basement door, typing on his phone. I wouldn’t spend all day in the bedroom while

Remo played captor, and I couldn't stop thinking about Serafina.

I was lounging on the couch when Nino came in. The moment I saw the haunted look in his eyes I knew something had gone horribly wrong. Dropping my book, I pushed to my feet and hurried over to him, trying to suppress my rising worry.

“Are you okay?”

Nino cupped my face and kissed me fiercely, catching me by surprise. My body sprang to life, answering to the need in his kiss until it became more, heated, too much. I tore away from him, shaking my head, even as my body throbbed with desire. “Tell me what happened.”

Nino's gaze dropped to his forearm where his fingers traced the scars. He frowned, pain and sadness flashing in his eyes before emotionless calm wiped them away. “Remo recorded a live video for Cavallaro and Serafina's family, but her choice wasn't the one Remo had anticipated.” There was no emotion in his voice, only that terrifying calm.

I backed away. “Don't tell me you gave Serafina *that* choice?”

My insides convulsed, twisting tighter and tighter. Nino continued to regard me with that quiet scrutiny. “Remo is playing mind games, but Serafina is strong-willed. She chose pain, forced his hand in front of Cavallaro.” His gaze flickered to the scars on his wrist. “She chose her wrist for the cut ...she ...”

“Remo cut her?” I took another step back then turned around. “I'm sick of it. I'll have a word with him. Someone has to.”

I rushed toward the door to confront Remo. Nino slung his arm around my waist from behind and held me tight. First Savio, now him. Anger and frustration flooded me, and a worse feeling of helplessness. “Let me go.”

“Only if you promise not to go to my brother.”

I squirmed in his grip. “Let me go.”

“No,” he said firmly.

I twisted and peered up at him, swallowing my hurt. “You promised to never use your physical power against me.”

His arms loosened slightly, but not enough for me to slip away, and a pained look crossed his face. “I’m protecting you. I’d never use my strength to cause you pain, I swear it.” He kissed the side of my head. “Don’t compare me to your uncle.” His voice rang with a note of vulnerability that startled me so much I turned in his hold to see his face better. It was impassive, but his eyes weren’t.

“I’m not,” I said. “I’m not scared of you or of you restraining me like this, but it makes me feel powerless and I hate it.”

“Your protection is always my top priority. I’ll take making you feel uncomfortable if it serves that purpose.”

I sighed. I didn’t want to fight with Nino. In his mind, his reasoning made sense.



“Where is she?” I asked Nino, who followed close behind me as we headed into Remo’s wing. My pulse was still up from my confrontation with Remo but I was glad that I’d managed to talk him into letting me visit Serafina.

Nino motioned toward a door to our right and stopped me before I could go in. “Be careful. People who are backed into a corner are dangerous.”

“Don’t worry. Everything will be fine.”

“I know.” He said it in a way that made me pause because of the steely undertone.

I knocked and, when no protest sounded, I turned the key and pushed inside.

Serafina was on the bed, her eyes filled with surprise. She was beautiful in an angelic way; long blonde hair, blue eyes, pale skin.

“Kiara Vitiello,” she said.

My name coming from her lips, I could practically hear all the stories she’d heard about me. People whispered about the bloody wedding, about what Remo and Nino had done, about the reasons for their actions.

“Kiara Falcone now, but yes, that’s me.” Nino stood close behind me as if he expected an attack any moment. His worry warmed my heart and annoyed me equally. I doubted Serafina would talk to me as long as he was present. She didn’t have reason to trust me, but she had plenty of reason to mistrust him and his brothers.

I told him, “You don’t have to stay. Serafina and I are going to talk. She poses no danger to me.”

Nino wasn’t looking at me, his calculating eyes firmly focused on Serafina. “I will stay.” He closed the door after him and leaned against the wall to watch everything. “And if you make a move toward my wife, the consequences will be very unpleasant.”

How could he say something like that? I gave Serafina an embarrassed smile before I moved close to Nino and pressed my palms against his chest. He lowered his gaze to me, the remnants of harshness still in his eyes. “She’s an innocent woman, Nino. You shouldn’t threaten her, much less consider hurting her.”

Nino’s expression remained hard. “I don’t care who she is, woman or man, innocent or guilty. If she poses a threat to you, I’ll cause her the amount of pain necessary to make her back off.”

I swallowed at his voice. When Nino was around me, he made it so very easy to forget what he was capable of. To me he was loving and gentle, but not to others.

“I don’t want you to hurt her.”

“I always respect your wishes, but this is something I won’t promise you. Protecting you is the only thing I care about. As long as she acts accordingly, she’s safe from me.”

“Nino,” I tried again. He shook his head and made it clear I wouldn’t be able to change his mind about the matter. I moved closer to Serafina, who eyed me as if I was the enemy. I was probably the only person in this house, except for Adamo maybe, who cared for her wellbeing, but our conversation showed that she had no intention of opening up to me.

“I doubt you’ve come to offer your help. You are loyal to the Falcones,” she said at last, sounding almost accusing.

“I am. They are my family.”

NINO

Hearing Kiara say that she was family, my chest felt lighter and some of the tension slipped away. She smiled softly at me, still loving and caring despite what she often witnessed us doing.

I’d been content with our family, of just my brothers and me building a tight-knit unit. I hadn’t seen any necessity to extend it, and still hadn’t considered it when I’d been set up to marry Kiara for tactical purposes. It had seemed impossible that anyone could fit into our family, that anyone could become part of our life and gain our trust, especially a woman, but Kiara had surprised us all. She found her place in our family in her own quiet, thoughtful way, accepted us despite our many faults, and tried to better us in subtle ways. That she considered us capable of being better men was something that filled me with contentment, even if her attempts were bound to fail.

Kiara turned back to Serafina and leaned close to her. I took a step in their direction. Sitting so close to the enemy was foolish. What was she telling Serafina? Vigilance and distrust were the foundations of my nature, but I couldn’t imagine Kiara betraying us in any way. I didn’t want to even consider the option that she could.

After their talk, I led Kiara outside and locked the door. “What did you tell her?”

Kiara peered up at me, frowning. “Don’t you trust me?”

“I do,” I said quietly, then cupped the back of her head, trying to remind her that she trusted me enough to touch her there. “You remember the rule we established at the beginning of our marriage? No lies. Don’t keep secrets from me, Kiara.”

“Secrets aren’t necessarily lying. You should know, Nino. I think you have more secrets than I do.”

That was true, but it wasn’t because I didn’t trust Kiara with them. “Do you want to know every aspect of our business, everything I do?”

Her lashes fluttered, hesitation clouding her expression. Kiara was clever, she knew the nature of my work, but there was a difference between knowing in general and knowing the sordid details. “No, I don’t think I could stomach it.”

That’s what I’d thought. Kiara was inherently kind, proven by her insistence to refrain from eating meat. She pressed her forehead to my chest, seeking solace in my closeness as she so often did.

“I only said to Serafina that there’s more to Remo than meets the eye and that she might be able to get through to him,” she said.

“If you think that she could be for him what you are for me, you’re forgetting that Remo’s initial situation is different from mine. I started on neutral ground. I didn’t have any kind of emotions for you, neither positive nor negative, but Remo’s opinion of women is tinged with anger.”

Kiara pulled back. “That doesn’t mean it can’t be changed. He seems to get used to me, so who’s to say he can’t get used to someone else?”

I couldn’t imagine Remo allowing an emotional bond with a woman, and even if Kiara might wish for it, not everyone was destined to find love. I still had trouble grasping the full concept of it, to understand its many nuances.

“I’m going to take a swim in the pool. Why don’t you join me?”

“Are you trying to distract me?”

I was, but that was beside the point. “That, and you said you wanted to learn how to swim.”

Her mouth curved down. “I can swim ... I think. I was never very good and it’s been almost a decade since my last swim, but it’s not something you can’t unlearn, right?”

I never unlearned anything, but I was aware that the workings of my brain were different from those of most people. “Why don’t we test your theory?”

Her eyes dragged back to Serafina’s door.

“You did what you could. She’s safe for now.”

Kiara pursed her lips. “What about her wound?”

“Remo takes care of it, and he won’t hurt her like that again. He never intended to do so in the first place. He’ll re-evaluate his tactic to adapt to her volatile personality.”

“His tactic,” Kiara said in disdain, then let out a soft sigh.

“Come on. Let’s go for a swim.”

Kiara gave me a small teasing smile. “You only want to see me in a bikini.”

“I prefer you naked.”

A blush stained Kiara’s cheeks and I swiped my thumb over it, always fascinated by her body’s reactions to a simple truth. “I have my swim trunks under my pants. Why don’t you get changed and I go ahead to warm up?”

Pushing up to her toes, Kiara kissed me then headed away. My gaze followed her for a moment before they settled on the key in Serafina’s door, wondering if it was best to hide it. Trust. It was difficult to gain and just as hard to maintain. I turned, leaving the key where it was, and headed downstairs. Only Savio was still in the common area, lounging on the sofa, one leg thrown over the armrest. He didn’t look up when he spoke. “And how did it go? Are Kiara and the captive BFFs now?”

“Hardly,” I said. “Where are Remo and Adamo?”

“Remo went into the kitchen, and Adamo’s sulking in his room.” He tore his eyes from the screen. “I think he might refuse the tattoo.”

“He won’t.”

Savio put his phone down and swung into a sitting position. “I wouldn’t be sure, if I were you. He’s feeling rebellious, wants to be a better man, or boy, whatever. I think he might use the initiation ceremony to make a statement.” Savio’s lip curled. “Come on, don’t tell me you haven’t considered it. He’s trying too hard, if you ask me. He’s like us and he can’t accept it. That’s all.”

He pushed to his feet, pocketed his phone then shrugged. “He’s not listening to me and I’m tired of hearing his whining. I’m off to meet Diego and Mick. I won’t be back until after midnight. After all, I have to take my fucking elsewhere and I don’t want those girls in my wing.”

I continued toward the front pool then thought better of it and headed for our recreational pool landscape. After I’d stripped down to my swim trunks, I dove in and emerged at the other end of the oval where Savio’s flamingo float bobbed on the surface. I shoved it out of the pool before I began swimming rounds, even though the pool wasn’t practical for that.

In my peripheral vision, movement caught my attention and I stopped my swimming and stood. Kiara was strolling toward me, a towel wrapped around her middle to protect her modesty.

Her smile was secretive when she stopped at a sunchair and dropped her towel, revealing a red bikini.

It was a very pleasing, albeit surprising, sight. I doubted she’d owned it before becoming my wife. The tiny bottom was held on Kiara’s beautiful hips by two ribbons, and the material covered only half of her round ass cheeks. The bikini top didn’t cover much more, giving a tantalizing view at Kiara’s ample breasts.

I'd been hungry for her since yesterday and this wasn't helping.

"It's new. I ordered it online. I thought you might appreciate it."

"Appreciation isn't a strong enough word for what your body is doing to me, Kiara," I murmured.

She laughed, moved toward the pool and sank down on its edge, dipping her legs into the water. It was comfortably warm, even for someone with a higher sensitivity to cold like Kiara, which was why I'd chosen it instead of the deeper, square pool. I swam over to her, unable to stop admiring her, then propped my hands up on the edge and pushed myself out of the water to steal a kiss from Kiara. She responded with a soft gasp and opened her legs when I applied more pressure with my hips, allowing me to slide between them and press my erection against her pussy.

Kiara pulled away, eyes wide as they searched our surroundings. "We shouldn't do this. Someone might see us."

The neighbors were too far away to see us and my brothers would enjoy the show. I didn't care if someone watched us. In the past I'd found it stimulating to have people watch me having sex, but Kiara was more conservative due to her upbringing. I stole another kiss then lowered myself back into the water. Before I moved out from between Kiara's legs, I pressed a firm, lingering kiss to the red fabric covering her pussy. She exhaled, then bit her lip, her expression filling with the same desire that burnt me up.

"How deep is it?" She gestured at the water.

"The pool has different depths. Here it reaches my chin, so you won't be able to stand, but back where the waterfall is it's only about chest level for me, and over at the staircase it's flat but getting steeper quickly."

Kiara glided into the water slowly, clinging to the edge with a white-knuckled grip. I gripped her waist. "I have you. I'll make sure you don't go under."

She released the edge only to grip my shoulders with the same fervor. I carried her through the water, floating on her belly, allowing her to get used to the feel of it, to relax. Eventually Kiara began to move her legs and she could have swum on her own but I was reluctant to release her. One of my hands glided down her body, taking in the curve of her ass, before I slipped two fingers under her bikini bottoms and began stroking her. She was slightly aroused.

“Nino,” she warned. I kept rubbing her folds and clit, lowering her slightly into the water so she felt less on display.

“Keep swimming,” I said as I circled her clit slowly. Her eyes flitted to me uncertainly. “Nobody can see us. But if you want me to stop, I will.” I really thought she’d enjoy it if she’d allow herself, but I wouldn’t push Kiara past her limits, not with her hurtful past. She didn’t say anything and I kept teasing her until I could feel her become slicker. Kiara’s strokes became less coordinated and she kept swallowing water when she moaned. “Turn over.”

Her arm slung around my neck as she drifted on her back in my arms. I nudged her bikini top aside with my mouth and latched onto her pink nipple while sliding a thumb into her.

Kiara let out an astonished moan.

“Is this good?” I asked against her breast then drew it back into my mouth, my thumb rotating in her pussy.

“Yes,” she whispered, eyes focused on my face as I sucked her breast. Then she averted her gaze shyly.

“Watch me. It turns me on if you watch me give you pleasure.”

Kiara smiled slowly, her breathing deepening, and her arousal quickly rose. Sometimes her eyes still darted back to the mansion and I made sure to keep her distracted. Her muscles began to quiver as her fingers on my neck tightened, and then she tensed with a beautiful moan.

“Yes,” I growled, moving my finger faster and sucking her nipple once more.

My own arousal throbbed through my body, turning my swim trunks into an uncomfortable prison for my cock. When Kiara became slack, I raised my head and kissed her mouth. She gave me a sex-drunken smile. I kept teasing her pussy even as I released her body and she hovered before me. She was always very sensitive after her orgasm so this brought her additional pleasure.

“Can we have sex here?”

I paused briefly, surprised by her request, and a bit concerned due to her body’s tendency to clamp up.

She flushed bright red as if she’d said something wrong. I pulled her against me so her legs wrapped around my middle. “Of course, but contrary to common belief water isn’t a lubricant. It dilutes your body’s very own lubricant. That can lead to discomfort.”

Kiara let out a small giggle, then pressed her lips together. “Sorry.”

I raised my eyebrows, trying to figure out what she found funny. I’d thought I should warn her and not plunge into her and cause any pain, which could lead to unpleasant memories.

“Your sexy talk is a bit ... strange.”

“I can talk dirty, don’t worry.”

Curiosity filled her eyes. “Really?”

“Yes. I tend to be a dominant, and vocal, lover. But I figured it would be better to tone it down for you.”

Her face fell. “Oh, right ...” She cast her eyes down and she laughed again, but this time it was a tense, joyless sound. “I guess our sex life isn’t very fulfilling for you.”

I frowned. “I didn’t say that. I enjoy sex with you and we’ve only begun. You’ll grow more comfortable and we’ll discover your limits together.” I released my hold so she sank lower until my erection pressed up against her center, causing her to moan softly.

“Would you like to try sex in the pool now?”

She nodded. I slid first one finger, then a second into her. It was a tight fit. Like I had suspected the water wasn't helping. I swam toward the pool's edge and hoisted Kiara out before sliding her bottoms to the side and kissing her pussy.

“Nino—”

“Let me help your body. I want to lick you.”

I pushed the flamingo into a position where it covered most of Kiara if someone were to glance toward the pool from the mansion. Then I ran my tongue along her crease, tasting hints of her arousal but not enough. That would soon change. Kiara was always very responsive when I ate her pussy.

“Watch me,” I said, deciding to test how much of my dominance she could deal with, and Kiara obeyed. I took my time licking around her outer lips then sucking them into my mouth, one after the other, before I used the tip of my tongue to play with her sensitive inner lips. Kiara's fingers tangled in my hair, her hips rocking slightly, and the sweet taste of her arousal became more prominent. My cock jerked when Kiara's juice swiveled on my tongue. I groaned against her. “Kiara, I love your taste.”

She shuddered when I parted her with my thumbs and dove back in, even slower than before, really savoring her pussy, but soon she began clenching, a sure sign of her impending orgasm. “Hold back. It'll be more intense if you fight your release for a while, trust me.”

I ignored her clit and focused on her opening. Even that made Kiara tremble. “Hold back,” I said again.

“I can't,” Kiara gasped, her face twisting with pleasure. “It feels too good.”

I gently eased two fingers into her and when my lips finally closed around her clit a tremor went through her and she moaned, her hands tugging at my hair with enough force to send a wave of pleasure through my body. I pumped my fingers into her quickly, enjoying the way her walls contracted around them with every pulse of her orgasm.

“Fuck, you're so wet.”

I shoved down my swim trunks before I helped her back into the water, and Kiara clung to me, a dazed little smile on her face as I lowered her to my erection.

“I’ll go slowly. Tell me if you feel discomfort.”

She kissed me and I slid into her, feeling no resistance. I halted as I was sheathed in her. Kiara was already pressing into me, rocking encouragingly, so there really was no question about if she felt discomfort. Holding onto her waist I started bouncing her up and down on my cock.

Kiara forgot everything around us as I fucked her, and I had to hold back not to come as she ground herself against me over and over again, her walls clenching and she threw her head back with a breathless moan, coming around me. I licked water off her elegant throat, enjoying the feel of her erratic pulse against my tongue.

My balls clenched but I fought my release with gritted teeth and carefully slid out of her.

Kiara stared at me in confusion. “You didn’t come.”

“Not in the pool.”

“I know your brothers have used the pool for their activities, especially Savio. Don’t tell me they never come, just to keep the water clear.” Her lips curled and she glanced around.

“They do, but with the whores they use condoms, and if they get a blowjob, the women swallow.”

Kiara gave a small nod. “Right.” Then she tilted her head up. “Did you like it if a woman did that?”

“Gave me head?”

“Yeah.” Her voice was a bare whisper. Were there men who *didn’t* enjoy the feel of a hot mouth? I stroked my palm down her spine, trying to gauge her mood. She seemed self-conscious. Was it because she’d never gone down on me? I had never asked her to, even if I missed it, because it was obvious that she was scared of doing it.

“I did,” I said, opting for the truth. “Let’s go inside. I want to be inside you again.”

Kiara followed me back into the house. She was tense, but the moment I lowered her to the bed and kissed her, she softened. I traced her thighs, then raised one over my back before I inched into her, savoring the slow tempo of her walls hugging my cock.

“Perfection,” I rasped. “This is fucking perfection, Kiara, so don’t linger in the past, not in mine, not in yours.”

Kiara’s expression lit up with surprise then a small smile came before my next thrust forced a moan from her lips.

I sped up gradually, pushing her deeper into the bed with every slam. When she was getting closer, I slowed again and pushed myself up on my hands. Kiara made a small sound of frustration and I kept up the torturously slow pace, rotating my hips, until I was only teasing her with my tip. She began wiggling for additional friction. I retreated every time she drove my cock deeper into her. She bit her lip, eyes filled with need. “Nino, please ...”

I eased my tip into her then halted. Her eyes trailed down my body to the point where our bodies met and she sighed. As she watched, I began fucking her slowly again. Kiara didn’t take her eyes off the sight, and I too dipped my head to see my cock claiming her pussy, glistening with her juices. Holding my weight up with only one arm, I parted her wide, giving us both an even better view, then I caressed the sensitive skin of her inner thigh while I kept up the slow thrusting. My fingertips graced the crease between her pussy and thigh, then her outer lip before they circled her clit. She clenched and whimpered, but didn’t come yet.

“Rub your nipples for me.”

After a moment of hesitation, Kiara took her nipples between her fingers and tugged lightly.

“Test your limits. Tug as hard as you enjoy.” My voice was rough, drenched with the strain to hold back my orgasm.

Kiara worked her nipples harder and she gasped in surprise and clenched again. My fingers on her clit sped up and so did my thrusts, and finally she cried out, shaking with the force of her release, and my balls jerked violently as I came. I thrust harder, turned on by the look of utter passion on Kiara's face as I fucked her while she played with her tits. Fucking perfection.

I stilled and lowered myself until I covered Kiara's petite body.

She let out an astonished laugh. "That was incredible. Whenever I think sex can't possibly get better, you do something new and ... just wow."

I chuckled at the innocent wonder in her voice, raising my head to look at her flushed face. "Trust me, Kiara, we've only just begun."

CHAPTER 3



NINO

Adamo had mostly been hiding in his room since Remo had brought Serafina home. His initiation was in three days and I wanted to make sure his current mental state didn't lead to a decision he'd come to regret. I knocked on his door and didn't get a reply. I knew Adamo was inside and could only assume he had his headphones on like so often. I pushed the door open and found him lying on his bed, listening to music and glaring at the ceiling. When he spotted me, he frowned and sat up, pulling his headphones off. "Ever heard of privacy?"

I took in the mess on the floor, crumpled clothes, dirty dishes, half-empty Coke bottles with cigarette stubs inside of them. "No smoking in the house. You know the rules."

Adamo rolled his eyes and gave me the finger. I advanced on him and grabbed his arm, jerking him to his feet. "Remo and I give you a lot of leeway, Adamo. But don't forget who puts food on the table, who pays for all this, who makes sure you are safe. Show some respect or I'll have to teach it to you." Remo and I didn't like to punish Savio or Adamo with violence, but Adamo was testing both our patience.

Adamo jutted out his chin. "Are you going to try out a few new torture methods on me?"

"I don't need to test out new methods. I've been using the same for many years and they are very effective."

Adamo had never been subjected to our father's torture, only Savio, Remo and I. It was a good thing, but it also made him weaker and an easier target. However, neither Remo nor I would raise his pain tolerance by torturing him.

Adamo grimaced. "Do you use them on the girl?"

“No.”

“Will you?”

“No.”

As I’d said to Remo, Serafina was an innocent woman and didn’t deserve the choice he’d given her, or being the victim of my very particular talents.

“Can you say more than no?” he grumbled, trying to free himself from my grip. I didn’t release him, tightening my hold.

“I can, and I would, if your questions required more than a simple ‘no’ answer.”

“I feel bad for her. She’s just a girl. Why does Remo want to hurt her?” The insolence was gone from his voice and he sounded like the little boy I’d read Harry Potter to.

I dropped my hand and he rubbed the spot, avoiding my eyes. I said, “I’m not sure if he wants to hurt her.” I didn’t think even Remo knew what exactly he wanted with the girl.

Adamo snorted. “Yeah, right. When did Remo ever *not* want to hurt someone?”

“He doesn’t want to hurt you, Adamo. You know that.”

“Yeah...”

“Your initiation is an important day. This is about more than loyalty to the cause, to the Camorra. This is about loyalty to our family, to Remo.”

“Will you turn this into a guilt trip so I take the oath?”

“Guilt is an irrelevant notion to me, you know that.”

Adamo let out a choked laugh. “Yeah, I got that. For you and Remo both, and for Savio whenever it suits him best.”

“Do you feel guilty for killing the Outfit soldier?”

Adamo sank back down on the bed and fiddled with his headphones, giving a small shrug. “Kinda.”

“Kinda? What does that mean?”

“I know you’re all keeping something about our mother from me. I want to know what it is. If I’m old enough to become a Made Man, I’m old enough for that, right?”

“Now isn’t the right time. Don’t concern yourself with the past.”

Adamo reached for a packet of cigarettes on his nightstand. He seemed to catch himself, darting his eyes to me and withdrawing his hand. I grabbed the packet and stuffed it in my back pocket.

“Hey!”

I raised one eyebrow, daring him to say more. He’d buy more cigarettes. Still, he needed as much discouragement as possible to stop this unhealthy habit. “Answer my question.”

“I feel guilty for not feeling guilty.”

That was completely unreasonable.

Adamo groaned. “Because I *should* feel guilty, but why do I bother explaining that to you?” He tilted his head, making a few of his curls fall into his eyes. “How do you make sure not to hurt Kiara? I don’t get it.”

“By monitoring her reactions and adapting my behavior accordingly.”

He shook his head. “Even your marriage is pure logic.”

It wasn’t, not anymore, but neither Adamo nor Savio knew of the recent changes I’d experienced. I didn’t want to explain them to my younger brothers until I was sure of their extent and understood them better.

“Maybe it would do you good to control your emotions on occasion? Logic might help you navigate your current emotional instability.”

Adamo’s face scrunched up. He threw himself back on his bed and put his headphones back on. Stifling my frustration with his irrational behavior, I turned and left him to his sulking.

KIARA

“Are you worried Adamo will refuse the tattoo today?” I asked as I lay in Nino’s arms after sunrise, tracing his tattoos and the hard ridges of his abs.

“Not exactly worried, no. I think he’ll see reason.”

I shook my head, and Nino pulled back to regard me with a frown. “Did he tell you anything?” There was definitely a hint of concern in his voice.

“No,” I said. “But I don’t think Adamo will do it because he sees it as the *reasonable* choice. He isn’t like that. Adamo is driven by emotions. He’ll take the tattoo because he loves you, Remo and Savio, because he’s loyal to you.”

Nino nodded and gradually his expression softened before he bent down to press a kiss to my mouth. I smiled against his lips and touched his cheeks, enjoying the feel of his beard against my palms. We stared into each other’s eyes and I could hardly resist telling Nino I loved him again. He was trying to come to terms with his emotions and I didn’t want to pressure him. It still seemed a miracle that he’d said it at all, and with Nino his actions always spoke louder than his words. “Will I be alone in the mansion today? I’m sure you all want to be there for Adamo, Fabiano included.”

“No,” Nino said firmly. “Fabiano will have to guard you and make sure Serafina doesn’t cause trouble.”

“I feel bad for him. Couldn’t you have asked one of your soldiers to guard the mansion?”

“If it was only Serafina, yes, but I won’t have anyone I don’t trust fully be alone with you, especially because you could feel threatened by a male guard you aren’t familiar with.” Nino kissed me again, his expression hard. “I won’t ever risk your wellbeing, Kiara. I can’t lose you.”

I swallowed, my resolve running like sand through my fingers. “Do we have time to make love?”

Nino answered by moving over me and settling between my legs.



Fabiano came over shortly before the Falcone brothers were about to leave. I'd hoped he'd bring Leona with him, but he was alone. Trying to stifle my nerves about being in his presence for the first time, I wrapped my arms around Nino. "Text me as soon as you can and tell me how it went."

Nino kissed my ear. "Fabiano is like a brother."

He pulled back and with a curt nod toward Fabiano moved outside where his brothers were waiting. The door shut, leaving Fabiano and me alone in the gaming room.

"Nino said you enjoy playing the piano. Would it help you relax?"

My cheeks heated. "Is my fear that obvious?"

Fabiano's blue eyes softened. "I didn't think you were scared, merely nervous. You know I'm here to protect you. You have absolutely no reason to be scared or nervous."

"I know. My brain knows, but it's like my body's still programmed a different way. I'm trying to work on it. Maybe today is a good chance to tackle my fear?"

Fabiano gave me a small smile and pushed his hands into his pockets. "So would you like to play the piano?"

"I'd love to. But won't it be too boring for you? I doubt classic is what you're usually listening to."

"True, but I don't mind."

I started toward Nino's and my wing, then halted when Fabiano walked behind me. "Can you walk beside me? I know you're trying to keep a distance from me, but I'd prefer you beside me."

"So you can have an eye on me?"

Fabiano didn't look angry, only curious, as he stepped up to my side, and we moved on.

“Sorry.” I hated myself for my body’s reactions. It was difficult to overcome a habit.

“You don’t have to apologize. Nino warned me.”

“Oh God, what did he tell you?”

“He reminded me to mind your personal space. I think he might have threatened me too.”

My eyes widened in horror. “I doubt Nino would threaten you.”

“Oh, he would, definitely if you are concerned. You bring out the protective side in him, and not only in him.”

In our living room, I sank down at the piano. “Don’t tell me you mean Remo.”

Fabiano plopped down on the sofa and stretched out his legs in front of him. “Remo and Savio both. It’s the way they watch you and act around you.”

I put my fingers on the piano keys, thinking about Fabiano’s words. Savio and Remo were careful not to touch me. They seemed to have gotten used to my presence during dinner. My fingers started to dance over the keys with a mind of their own as I stayed lost in my thoughts. Soon the tension slipped away as the notes of the melody swirled around me. It was a new song I’d been working on for a few days, one that was supposed to encompass my feelings toward my new family. Like my song for Nino, it was dark, moody and erratic in the beginning, conveying my initial fear and insecurity, but grew gradually calmer. I hadn’t told them yet that I had every intention of creating a song for every Falcone brother, and once I knew him better, even Fabiano.

The sound of a ringtone tore me out of my trance and my fingers lost track. I glanced toward Fabiano who stared down at his phone with a gentle smile. When he looked up, a more restrained expression took over.

“Leona?” I asked.

He frowned. “How did you know?”

“The look on your face.”

Caution filled Fabiano's eyes and he stuffed the phone back into his pocket. "She's at college. She's taking preparatory courses."

"Did she choose to get her Bachelor in Criminal Justice?"

"Yes. She thinks it's the most useful for her later law studies."

"Ironic, isn't it? That she's taking criminal justice classes while being involved with the Camorra."

"She'll be very useful for the Camorra once she's graduated law school."

"That's still how long, seven years?"

Fabiano nodded.

"Won't you be married by then and have kids?" The moment the words were out I wanted to take them back. Fabiano and I didn't know each other that well. It was a question I should have asked Leona, not him.

A few seconds passed before he replied and his face was almost as locked down as Nino's could be in the beginning. "We haven't discussed our future in detail yet."

Feeling bad, I decided to make it up to Fabiano. "Are you hungry? I could bake us muffins. They won't take long."

Forty minutes later I pulled a tray of triple chocolate muffins with a cheesecake filling from the oven.

"They smell amazing," Fabiano said.

"They're still pretty hot. We can risk a bite anyway." I took out three plates.

Fabiano motioned at one of them. "I can't let you go up to Serafina. Nino made that quite clear."

Sighing, I put a muffin on each plate, then put one of them to the side so Remo could take it up to Serafina later. Two plates in hand I headed over to the table and sat across from Fabiano. "I hope you like it."

Fabiano dug in immediately. "Perfect."

“It’s strange that we’re sitting at this table, eating muffins, when we were raised to hate the Camorra. But we both found a family here.”

Fabiano regarded me. “To be honest, I felt pity for you in the beginning. Even before I knew what happened to you, I thought living under a roof with the Falcones would be the end for a girl like you.”

“Did you think they’d abuse me?”

“No, I thought they wouldn’t know what to do with you. Dealing with someone with your past takes patience I didn’t think Remo or Savio possessed. Nino yes, but he doesn’t feel emotions, so that’s a big problem.”

“They’ve all been trying in their own way, and I feel like it’s getting better every day.”

“They see you as family now, so you’ve won.”

I bit my lower lip, wondering if it was true. Nino, of course, but the rest of them? I wanted nothing more than to be part of their family.

We were still in the kitchen when Remo, Adamo and Nino returned. Nino immediately scanned me from head to toe, which led to Fabiano rolling his eyes and saying. “She’s in one piece.”

Nino came over, bent low and kissed my ear. “Are you all right?”

I nodded. “I made muffins. They’re still warm.”

I looked to Adamo who appeared a bit pale. “You should eat one. The chocolate will make you feel better, trust me, and I didn’t make them very sweet.”

I stood, headed over to the tray and scooped four muffins onto the plates, then handed them to each man. Remo cocked his eyebrow.

“You know I hate sweet things.”

“Maybe you haven’t had the right kind of sweet yet?”

Not waiting for his reply, I moved on to Adamo and gave him the plate. His forearm was wrapped with a bandage. “How did it go?” I asked softly.

“Okay,” he said with a hint of relief. Maybe he’d come to terms with everything now that he was initiated.

I handed the last two plates to Nino and Fabiano. “Where’s Savio?”

“With two whores,” Nino said, and I nodded. I shouldn’t have been surprised. Remo and Nino both only ate half of their treats, and I finished Nino’s then stopped Remo from throwing away his. I took the half-eaten muffin and took a huge bite.

“You realize I bit into that before.”

“And now I’m biting into it. That’s what muffins are for.”

Remo shook his head. For once his face didn’t hold the scary harshness it usually did.

“And you say you don’t like sweet things, Remo,” Fabiano said in a teasing voice.

Remo and he exchanged a look I didn’t understand.

“You’re full of shit, Fabiano.”

CHAPTER 4



KIARA

On Remo's request early the next day I went clothes shopping for Serafina. Nino was busy visiting a drug lab in the suburb to discuss new designer drugs and Remo hated shopping, which left Savio with the task of playing babysitter.

He was munching on one of the muffins when he swung himself behind the wheel of his Ferrari. "If you're bored, I wouldn't mind if you bake again."

I smiled, happy that they all enjoyed my cooking when in the past I'd barely had the chance to try my hand at it. "What's your favorite?"

"Red velvet."

"Then I'll make those next."

Savio tore his eyes away from the traffic to give me a curious look but didn't say anything.

"You have to turn right there."

"I know Vegas by heart, don't worry."

"Even boutiques?"

"I like nice clothes."

I tilted my head in agreement. Savio was always impeccably dressed and styled.

He said, "Your new style works better for you, by the way."

I flushed, glancing down at myself. I'd chosen a red off-shoulder summer dress with white dots that ended above my knees. "Because of the red?"

“That and you’re not hiding your body anymore. With curves like yours, it was a fucking shame to hide them under those wide dresses.”

I laughed uncertainly.

“Don’t worry. I’m not coming on to you,” he said with a smirk. “Nino would chop my balls to pieces like a Tataki master. And you’re like a little sister to me. I’m not that kinky.”

My cheeks burned, causing Savio to chuckle and shake his head after catching a glance at me. He said, “That you can still blush like that living under a roof with my brothers and me...”

I couldn’t get over the fact that Savio had compared me to a little sister. It made me emotional and I really didn’t want to cry. It would only freak him out. “If anything, I’d be the older sister. You’re younger than me.”

“Yeah, but you’ve got the whole little sister vibe going, needing protection, being tiny as fuck and all.”

“Tiny as fuck?” I repeated.

Savio laughed again and pulled the car up in front of a boutique. “Let’s go. I don’t want to spend all day shopping with you. I’m meeting Mick and Diego later.”

“Mick? That doesn’t sound very Italian.”

“Short for Michelangelo. His parents must have been high on something when they chose that name.”

Savio got out of the car and walked around it so he was by my side. With my flats, I only reached his chest, so I understood his tiny comment. As we strolled toward the boutique, I caught a group of three teenage girls checking Savio out. Of course, he noticed and winked at them, causing them to giggle then look at me guiltily.

“Do you know them?”

Savio dragged his eyes back to me and held the door to the shop open. “We went to school together.”

“Wasn’t it strange for you to drop out early?”

He gave me an odd look. “Why? It was a waste of time. I need to help my brothers and protect the Camorra’s interests. Nino’s homeschooled me a lot of the time, and I did graduate. I was advanced in most classes anyway.”

We stepped into the shop and at once the vendor who’d served me the last few times appeared at our side. After a nervous glance at Savio, she smiled at me. “I have a couple of new red pieces I could show you.”

“Actually, I need clothes for someone else.” I paused. “But I’ll try the red pieces as well.”

Savio huffed and headed over to one of the chairs in front of the changing room, sank down and pulled out his phone. The other chair was occupied by a middle-aged man whose wife was likely getting dressed.

“I’ll put these in a changing room for you,” the vendor said as she walked past me with two red pieces. I nodded distractedly as I perused the clothes for something Serafina might like. I didn’t know Serafina but she seemed the type who wasn’t shy about her body. Taking a few shorts and summer dresses as well as shirts from the rack, I asked the vendor to get them for me in the size I suspected Serafina needed. Then I headed into the changing room to try on the other clothes.

The first dress was an instant buy. The second piece, a jumpsuit with tight shorts and a wrap-around top, I wasn’t sure. “Do you think that’s something Nino would like?” I asked.

Savio peered up, eyes raking over me. Then his gaze shifted to the mirror behind me, giving a good view of my butt in the shorts, but he wasn’t focused on that. His usual air of easy-going arrogance slipped off and I realized why. The middle-aged man was checking me out, or rather my ass. Savio turned toward the man.

“How about you stop the leering and keep your eyes on your wife?”

The man quickly tore his eyes away, stood and walked over to the changing room, calling out. “Are you almost done?”

Savio rolled his eyes. “Looks sexy. I’m sure Nino will approve of it in his logical way.”

My lips twitched, and I returned to the cubicle to change back into my clothes.

NINO

The push and pull relationship between Remo and Serafina was reaching unsettling dimensions. In the last few days he’d spent more and more time with the girl and I wasn’t the only one who noticed. Kiara tried to extract information from me every chance she got, thinking I knew what my brother had in mind, but for once Remo kept his motives carefully hidden.

I stepped into the kitchen, following the sound of clanking and humming, just as Kiara put a baking tray into the oven. The kitchen smelled of lime and coriander, and something spicier. The sight of Kiara’s ass in tight shorts was even more enticing. Walking up to her, I caught sight of what looked like tacos. I wrapped my arms around her from behind, kissing her neck.

“That looks good. What is it?”

“Enchiladas Verde. I hope they aren’t too spicy.”

I gripped her hips, turned her around and hoisted her on top of the counters, then stepped between her legs.

Before she could utter a protest, I kissed her, my fingers stroking her smooth thighs. In the last few days my own emotions had been erratic, maybe triggered by Remo’s irrationality. Kiara’s closeness always eased the pressure in my chest until I felt a familiar calm.

Savio sauntered in, letting out a scoff. “Okay, just to get this straight. I’m banned from any kind of fucking in the communal space of the mansion, but you’re getting it on in plain daylight on our kitchen counters?”

Kiara drew back, her cheeks turning pink.

“We were kissing,” I said, not bothering to step back.

Savio leaned against the counter, arms crossed. “Looks like that won’t be the end of it. Hypocrite much?”

Kiara gently pushed against my chest, trying to make me step out from between her thighs, but I resisted. “Nino.”

“If you ever bring a girl you’re serious about, you can get it on like this, too,” I said.

Savio smirked. “I take my fucking very seriously, does that count?”

Kiara poked my side and I finally moved back so she could slip off the counter, avoiding Savio’s eyes.

“The blush goes well with the red of your shorts,” he said.

I sent him a warning look but he was immune to my threats.

Kiara checked the enchiladas, bending over, and Savio’s gaze followed the movement of her ass before he gave me a thumbs-up.

I moved forward but Kiara beat me to it, whirling on him and stabbing her finger against his chest. “Stop staring at my backside.”

Savio raised his hands with a grin. “All right, Tiny.”

Kiara shook her head, smiling. I frowned, trying to understand what was happening between them. She told Savio, “I hope you’ll find a nice girl soon who will teach you some manners.”

“Not going to happen. Girls in relationships are too much work. They start thinking they can boss you around and make demands. I prefer it when girls do what I want.”

“How would you know? Have you ever had a relationship?”

“I don’t need to. Look at Nino and you. If a girl like you, who’s submissive as fuck already, can get a guy like Nino wrapped around her finger, that doesn’t really make me want to be in a relationship. I like my freedom.” He pushed away

from the counter and headed for the door. “Call me when the food’s done.”

Kiara scowled after him. “Submissive as fuck?” She turned to me. “Do you agree with him?”

I stroked her throat with my fingertips. “Not in those exact words, but you are submissive.”

“I thought I was getting better.”

“You are. You stood up to Remo and Savio. Outside of the bedroom you aren’t naturally submissive.”

Her eyes grew wide and she swallowed. “What?”

I cupped her chin, bringing our foreheads together. “You don’t like being in control during sex, even when I tried to let you be in the beginning. You only relax if I take lead, if I don’t give you choices but decide for us.”

She bit her lip, embarrassed. “Isn’t that unnatural considering what happened to me ...”

I kissed her. “No, you were scared of feeling at someone’s mercy, of feeling out of control, but you trust me and know you can relinquish control without fear because I only want to give you as much pleasure as possible.”

Kiara released a shaky breath, licked her lips, and from the look in her eyes she was aroused. The oven beeped, announcing the end of the baking time. I leaned into Kiara, letting her feel my erection.

“Later,” I promised.

KIARA

I watched the cage fight of Savio’s next opponent with Nino and his brothers, even though I’d have preferred spending the evening with Serafina, talking. Nino refused to let me be alone with her. My eyes began drooping as I rested my head against Nino’s chest.

I must have fallen asleep because suddenly Nino shook me. “Wake up, Kiara.”

His voice rang with tension that had me wide awake. I peered up at his tight expression. He was looking at Adamo, not me.

“Adamo, take Kiara into the panic room. Shoot to kill, no questions asked.”

“What’s the matter?” I asked, sitting up, completely confused. Remo and Savio were staring down at their phones. Nino pulled me to my feet, kissed me quickly then nudged me toward Adamo. I didn’t understand what was going on, only that it must be bad judging by Remo’s terrifying expression.

Adamo gave me a tight smile as he grabbed my hand and pulled me after him. He was clutching a gun in his other hand and his body was brimming with tension. I could hardly keep up with Adamo’s pace.

“Adamo,” I gasped. “What’s wrong?”

“Not now.” He led me down the stairs into the basement, then to the last door in the corridor: a monstrous thing made out of steel.

Adamo keyed in the code and the door unlocked. Shoving it open, he stepped inside with me and closed the door again. Only then did he release me.

“Fuck,” he breathed.

I touched his shoulder so he faced me. Seeing his worried face, my insides twisted. “What’s going on?”

“The Outfit attacked the mansion. They want to free Serafina.”

“They are on the premises?”

He gave a terse nod, running a hand through his unruly locks. “I should go back out and help my brothers.”

I gripped his sleeve. “Don’t leave me alone in here.” The panic room was designed to keep us safe, but it felt like a grave of steel. Panic began to claw at my chest as I felt the walls closing in on me and I started shaking.

Adamo shoved his gun into his pocket and touched my shoulders lightly. "It's okay. I'll protect you."

I swallowed, my throat tight.

"Look at me, Kiara," Adamo said gently.

I peered up at him, trying to concentrate on his concerned eyes. For some reason this was the first time I realized how tall he was, already a few inches taller than me. After a few deep breaths, I felt better.

"Thank you."

Adamo lowered his hands, his attention returning to the steel door. "Savio should have arrived with Serafina by now."

"Do you think something happened to them?"

"The Outfit won't hurt Serafina ..." Adamo pulled out his gun once again. "... and Savio can take care of himself, but sometimes he's too confident."

"Go if you want. I'll be fine in here," I said, even though I wanted him to stay. If Savio needed him I didn't want to be responsible for any tragedy.

Adamo gnawed on his lower lip, stepping closer to the door. "Nino wants me to protect you. If I leave and something happens to you ..." He sighed, looking torn.

I pointed at the shelf filled with knives and guns. "I can defend myself, and nobody's going to get in here, right?"

"Not unless they have the code. Neither Savio, nor Remo or Nino will ever give it to anyone, no matter what kind of torture they put them through."

"Neither would you," I said.

Adamo looked doubtful.

I walked over to the sofa against the wall and sank down, studying the other shelves stacked with water and food, then the door leading into a small bathroom. How long could we survive in here if it ever came to the worst?

I pushed the thought aside. Nothing would ever happen to Nino and his brothers.

Adamo sat down beside me, his hand with the gun resting on his thigh. The skin around his Camorra tattoo was no longer red.

Adamo followed my gaze. “It takes some getting used to. People in school look at me different now, and even in the street strangers keep their distance as if they think I’d kill them for looking at me the wrong way.”

I nodded. “How are things with Harper and your former clique? Did she try to talk to you again?”

Adamo avoided my eyes, shrugging. “I saw her alone a couple more times, but now it’s over.”

“You did?”

“My brothers don’t know. Promise not to tell them.”

I hesitated. Adamo looked like he needed someone he could confide in, and this wasn’t really a major secret.

“My lips are sealed,” I said. “But why would you want to see her again? I thought she used you to get drugs? And she cheated with that guy ...”

“Mason.”

Adamo frowned, clenching and unclenching his hand, watching the way his muscles flexed. Every day he seemed to grow more. In moments like this he didn’t look the fourteen-year-old. “I don’t even feel guilty.”

“That’s okay.”

Adamo tilted his head up with a grim smile, and for the first time I saw his resemblance to Remo. “Is it also okay that I only went back to Harper because I wanted to get another blowjob and screw her, after what she did to me? Pretending I didn’t know where Mason was when I’m the one who killed him?”

For a moment his words threw me off and I felt my cheeks heat. Adamo sank against the backrest with a grimace. “Sorry,

Kiara. I shouldn't have said that. I didn't want to upset you. Forget what I said." He leaned his head back and glared at the ceiling.

"Why would I be upset?"

Adamo winced. "Because of ... you know ... "

"I'm not breakable. I don't get upset because you talk about sex." He didn't say anything. "So you slept with Harper?" I couldn't believe he'd had his first time with a girl who'd messed with him.

A flicker of embarrassment crossed his face and he kept his gaze fixed on the ceiling. "Yeah. Only once. I thought I'd feel better. Like I was paying her back in some way, you know? I wanted to get something out of it after how she and Mason tricked me."

"But you don't feel better?"

He shook his head. "I hated it, and now I wish I hadn't done it."

"See the positive. Savio will stop teasing you now," I tried to lift his mood.

"I won't tell my brothers. I was supposed to stay away from Harper."

Before I could say more, the lock clicked. Adamo jumped to his feet, aiming his gun.

Nino stood on the threshold, knife in hand and covered in blood. My stomach fell and I rushed forward, touching his chest. "Are you all right?"

Nino tilted his head at his brother before he met my gaze. His eyes were blank mirrors, hard as steel. "I'm fine. The threat is contained."

"The attackers are all dead?" Adamo asked.

"Not yet. We spared two for questioning. Do you want to be present?"

Adamo gave a jerky shake of his head. "I'd rather not..."

Nino's frowned momentarily but he nodded. "Then take Kiara up to our bedroom."

"Nino," I said softly, worried by his demeanor.

He touched my cheek, his eyes remaining detached. "I'll be upstairs soon. I want you away from the basement when I'm dealing with the prisoners." He nodded at Adamo. "Take her upstairs."

Adamo held out his hand. "Come on, Kiara."

With a last, lingering glance at Nino, I slipped my hand in Adamo's and followed him. I shivered, causing Adamo to tighten his grip.

Blood stains littered the floor. It was silent in the house. At my request, Adamo left me alone in the bedroom. My thoughts strayed to Serafina, wondering if she was okay. She must be devastated, having her hopes crushed and what if someone she knew died? Her father? Fiancé? Brother?

I got ready for bed even as my anxiety rose with every passing moment. Trying to focus on a book was wasted energy and eventually I curled up on my side in bed, staring at the door, waiting for Nino to return.

It was past midnight when he finally stepped inside, closing the door silently and looking surprised when he saw me. "I thought you'd be asleep."

I took in his clothes, blood-drenched now when before there had only been a few stains, and his hands coated in red. Slowly I slid out of bed, pushing down my revulsion. Tiredness filled Nino's face and my protectiveness banished any hesitation. I opened the bathroom door for him so he didn't leave marks and he walked past me. Turning on the faucet, I filled the sink with water while Nino undressed. Even part of his chest was stained pink from the blood and a bruise started forming over his hipbone. Nino lowered his hands into the water and reached for the scrubbing brush.

I put a hand on his. "Let me."

Nino regarded me with a frown. "You don't have to do this, Kiara. I know the sight of blood unsettles you. I don't

want you to feel uncomfortable.”

I kissed his bicep. “I want to.”

Nino nodded and allowed me to start cleaning his hands and forearms with the brush. His eyes never left my face as I scrubbed him clean in silence. Once I was satisfied, I drained the sink and filled it with fresh, warm water, then took a washcloth, dipped it into the basin and lifted it to Nino’s chest. He released a small sigh and the tension left his body as I wiped the blood off his skin. He brushed a strand of hair away from my shoulder and traced my collarbone before he cupped my face.

Smiling, I dropped the washcloth in the sink. “All done.”

He led me back into the bedroom where we laid down in the bed.

“Will you tell me what happened?” I asked.

“Serafina’s brother led a badly executed rescue mission.”

“Her brother? Is he dead?” Serafina loved her twin. She’d be devastated if something happened to him.

“No, Remo decided to keep him alive and send him back with a warning.” Disapproval rang clearly in Nino’s voice even as relief filled me. Serafina would have hated Remo if he’d killed her brother.

“You disagree with his decision.”

“It’s not logical. Killing an enemy after extracting information is the most effective tactic.”

“I think Remo’s psychological warfare follows a different logic than yours.”

Nino shook his head. “I’m aware of the usefulness of psychological warfare. Remo’s emotions are getting in the way and that poses a risk for our mission and worse, you.”

“I’m fine. Nothing happened.”

“But it could have. If Samuel had planned his attack better, if he’d had the support of Cavallaro or Mancini, he could have

done real damage. What if they'd captured you? I promised I'd never let anything happen to you."

I touched his chest. "Nothing will happen to me."

"If someone ever tries to hurt you, I'll take them apart piece by piece, sinew by sinew, bone by bone."

"I know," I whispered, and I hoped it would never come to that.

CHAPTER 5



NINO

Two days later we got word from one of Grigory's men that Samuel had returned to Minneapolis.

"Won't Cavallaro see it as a sign of weakness that we've sent back the asshole?" Savio asked as we settled at the breakfast table. Kiara was making pancakes. I could tell that she was listening curiously.

"Showing mercy isn't always weakness," Adamo muttered.

Savio shook his head. "Are you sure he's our brother? Maybe they swapped him for another baby in hospital after birth."

I froze as my chest constricted, remembering the days prior and after Adamo's birth. I looked at my scars. Kiara set down a plate stacked with pancakes and a bowl with berries in the middle of the table before she sat down close to me and touched my leg.

I raised my eyes from my wrist and found Adamo and Savio watching me intently. "Cavallaro knows it wasn't to show mercy. He'll suspect we have ulterior motives."

"Problem is Remo doesn't tell us what his fucking motives are," Savio said, then shrugged and piled his plate with pancakes. "But this is his game."

"Aren't you hungry?" Kiara asked when I didn't fill my plate.

I nodded distractedly and grabbed a few pancakes. Digging in, my hunger returned and Kiara smiled.

The door swung open and Remo walked in, only in briefs. He nodded and headed over to the coffee maker to pour himself a cup. “One of you needs to take up breakfast to Serafina.”

“It’s not going to be me,” Savio said. “I need to get ready for training with Diego and Gemma.”

“I can do it,” Kiara suggested.

Remo cocked an eyebrow at me.

“I’ll do it. I don’t trust the girl’s mental state so shortly after seeing her brother,” I said.

“Why don’t you go up yourself?” Adamo asked Remo.

Remo sipped at his coffee. “Not in the mood to see her.”

It wasn’t that. Sending my brother a disapproving look, I got up, grabbed a plate with pancakes, and left the kitchen. Remo was losing track of his goals, which was a major problem.

On my way back downstairs after dropping the pancakes off, I ran across Savio who was already dressed in fight shorts. “Listen,” he began, grimacing. “What happened in the kitchen? Your expression when I mentioned Adamo’s birth was scary as fuck.”

My defenses rose. Remo and I had tried to keep most of the horrors of the past from our younger brothers. Telling them everything didn’t serve any purpose.

“You know as well as I do that Adamo wasn’t mixed up.”

Savio groaned. “Come on. Stop the shit. You know it was a joke. Don’t use this ‘I don’t get your emotions’ shit on me. I noticed that you changed in the last few weeks. I’m not blind.”

I frowned. “It’s nothing.”

“Sure it is,” he said. “I don’t remember what happened, and you and Remo do, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to know the truth.”

Savio wasn’t a kid anymore, far from it. He’d been fighting at our side for years now. He knew our mother had

tried to kill us all, but not what happened after.

I leaned against the wall. “Our father’s men stitched us up so we didn’t bleed out. Then they took us home where our father was waiting with the doctors of the Camorra. Two of them tended to Remo and me while the others performed an immediate C-section on our mother, cutting Adamo out of her.”

Savio stared at me. “They cut him out of her with you and Remo in the same room?”

I flexed my hand, staring at my scars. “Blood’s blood. Father thought it would make us stronger.”

Savio touched my shoulder and squeezed. “Fuck. That twisted fucker. I wish you and Remo could have killed him.”

“Regret over the past—”

“Is wasted energy, I know,” Savio said, then pulled back and ran a hand through his hair. “Fuck. Now I really need to beat the shit out of someone.”

“Diego is a decent opponent.”

“He is,” Savio said. “But I’m supposed to fight his sister first. It requires too fucking much concentration not to seriously hurt Gemma.”

I nodded. Training with Kiara always proved much more stressful than fighting my brothers, because with them I didn’t have to be careful of every move. If I made a mistake, I paid with pain. With Kiara, I could end up seriously injuring her.

“Does Adamo know?”

“No, he doesn’t know anything of what happened.”

“Not even that our mother’s alive, I assume?”

I shook my head. Adamo had been in a difficult phase and it seemed unwise to burden him with the weight of the past.

“You should tell him. He isn’t a little kid anymore, and this concerns him too.”

His phone buzzed and he fumbled it out of his pocket. “Need to go. Diego’s already asking what’s taking so long.” He typed in a message then looked back up. “Are you going to come over to the gym later? I’d like to spar with you and go over possible moves for my cage fight.”

“I’ll bring Kiara along. I need to work on her defensive skills.”

“All right.”

I watched my brother leave, considering what he’d said. Maybe he was right. Adamo deserved to know the truth about his birth, and why Remo and I were messed up. But Remo was even more volatile than usual with Serafina in the mansion, and Adamo was on edge because of the situation as well.

When I returned into the kitchen, only Kiara was inside, humming as she stirred reddish dough in a bowl. She smiled over her shoulder at me.

I asked, “What’s that?”

“I’m trying a recipe for red velvet cupcakes. I want to perfect them for Savio’s fight. I’m sure he’ll want a sweet treat after.”

“Savio usually treats himself to a whore or two.”

Kiara pursed her lips. “Well, maybe they’d like a cupcake too.” She laughed, shaking her head. My own lips twitched seeing her joy.

“I thought we could head for the gym for defense training. After the attack on the mansion, I think it’s absolutely crucial that you learn to defend yourself.

“Now?” Kiara asked, glancing down at the dough.

“Yes, Savio asked me to spar with him later.”

“Okay,” she said hesitantly, and put the bowl in the fridge. “I’ll just grab my gym clothes.”

Kiara was always tense when it came to her defense training, which was why I decided not to tell her I planned on having her fight Savio. He’d trained with the young Bazzoli

girl a couple of times now and knew how to hold back when faced with a petite woman.

KIARA

When Nino and I entered the Falcone gym, I could already hear the sounds of fighting.

“Gemma, be careful, for God’s sake!” a familiar voice shouted.

“Shut up, Diego. You keep distracting me!”

The dojo came into view and with it the fighting cage. My eyes widened at what I saw.

Savio was inside the cage with Gemma. The girl reached only his chest but moved with a grace and confidence that showed she was used to fighting. It was still an unsettling sight. Savio was scarred and muscled, and this girl tried to land a hit in his side, which he blocked.

“You need to be quicker, Kitty, if you want to hurt me,” he taunted.

Her face turned even redder and she tried a kick between his legs.

Diego, who was clutching the mesh of the cage, shouted, “Gemma! Stop the shit!”

Savio bent down, hoisted her over his shoulder and threw Gemma over his back. She let out a surprised cry when she hung head-down over his shoulder while he held her with one arm over her calves.

“Let me down! Savio!” She wiggled desperately, but Savio had her trapped. She started pounding his thighs with her fists and he turned to us with a grin, completely ignoring Gemma. For a moment, I thought he’d clap her butt because it was typical for Savio, but he didn’t.

“How old is she?” I asked Nino, who led me closer.

“Thirteen, I believe.”

Diego noticed us and glanced from Nino to me, his expression falling slightly. Maybe he remembered our last

encounter when he'd suggested I was Savio's newest conquest. I tried to ignore that he, like Savio and Nino, was only wearing fight shorts. All these naked chests were making me uncomfortable.

He straightened and held out a hand to Nino, shaking hands with him. Then he gave me a small nod. "Mrs. Falcone."

I stifled a smile.

"What? No 'nice catch' comment today?" Savio hollered. Gemma had stopped fighting by now and was trying to keep her head up.

Nino frowned at his brother then glanced between Diego and me.

Diego gave Savio an incredulous look. "Shut up."

Savio chuckled and finally set Gemma back on her feet. She swayed slightly then narrowed her eyes and shoved his chest, embarrassment unmistakable on her face. "Don't do that again. I'm not a little kid."

Savio climbed out of the cage, grabbed a towel and began wiping his chest. "If you say so, Kitty."

Gemma glowered as she followed him. "Hello," she mumbled to Nino and me. I wasn't sure if her face was bright red from exertion or embarrassment. That didn't make her any less stunning. Despite her tomboy attitude she looked like a doll: long dark hair, olive-green eyes and sweet pout.

"Savio, can you help with Kiara's training for a while?"

My heart sank. There could only be one reason why Nino wanted Savio around.

Savio glanced at me then shrugged. "Sure." He flashed Gemma a condescending grin. "Maybe you have a chance against Diego, Kitty?"

Diego scoffed. "As if."

Gemma made a face at her older brother. "You're always worried about hurting me, that's why I'm going to kick your

ass.”

Diego nudged her toward the cage and muttered something under his breath.

I followed Nino and Savio toward the boxing ring, trying not to freak out yet. Savio swung himself over the ropes and held them open for me. I climbed through and sent Nino an anxious look.

He shook his head. “I know you don’t like it, Kiara, but we need to make progress. Now more than ever. If you refuse to fight Remo, you’ll have to deal with Savio.”

“Good to know that I’m not your first choice,” Savio said, winking.

I gave him a shaky smile.

“Get in position,” Nino said. I could tell that he wouldn’t back down today.

Swallowing my nerves, I faced Savio. Had he always been this tall and muscled?

“Like what you see?” he asked, stretching out his arms.

My mouth fell open. “I ... I didn’t...”

“Check me out? Sure.”

I glanced at Nino for help. He looked slightly amused. “My brother needs a good ass-kicking, maybe you can give it to him.”

“Ready?” Savio asked.

I nodded, but the moment he advanced on me my muscles started freezing up. “Tiny, this is your chance to grab a feel, don’t waste it.”

I glared at him in indignation. He was smirking, but cautious. I tried to block his hands but he was too quick and strong, and then I was on my back and he had my wrists above my head in one of his hands, the other hand on my waist holding me down.

My chest heaved and I tried to push through it. Savio released my wrists without backing off, still hovering over me. “Try to push me off.”

I reached out with shaking hands. For some reason I couldn't bring myself to touch his bare chest. Savio jumped to his feet and held out his hand, pulling me to my feet.

“Kiara, I know this is difficult for you, but we need to condition your brain to unfreeze in situations like that,” Nino said.

Savio regarded me. “All right. Let's try a different approach. Come closer.”

He waved me toward him until our feet were almost touching and I had to tip my head back to look up at his face.

“You have a problem with my closeness, right?”

I nodded.

“Touch my chest.”

I glanced toward Nino, who was looking thoughtful. Savio stepped into my line of vision.

“Eyes on me. Nino, can deal. You're not grabbing my dick, only my chest.”

I huffed out laughter and hesitantly pressed my palms against Savio's chest. Of course I could feel a blush rise into my cheeks. Savio's mouth twitched, his eyes darting to Nino.

“Does she blush like that whenever she touches you? She must be lightheaded when she touches your cock.”

Without thinking, I slapped his chest.

Savio grinned. “See? Was that so hard?”

“No.”

The amusement disappeared from Savio's expression. “All right. I'm going to wrap my fingers around your wrists now.”

Savio gripped me like he'd said. I concentrated on his eyes, which held my gaze steadily. “I'm going to force your hands down my body. Not lower than my waistband, calm

down, and you're trying to break my grip or stop me in some other way. Doesn't matter how. I'll move slowly, giving you plenty of time to consider your options." He cocked an eyebrow. "Ready?"

"Yes."

Savio tightened his grip and pushed my palms down his pecs to the beginning of his six pack. My gaze darted down to his fight shorts.

"Eyes off my dick. He's not your problem."

I snorted, and that seemed to do the trick. I tugged at Savio's hold but he didn't budge. Without thinking I let myself fall back, startling Savio. His hands tightened to stop my fall and I used the momentum to bring my leg up and aim a kick at his groin. In a stunningly fast move he released one of my hands and blocked my kick with his hand and raised knee. He jerked me back to my feet.

"Not bad."

I smiled proudly.

"Now we're turning the tables. I'm going to put my hands on your body. Shoulder blades to ass or hips to tits. What do you prefer?"

I blinked as if he'd spoken a foreign language. "What?"

Savio stepped closer and slowly curled his fingers over my hipbones. "Like this and I'll move up," he explained quietly. I swallowed, having become completely still. He moved his arms around me so his palms rested on my shoulder blades, bringing us even closer. My breathing quickened as I craned my neck to hold his gaze. "Or like this and I'll move down."

"The first," I said.

Savio nodded and dropped his hands. "Okay. Let's choose a safe word."

"Safe word..."

"That's a word kinky people use because stop turns them on."

I shook my head, not sure if I was on the verge of a giggling fit or hysterical breakdown. Maybe both.

“Let’s choose a word. One you’ll be reluctant to use. You should only use your safe word to stop our simulation if you really can’t bear another fucking second of my touch. I want you to cross your boundaries.”

“Okay.”

Savio tilted his head to the side. “What would make you extremely uncomfortable? How about ‘lick my pussy’?”

I pressed my lips together and turned to shoot a desperate look at Nino, but he was gone. Savio nudged my chin so I faced him.

“It’s only you and me, Tiny. Focus, all right? I’m going to touch your hips now and you’re going to say ‘Lick my pussy’ as a safe word. Stop won’t change a fucking thing, got it? Stop me in any way you can think of. Ready?”

I took a deep breath then nodded.

Savio rested his hands on my hips. It was strange to allow this closeness. Slowly he slid up, fingertips brushing my stomach over the fabric of my shirt.

“Are you just going to let me feel you up?” Savio said challengingly.

I gripped his wrists, trying to pull them away, but he kept moving higher, reaching my ribcage. I raised my hands and brought my elbows down, trying to slam them into his wrists. Savio snatched his hands back before I could do real damage.

He nodded. “Good. That would have hurt.”

We repeated the same simulation two more times.

“Let’s change things up. Turn around.” I did. Savio stepped very close so I could feel his breath on the back of my neck. “Nervous yet?”

“Not really.”

“Then let’s change that.” Savio startled me when he wrapped an arm around my waist, pressing his palm against

my belly and pulling our bodies flush together. A choked sound burst from my lips. Squirming, I tried to free myself, but this position was definitely more challenging for me. “Think, Tiny. Focus on the present.”

Pushing through the fog of discomfort, I tried to kick his shin then ram my elbow into his side. I didn’t manage to free myself. At least, Savio didn’t seem unhappy with my progress.

“I think this is enough for today,” Savio said eventually, releasing me.

I wiped my sweaty, trembling hands on my gym shorts. “Thanks for being patient.”

Savio gave a one-shoulder shrug. “How about you show your gratefulness with a few delicious cupcakes?”

I grinned. “Red velvet dough is in the fridge.”

He looked surprised. “You’re starting to grow on me, Tiny.” His gaze focused on something behind me and I saw Nino heading our way. “Nino’s going to work with me in the cage now.”

Savio and I climbed out of the boxing ring when Nino arrived. He wrapped his arm around my hip and regarded me questioningly. “How did it go?”

“Good,” I said proudly.

“You’ll probably have to deliver tonight, Nino. I riled her up with my magical hands.”

I pressed my forehead against Nino’s chest as I laughed. “You’re impossible, Savio.”

“I’ve been called worse.” He nodded toward the cage. “I’ll go ahead and warm up while Nino makes sure I didn’t misbehave too much.” He sauntered off.

“You seemed to be taking Savio’s approach really well. Maybe I tackled your problem wrong,” Nino said.

“Savio was really patient, and his humor helped loosening me.”

Nino nodded. “Savio has a way with words and women.”

I huffed. “I don’t think he’d need to rely on whores if he bothered to use his charm on normal women.”

“Savio is lazy. He rarely bothers charming women, but when he does, his success rate is impressive. He could take over Stefano’s job without trouble.”

My lips curled, thinking of the Camorra’s romancer.

Nino kissed me. “It’s good to see you improve. You’ve come far.”

So have you.

“Hey lovebirds, I have a fight I need to win.”

Shaking his head, Nino led me over to the cage. Diego and Gemma had pulled up chairs and were waiting for the spectacle to begin. Nino followed Savio into the cage and I sat down beside Gemma, who gave me a curious look.

Diego, too, regarded me for a moment. I supposed by now they knew all the rumors. In the past it had always been my biggest fear that the truth about the rape would come out, that I’d be regarded as less because of it, but now I was glad everybody knew. It was freeing.

Savio and Nino assumed their fight positions. They both looked impressive with their focused expressions and tight muscles.

“Go!” Diego shouted.

Savio was the less-restrained fighter. He taunted and challenged Nino with words and his expressions. It didn’t make his kicks and punches any less focused. I mainly watched Nino, the eager look in his face, the way every muscle was conditioned in fight mode. It was a surprisingly even fight. I wasn’t sure if it was because Nino was holding back or because Savio had become an equally lethal fighter. I wasn’t familiar enough with fighting to tell, and they both weren’t giving one hundred percent because they couldn’t risk injuring Savio mere days before his cage fight.

I glanced at Gemma who leaned forward in her chair, arms propped up on her knees and lips parted as she followed the

fight. I could tell that her focus was solely on Savio. It was obvious that she had a major crush on him, and it made me feel protective of her. Savio was an absolute womanizer and while I doubted he'd go for a girl that young, I worried she'd get hurt.

Noticing my attention, Gemma's expression became less infatuated and she sat back in her chair, crossing her arms.

After training, Savio stayed back with Diego and Gemma while Nino and I drove home. In the car, I touched Nino's thigh. "Gemma is head over heels for your brother."

Nino slanted me a look before he returned his attention to the traffic. "And that worries you?"

"Yes. For Savio, girls are meaningless fun. She's young and easily influenced."

"You can't protect everyone. I know you're sensitive because of what happened, but Savio won't make a move on the Bazzoli girl."

"Because of her age."

"That, and because Remo honors the traditionalists among our followers and the Bazzolis are as traditional as they come. Like the families in the Famiglia."

I frowned. "Really? But Gemma is allowed to fight and she doesn't seem very docile."

"When we took over power, her father asked Remo for his opinion regarding the matter. Remo said it would be good to show a girl how to defend herself because it would also make sure that she could ward off advances before marriage. That convinced Bazzoli. Since then Gemma has been learning how to fight. Diego is always with her though." Nino covered my hand. "You're too kind for this world, Kiara."

"I can't help it."

"You aren't supposed to change. It's good that you are kind and caring, and inherently good. It balances out what my brothers and I are."

“You make me sound like I’m some kind of saint. I’m not that good.”

Nino pulled into the driveway of the Falcone mansion, killed the engine and pressed a kiss to my knuckles. “I doubt there’s someone who’s better than you.” He said it so honestly, as if it was the unfailing truth, that tears sprang into my eyes. I tried to blink them away before Nino could see them. His eyes lingered on mine and he leaned forward, cupped my head and pressed a kiss to my temple. “One day I’m going to kill every single person who made you feel less. They should pray that your kindness stops me long enough.”

Deadly words shouldn’t warm my heart, shouldn’t feel like the most romantic declaration of love, but with Nino they did.

CHAPTER 6



KIARA

In the afternoon, I joined Remo on the terrace. He was still brooding after a fight with Serafina during one of their daily walks this morning. His hands were pushed into his pants and he was glaring off into the distance. Standing beside him, I looked at his face, at the scar his mother had caused, at the cruel twist of his mouth.

Serafina had told me she felt like she was losing herself and I couldn't help but wonder if it was the same for Remo, and what did it even mean for a man like him?

"Say what you got to say," he growled. There was so much I wanted to tell him, how I thought it was wrong to kidnap an innocent woman, but he knew that. And deep down I wondered if maybe this was the only chance for Remo to ever be close to a woman, for him to overcome the hatred that had carried him through the years, that still carried him.

I wanted to tell him that he needed to stop this game so he could be strong for his brothers, particularly Nino. I wanted to tell him that I wished to see him happy one day, even if he didn't believe in happiness.

Remo growled, anger flashing on his face. He grasped my upper arms and brought our faces close. "Say something. Don't just stand there with that fucking sad look. It's fucking annoying."

Despite my body's tension, I didn't pull away. "Do you think Nino could love a child?"

Remo released me with a jerk, eyes widening as he stepped back. "Are you ...?"

“No,” I said quietly. “But I want a baby. I’ve always wanted to be a mother. I want to hold a baby in my arms, cuddle it into sleep. I want to protect and love it. I want to give this baby everything we all never had. If there’s only one thing in my life I can achieve, then it’s that.” Tears filled my eyes. I wasn’t even sure why I was telling Remo this. Maybe because I could feel that he was on the verge of something, something either better or far worse.

Remo looked like I had shaken him to the core. Silence stretched between us.

“I’m sorry,” I said eventually. I turned but Remo stopped me and leaned down, his expression fierce. “Nino loves you. I don’t understand how it’s possible. I thought the part of him capable of that shit was lost but you dug it out. I don’t know what he can or cannot feel, but every child that grows up in this house will be cared for, will be safe and as fucking happy as it can be in our fucked-up world.” He straightened. “And with you as a mother, it’ll drown in love and sweets, that’s for sure.”

Remo turned and left me standing there. I wrapped my arms around myself. Nino found me like that a few minutes later and pulled me against him.

“I’m fine,” I said before he could ask. I smiled up at him and his frown smoothed. Once things had calmed down, once Serafina was back home, I’d ask Nino if we could have a baby.



After following our new routine of swimming a few rounds in the pool together, Nino and I retired to our room to change. I watched Nino get out of his swim shorts, taking in his muscular tattooed thighs, his narrow hips with the delicious V leading down to his hardening cock. He stalked toward me as I admired him, feeling the familiar tugging of desire.

Nino kissed me, taking the lead as he always did. He unfastened my bikini top and bottoms, which fell in a wet heap on the floor, before he steered me backward until I fell on the

bed. He climbed over me, his strong body pressing into me as he captured my lower lip in his mouth and sucked as he rocked his erection against me, sending a shockwave of desire through me.

My mind wandered to the one thing I'd been thinking about often in the last few days—finally going down on Nino. I'd been meaning to do it for a while but always lost courage. For some reason, I couldn't forget how degrading and disgusting it had been to go down on my uncle. He'd forced himself into me until I felt I was choking, until my throat and mouth were tender. Whenever I considered pleasuring Nino with my mouth, the same horrible images flooded my mind, followed by a nagging worry that I'd still feel degraded and dirty when going down on him. I desired Nino, every part of him. I loved how he gave me pleasure with his mouth and I wanted to return the favor.

“Kiara?” Nino asked quietly, drawing back, searching my face. I must have become still under him.

“I ... I want to put my mouth on you,” I said. Even voicing the wish cost me a lot. It felt wrong to say it, to want it, and I was scared that despite my desire to do it, the images of the past would win, that a small part of my uncle remained wedged in my brain.

Nino didn't say anything at first, but I could tell by the brief flicker of desire in his expression that he wanted this. I supposed I shouldn't have been surprised. He'd been on the receiving end of that kind of attention in the past, with other women. And he pleased me with his mouth almost daily. Of course he'd want it.

“On my cock?” he asked carefully.

Flushing, I nodded. “I want to try to give you...give you head.”

Nino's face softened. “Okay.” He rolled off me and lay down beside me. “Come.”

I sat up and knelt beside his hips, then curled my hand around his shaft.

“Would you like me to tell you what to do?”

I considered that. “I don’t know if ... if I ...”

Nino squeezed my thigh gently. “Take your time and if you want to stop, stop.”

“You won’t go down my throat ... right?” I whispered, feeling a wave of shame wash over me.

“I won’t thrust into your mouth unless you want me to. I’ll try not to move at all.”

“Okay,” I said softly.

I stroked him for a while, enjoying his silkiness and feeling my own arousal spike once more just from touching him. I loved Nino’s body, the way he made me feel, the way I could make him feel. Gathering my courage, I bent my head down and cupped the tip with my lips, tasting him for the very first time. He twitched and I tasted a hint of saltiness. I looked up, finding Nino watching me with unabashed hunger.

Emboldened by his reaction and my body’s need, I twirled my tongue around his tip before I began to bob my head up and down slowly, testing my limits.

Nino brushed my hair away then touched my neck. I became still, slowly pulling away, fighting the images of the past. My gaze darted up to his face and as usual I found solace in his calm.

“I wanted to hold your hair so it doesn’t bother you. I won’t tug at it and I won’t push you down,” Nino said quietly, his thumb rubbing my neck.

“I know,” I said, because I did know. My body reacted before my mind could catch up.

With a small smile, I tasted him again, then ran my tongue around his tip, enjoying his softness, his scent, his taste. Everything kindled my own desire and I could have cried from relief. I established a slow rhythm. Nino stayed true to his promise, lying completely still beneath me. Only his hand fisting the blanket gave an indication how much he struggled to stay put.

Nino moaned, his muscles tensing. His hand on my neck tightened then he relaxed it quickly. "I'm going to come if you keep it up."

I nodded, and kept up my sucking. My mind began whirring when I felt his muscles twitch. I tensed as I tried to decide if I could swallow, if I could do this for Nino.

"Kiara," he gritted out another warning.

I didn't pull back. I wanted to do this, to beat the last shreds of my past into submission. Nino's hand twitched a second before his body coiled tightly and then his erection jerked. With a low moan, Nino came. He made small rocking motions as he spilled into me. For a second I was frozen, awaiting the inevitable. My past to bulldoze my present, for my body to do what it had done many years ago, to retch, for bile to travel up my throat. The feeling of choking, of suffocating as my uncle held me in place.

But nothing of that sort happened. Nino stroked my back and I swallowed, kept pumping and felt a wave of accomplishment. I was free. Completely free.

Nino pulled me on top of him as if I was a doll. He nudged my chin up as I lay sprawled on his strong chest, his eyes searching mine. He kissed my mouth once, twice. "Do you want me to get you a glass of water?"

Every time I thought I couldn't possibly love Nino more, he showed this kind of consideration. My lips pulled into a smile.

"Say something," Nino said with a hint of confusion.

"I love you."

Nino kissed me again. "And I love you, Kiara." He ran his hand over my spine before palming my ass. "But you didn't answer my question. Do you want something to drink?"

"No," I whispered. I didn't feel the need to wash Nino's taste away, not at all.

Nino tilted his head, confused by my reaction and unsure what to do. And I was too, because giving Nino pleasure like

that had turned me on.

“Kiara,” he said. “Right now I’m not sure if you’re in shock or if you’re really okay with what you did ...”

I buried my nose in his throat and arched my hips in silent invitation. Nino’s hand on my ass cheek tensed briefly before he dipped his fingers between my folds, finding me wet.

His chest expanded under me as he released a shuddering breath.

“I’m more than okay,” I said with a small, embarrassed laugh.

Nino ran his fingers along my slit lightly, stirring up my need for him once more. “Sit on my face.”

I lifted my head with wide eyes.

He smiled, but his eyes shone with desire. “Come on.”

I pushed into a sitting position on Nino’s chest. His eyes lowered to my most private part as his hands came to rest on my hips and he nudged me forward, encouraging and hungry. With a small smile, I gripped the headboard and lifted up, allowing Nino to hoist me above his head.

NINO

My body was still throbbing with the remnants of my orgasm as I saw Kiara’s beautiful body, seeing her breasts stand to attention and her dripping pussy right in front of my face. Dripping because she’d sucked my cock. I couldn’t deny it, I’d enjoyed coming in Kiara’s mouth tremendously, especially because she’d enjoyed it too.

Grasping her ass cheeks, I pushed her pussy toward my mouth, tasting her arousal. Kiara peeked at me, but as always she was too self-conscious to watch like I knew she wanted to. I drew back from her pussy. “Watch me.”

Kiara smiled sheepishly then moaned as I sucked her clit lightly. She held my gaze and my cock soon filled with blood, eager for another round. A sound outside the open window caught my attention, but I kept teasing Kiara with my tongue,

not wanting her to get distracted. It took me a moment to hear the hints of a deep male voice. Remo.

I wasn't sure what he was up to now and I didn't care. For all I cared he could listen, as long as Kiara didn't find out. I slid a finger inside of her as I flicked my tongue back and forth, keeping her busy. Kiara's body tightened and she rocked forward, driving my finger deeper into her pussy as I licked. Her moan rang out and I watched her thrown-back head and puckering nipples. She went slack, shaking and panting. I gripped her hips and rolled over so I was on top of her. "Turn on your stomach."

Kiara's eyes peeled open but she did as I asked and I pressed into her back, kissing her neck and shoulder blade as I slid my cock between her thighs. "Is this position okay for you?"

"I think so," she murmured, her expression trusting.

I pushed into her and groaned low in my throat. In this position Kiara's walls gripped me even tighter. Tilting her head so I could taste her mouth, I pitched my hips forward, my pelvis slapping against her firm ass as I fucked her. Our bodies rubbed together and Kiara's tantalizing scent drove me almost insane with lust. I still tasted her on my tongue.

Kiara soon lifted her butt to match my thrusts, moaning desperately into my mouth as she came undone. After a few more hard thrusts, I exploded and Kiara arched up. We both went slack and I held her tightly, kissing the corner of her mouth. "Am I too heavy?"

"Stay," she whispered. "I love the feel of your body on top of me. It makes me feel safe."

I linked our fingers. "You are safe."

Her mouth tipped up and her doe eyes held mine and I just stared back, feeling utterly calm.

CHAPTER 7



KIARA

I was completely exhausted after our lovemaking and didn't move even when Nino rolled off me. "I could use something to eat. What about you?"

I grinned. "I could eat." I moved to stand but Nino shook his head and got out of bed. "Stay. I'll get something for us, and then we can plan our hike tomorrow."

I stretched out on my back, feeling as if every muscle in my body had been turned to rubber. "Sounds good."

Nino pulled on briefs then his eyes traveled the length of my naked body in appreciation, and my toes curled in delight. He slipped outside and I sat up, loving the delicious soreness between my legs. A grin pulled at my lips, and I couldn't hold it in. I'd never been this happy in my life.

I cleaned up in the bathroom and grabbed the hiking guide for the greater Las Vegas area then waited for Nino. Thirty minutes passed and he wasn't back yet.

Confused, I considered going after him but I didn't want to appear like a mother hen so I occupied my mind perusing the pages of the book.

Almost an hour passed before Nino returned with a tray loaded with grapes, cheese cubes and bread. He set it down beside me on the bed. I could tell that something had happened. Reaching for a grape, I waited for him to say something. He sank down beside me and picked out a piece of bread.

"Have you decided which hike you'd like to try?"

“Not really. You’re more familiar with the area,” I said. “Why were you gone so long?”

A trace of hesitation on Nino’s face was worryinf. “I ran across Remo.”

“And?”

Nino’s fingers curled around my wrist. “He had sex with Serafina.”

I froze.

“She wanted it,” Nino added.

I shook my head, unable to believe it. “Now that he’s taken her virginity, her fiancé won’t want her back. She’ll be shunned. Unless she manages to hide the fact somehow, but...”

“Remo just sent them the bloody sheets to taunt them with the Famiglia tradition.”

I tore my wrist out of Nino’s grasp and pushed out of bed, too agitated to lie down. Nino swung his legs out and stood as well as if he thought I’d storm out for another confrontation with Remo. “What the hell is wrong with him?”

Nino reached for me. I was so angry, I slapped his hand away. He lowered his arm in surprise.

“Sorry,” I said. “I shouldn’t have hit you.”

“It’s okay, Kiara. I prefer your anger to terror.”

“Still, I don’t want to hurt you.”

Nino smiled slightly. “You can’t, trust me.” He approached me again and this time I allowed him to touch my waist.

“Is Serafina all right? Does she need medical treatment?”

Nino frowned. “I told you, she wanted the sex.”

“But it was her first time...with Remo of all people.” I cringed as unwanted images tried to come to my mind.

“Remo didn’t mention anything of the sort. I assume, given his talent reading people, he adapted his sexual advances

according to her inexperience and put some effort into making it pleasant for her.”

I burst out laughing, pressed my head against Nino’s chest and closed my eyes. Everything about our current situation was surreal, but with the Falcone brothers I should have come to expect nothing else. Tomorrow, I’d try to talk to Serafina in private and make sure she was truly okay, on a physical level at least. I could only imagine her inner turmoil over sleeping with her captor and family’s enemy.

Nino stroked my back. “Kiara?”

“I’m okay. Let’s plan our hike now.” I pulled back and gave Nino a tense smile.

Nino’s grip on my waist tightened, holding me in place. “Serafina chose to lose her virginity to Remo. It’s her choice, so you don’t have to feel pity for her.”

Nino couldn’t understand.

“It was her choice to sleep with him, that’s true, and I’m glad she got to choose, and that’s not why I feel sorry for her. Remo is playing a game and for him this might be nothing. But if she decided to give him what she promised to her fiancé, then whatever she feels for Remo isn’t just nothing.”

Nino thought about that. “You didn’t get to choose, not when you were a girl and not even now. You knew you’d have to sleep with me at some point. Nothing was your choice.”

My throat tightened realizing Nino’s thought process. Standing on my tiptoes, I cradled his head. “I didn’t choose you on our wedding day, because I didn’t know then what I know now. If I had, I would have chosen you. And since our first time, and even before then, everything was my choice, because you allowed it to be so, and because of that and because of how you always treat me right, I’ll always choose you.”

Nino pressed our foreheads together, and he swallowed. “Sometimes I feel like my insides are a raging flood of emotions when I look at you, but I don’t mind drowning.”



After our hike, I headed into the kitchen to see if we had something I could turn into a proper lunch, but Nino and I had forgotten to go grocery shopping.

The kitchen door swung open, and glancing over my shoulder I saw Remo stepping inside. I closed the fridge, considering what to say that wouldn't lead to a fight, so I said the first thing that crossed my mind. "We need to go grocery shopping. We have nothing for lunch."

Remo raised his eyebrows, amused that I thought that was his business. "Then order something."

"How's Serafina doing?" I asked pointedly.

Remo smiled twistedly and came toward me. "I didn't know Nino had turned into such a gossip."

"I hope you treated her right."

Remo leaned down so we were eye-level. "If you want to know details about my fucking then you'll have to share too. I'll show you mine if you show me yours." His smile widened at the look on my face. "No? Then what I do with Serafina is none of your business."

He stalked toward the door. "If you order food, order something for me as well."

I grabbed a flyer for a new sushi restaurant and ordered enough to feed everyone in the house. Then I headed into the communal space. Nino sat on the couch, talking to someone on the phone.

"We have it under control. A truce doesn't entitle you to meddle in our matters. Mind your own business, and rest assured Cavallaro won't bother attacking your territory in the near future." Nino paused. "Why?"

I stopped at the underlying warning in his voice. His eyes settled on me. "I'll ask her." He lowered the phone. "Luca wants a word with you."

I was surprised. Luca and I had never been close. He was Capo and a scary man, not to mention that we had plenty of cousins. Swallowing, I nodded and took the phone from Nino. “Hello Luca?”

“Kiara, how are you?”

“Didn’t Cassio keep you updated? I assumed he reported whenever I talked to Giulia on the phone.” My cousin’s husband was Luca’s trusted Underboss, so it was highly unlikely that parts of our conversations, at least, wouldn’t reach Luca’s ear.

Silence. My words had been on the verge of insolent, nothing a man like Luca usually tolerated, but I resisted the urge to apologize. Nino and Remo wouldn’t approve of me submitting to the Famiglia Capo.

“I’m aware that you seem to be doing fine in Camorra territory,” Luca said tightly. “Of course, I asked for updates. The Falcones are...difficult.”

“Did you only want to ask for my wellbeing? I’m doing fine.”

“The recent development with Dante’s niece has been unsettling. It raised new worries.”

“I’m not going to tell you any details about Serafina. Remo and Nino know what they’re doing.”

“Loyal,” Luca said with a dry laugh. “That’s not why I wanted a word with you. I want you to know that the Famiglia will always take you in, if you need protection. I failed you once, but this time you should come to me if something’s the matter. Call Giulia and she’ll inform me in case you need to be discreet.”

“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary.”

“Maybe you’re right, but you should know.”

“Do you want to talk to Nino again?”

“No, everything’s said. Goodbye, Kiara.” He hung up and I lowered the phone, still surprised. It had almost sounded as if

Luca felt guilty for what had happened to me, which wasn't his fault. He couldn't have known.

Nino took his cell from me, frowning with suspicion. "What did Luca want? He tends to forget the borders of his territory."

"He told me I could return to the Famiglia if I needed to escape the Camorra. He told me the Famiglia would protect me."

"You are part of the Camorra now," Nino said tightly.

"I am, and this is my home."

Nino relaxed slightly. Did he really think I'd ever consider returning to the Famiglia?

The bell rang.

"I ordered sushi for us," I explained.

Nino glanced down at his phone to check the camera at the gate then nodded and headed for the door. "I'll get it."

He returned, carrying three bags and raised a curious eyebrow.

"I ordered for all of us. Our fridge is empty."

Nino set everything down in the center of the gaming room table. "I'll see if I can find Remo, will you look for Adamo and Savio?"

With a nod and smile, I headed toward Adamo's part of the house. I hadn't been there before, but it was slightly smaller than the other three and all except for one door were open and empty. I headed for that one and knocked. Nothing happened for several moments until finally Adamo opened the door. A plume of smoke wafted toward me and I coughed. Adamo was only in sweatpants, his hair tousled. I took in the mess behind him. Bottles and dirty clothes on the floor. Only a narrow path led from the bed to the desk and to the door. "Oh, Kiara, hey," he mumbled.

"If you want, I can clean your room for you," I said without thinking.

Adamo glanced over his shoulder and rubbed his neck, considering my suggestion. He shook his head and gave a sheepish smile. “Nah, it’s fine.”

That didn’t look fine to me, but it wasn’t my business.

“I ordered sushi for lunch. If you come down, we can all eat together.”

“I’ll get dressed then come down.”

Tearing my eyes from the mess, I turned and headed to Savio’s wing. For some reason I was more nervous to enter his territory because I had a feeling he was more private than Adamo, and I was worried about the state *his* room would be in. If it was worse than Adamo’s place then I’d ask Nino to send pest control.

It wasn’t difficult to find Savio. The door to his room was open and he hung head-down from a bar he’d attached in the doorframe, doing crunches. He stopped mid-air when he noticed me, then finished two more reps before he gripped the bar and swung himself down. Like Adamo he was only wearing sweatpants. I really didn’t understand what it was with the Falcone brothers and their aversion to wearing shirts.

“Booty call?” he asked, cocking an eyebrow as he reached for a weight sack and squeezed it between his knees before he began doing pull-ups at the bar.

“You wish,” I said with a laugh, trying not to stare at all the display of nakedness and muscle.

“No, trust me, *you* wish.”

I shook my head at his arrogance. Relief filled me when I saw the room behind him was impeccably clean, and everything was white and beige—stylish.

“Are you looking for something?” Savio grunted out between pull-ups.

“I’m just relieved your room is cleaner than Adamo’s.”

Savio scoffed. “That’s not difficult. He lives in a fucking dump.”

I really couldn't defend Adamo in this case.

"I got sushi for all of us."

Savio dropped the weight and lowered himself to his feet, reaching for a towel on the ground. "What kind?"

"The kind you'll like," I said with a teasing smile.

Savio rolled his eyes. "That means only greens, right?"

I gave a small shrug, turned and headed back down. If they didn't order their own food, they'd have to live with my vegetarian choices or starve.

When I entered the gaming room, Nino and Remo sat on the couch and I sank down beside Nino. Scanning the sushi boxes, I picked up one and set it off to the side.

"Are you trying to bribe Serafina with sushi so she'll spill the beans?" Remo said. He was in a strange mood.

"Feeding her is not bribing."

Adamo and Savio joined us in that moment, both still without shirts. I shook my head. They plopped down on the sofa across from us and reached for the chopsticks and boxes without a word.

"How about you leave the boxes in the middle so we can all share?" Remo snarled.

I chanced a glance at him.

"Considering that you got into the bitch's pants, you're in a shitty mood," Savio said.

Remo's face flashed with anger. "That's the fucking last time you call her bitch, got it?"

Savio raised one eyebrow and even Adamo froze with his chopsticks against his lips. I looked at Nino who was frowning at his brother.

We'd all heard it. That was protectiveness in Remo's voice.

"Come on, she earned the name," Savio said.

Remo rose, his body shaking with barely restrained fury. What had gotten into him?

“What?” Savio said. “Now you want to hit me because of a woman? She’s your captive and the enemy—or did she get under your skin?”

Remo gave a twisted grin. “As if that’s ever going to happen. You just piss me off.” He sank back down as if he hadn’t been on the verge of attacking Savio a moment ago.

I snatched up an avocado maki and pushed it into my mouth while the men pounced on the California rolls and summer rolls. I kept sneaking a look at Remo, trying to figure out what had gotten into him, but attempting to glimpse behind his mask was bound to fail.



Nino and I settled at my piano in the afternoon to play together. It had become a ritual I enjoyed tremendously, and something we tried to incorporate into our daily routines.

Nino started playing a soft tune, barely audible, frowning in concentration. I wasn’t sure if it was because he was trying to focus on the music or make sense of his emotions. I leaned my head against his arm, listening to the melody he created. I loved listening to Nino, because his music always reflected the feelings he couldn’t understand or was unable to express. The music flowed louder, an uneven staccato. It filled my body, engulfed my heart, every fiber until my pulse sped up, living what the melody tried to convey. “Are you worried about Remo?” I whispered.

Nino regarded his fingers on the keys with a calculating expression, as if he didn’t trust them to show his true feelings. “Remo is too emotional. He lets whatever he feels consume him. He and Adamo are similar in that regard. Until now Remo mostly thrived on anger and hatred ... whatever connects him to Serafina, it can’t persist and I worry that it’ll tip him over.”

“Remo’s got you,” I said, propping my chin up on Nino’s shoulder. The frown eased. Nino and Remo had survived so much together, they’d get through this as well.



I grinned when I saw the set-up in the living area in our wing. Nino had bought a TV and set it up across from the sofa. The small table was loaded with dips, chips, veggie sticks, sushi and Leona’s favorite cupcakes—raspberry with a cream cheese frosting.

The bell rang out in the main part of the house. I hurried toward the gaming room and when I arrived, Fabiano and Leona were already waiting. The men would be watching fights and races while Leona and I would have some girl time. I hugged her and she smiled, looking as excited as I felt. With a wave, we left the men to their own devices.

“I hope you had a wonderful birthday yesterday?” I asked. I’d sent Leona a text, congratulating her from Nino and me, and today was our evening to celebrate a bit.

“Fabiano and I had a late breakfast in a cute café not too far from our apartment, and in the evening, we drove to our favorite stop and had a picnic there. It was really romantic.”

I grinned, then pointed at her necklace, a beautiful gold chain with a diamond pendant. “Fabiano’s gift?”

She touched the necklace and bit her lip. “Yeah. I bet it cost a fortune. How am I going to compete with that for his birthday in November?”

“Fabiano doesn’t expect you to buy him anything expensive.”

She shrugged. “I know. He gave me a card for his bank account, but I always feel strange using it. Though it doesn’t even matter anymore. Fabiano’s paying so much for college and for everything else. I can never pay him back.”

“He doesn’t want the money back. He wants you.”

Leona flushed and didn't say anything. Then she saw the cupcakes. "You baked my favorites?"

"I hope you'll like them. It's the first time I tried this recipe. The frosting I tasted was delicious."

We settled on the sofa, shoulder against shoulder, and I turned the TV on. "I chose *Jane Eyre*, *The Devil Wears Prada* and *After You*."

"That's so great. I don't even remember the last time I watched a romantic movie. Fabiano hates them and refuses to watch them with me no matter how much I beg him."

"I never ask Nino to watch them with me," I said with a giggle, taking a piece of sushi. "He doesn't really like fiction or movies. He prefers documentaries and that sort of thing."

"With him I get it. He wouldn't really understand all the emotional stuff, but Fabiano could if he wanted to."

I shrugged. I hadn't told Leona about Nino's recent development, about how he'd told me he loved me and meant it, how he didn't have to simulate emotion for me anymore. It seemed like such a personal thing that sharing it would have felt like betrayal.

Leona dipped a carrot stick in the sweet potato hummus I'd made, then her gaze went to the ceiling as if she was looking at something above us. "It feels weird that we have a girl's night while another girl is locked up in Remo's bedroom somewhere on the upper floor."

"She's got her own bedroom," I said, as if that made things better.

Leona raised an eyebrow and we both started laughing. Leona covered her eyes, shaking her head and her smile fell. "I really can't believe this is reality. My life's always been different but now it's reached a new level of weird."

I sobered. "I know. But Serafina is well, considering everything that's going on. I wish she could be down here with us, but Remo and Nino would never allow it."

Leona nodded. “Fabiano warned me not to talk to Remo about it. He says his Capo is a bit tense at the moment.”

“He is. Things with Serafina are complicated.”

Leona tilted her head, regarding me with a confused look. “Complicated how?”

I bit my lip. “I don’t know. I think there might be feelings involved on both sides.”

Leona choked. “You think Remo Falcone has feelings for a woman?”

I reached for the bottle of Sauvignon Blanc Nino had opened for me and poured both Leona and me a generous amount. Leona didn’t know Remo as well as I did—not that I really knew him. “Maybe I’m wrong, but ... just forget it. Let’s not talk about it.” I raised my glass and Leona clinked hers against mine.

I turned on the TV. My own eyes occasionally strayed to the ceiling, wondering what Serafina was doing and feeling guilty, but eventually the amount of alcohol that Leona and I consumed made me forget everything else.

I wasn’t sure what time it was when Nino and Fabiano walked into the room. Leona and I still sat shoulder against shoulder, temple against temple, hardly able to hold our glasses. *The Devil Wears Prada* was running on the screen but I barely noticed anything, too drunk. Two empty wine bottles littered the table.

Nino and Fabiano exchanged a look before moving over to us. Nino picked up the remote from the floor where I’d dropped it half an hour ago but couldn’t retrieve it because my head swam the second I looked down. He turned off the TV while Fabiano tried to get Leona into a standing position. He gave up eventually and lifted her into his arms. With a smile at me and a nod toward Nino, he carried her out. Leona gave a small wave before she closed her eyes with a sick look.

Nino sank down beside me and gently pried the wine glass from my hand before he tipped my head up and scanned my face. I grinned, couldn’t help it.

“How much have you had?”

I nodded toward the empty bottles then groaned when my vision swam.

Nino touched my forehead then got up. “Wait here. Don’t move. I’ll get you some Coke to drink. It might help.”

“Don’t go,” I slurred.

Nino hesitated, then he unscrewed one of the water bottles we’d ignored and held it out to me. I only stared, too tired to even lift my arm. Nino hunched before me and brought the bottle to my lips. “Small sips. I don’t want you to choke.”

I did as he asked, all the while watching his serene beautiful face. “In the beginning, your beauty almost terrified me. All that cold beauty, and the tattoos...it was almost too much to take in.”

With a small, amused smile Nino lowered the bottle. “You’ve drunk too much. I need to get you into bed.”

“I mean it.” I fumbled with the buttons of his shirt and finally got a few undone. “This one, it terrified me in the beginning.” I pointed at the skull swallowing the blade. “And the one on your back...that one too.”

“A phoenix rising from the flames is something positive, isn’t it?” Nino asked curiously.

“Show me.”

“You’ve seen it many times,” Nino said gently.

“Show me.”

He stood and unbuttoned his shirt then shrugged it off before turning around.

I stumbled to my feet and had to grip Nino’s hips to steady myself. “Now I think it’s beautiful.” I traced the intricate orange feathers of the fantastic bird, its parted beak, his fierce dark eyes, the talons dripping with red. Part of the tattoo disappeared into Nino’s waistband. I reached around and tried to unbutton his pants, but failed with my unsteady fingers. Nino’s hands came to my help and finally I could pull it down,

revealing the long burning tail of the phoenix and the angry flames he'd escaped. They covered his ass cheeks. I swallowed thickly as I traced Nino's muscles, the way they seemed to make his tattoos come to life when he shifted. My hands ghosted over every inch of his back then over his firm ass. Pressing closer, I kissed Nino's shoulder blade then reached around, touching his chest, then lower until my hand curled around his erection.

I released a low breath, my forehead pressing against Nino's skin as I pumped him. His breathing deepened and his familiar musky scent sent a wave of desire through my drunken haze. He turned slowly, leaving me no choice but to release him. I let myself drop back down on the couch, bringing me eye-level with his length.

Nino's chest heaved as I leaned forward and took him into my mouth. Any hesitance evaporated from his face and gradually he began to thrust lightly into my mouth, never taking his eyes off me. Neither could I take mine off him, the way his abs flexed with every shift of his hips, his intense expression. I didn't think I'd ever grow tired of admiring this man.



I didn't remember how I got into bed. Only that after Nino came, he wanted to return the favor but then I blacked out. A soft tongue slid along my crease and I arched up toward the familiar mouth, realizing what had woken me. I looked to find Nino, gloriously naked, sprawled out between my legs, his head buried in my lap. His tongue and lips banished the last remains of sleep, sending shockwaves of pleasure through every inch of my body.

"Nino," I rasped, opening wider, desperate for more, but Nino didn't comply. He loved to draw my orgasms out until I was almost shaking with the need to come.

His eyes fixed me with a dominant look, his fingers clamping down on my hips to stop me from grinding myself against him. "No. Not yet. We'll draw this out."

I stopped fighting it, surrendering to Nino's gentle torture. The way he guided me toward the edge of the cliff, made me desperate for the fall, only to pull me back. I was panting, gasping, completely boneless.

"Happy birthday, Kiara," he half growled before finally he pushed two fingers into me, hitting that sweet spot I never even dared dream about. He sucked my clit, and I exploded.

My vision sparked with stars, my muscles clenched, and I cried out, really cried out for the first time, losing control, and it was glorious.

"That's number one," Nino said in a low voice, kissing the inside of my thigh. "One of many."

He stayed true to his promise. Before breakfast, Nino gave me several more orgasms with his tongue, fingers and cock, until I was completely sated and starving.

"That's a great way to wake up," I said with an embarrassed laugh as Nino led me into the kitchen to prepare breakfast for me. Despite his brief protest, I helped him. Because really, cooking wasn't a chore for me.

"I have made plans for tonight. I arranged for the Chengdu to open exclusively for us so we can enjoy our food and the concert of your favorite piano player, without interruption."

I almost dropped the whisk I'd used to beat the eggs for the French toast. "You got him to come to Vegas and play for us?"

Nino nodded as he cut mangos into accurate stripes.

I couldn't move. Putting down the whisk, I wrapped my arms around Nino tightly then kissed his mouth. "That's the best present I could imagine."

"That's what I thought," Nino said with a knowing smile.

"You're spoiling me."

We'd had dinner at the Szechuan restaurant a few times since we'd been married and it had been spectacular every single time, and now that our food would be accompanied by beautiful music it could only be perfect.

Nino's expression hardened briefly. "I give you what should have been yours all along—whatever you want."

I shook my head, letting out a shuddering breath. With shaking hands, I returned to my task of scrambling the eggs. "You really need to stop making me so emotional."

"No. I enjoy seeing happiness on your face. It's as if I'm feeling it myself."

There was really nothing I could say in return and so I only smiled.

CHAPTER 8



NINO

Remo had finally decided to send Serafina back after two months. If he'd acted according to our original plan, he'd long given her back, but with my brother plans always got ignored. Yet, this time, with Serafina, he should have listened to my advice for once. Things between them were progressing in a dangerous direction. He knew that as well as I did.

Sitting on the sofa, I took out my phone and dialed Luca's number. Kiara was playing a new song, an erratic, moody melody. I wondered if it reflected her feelings about Remo's decision to send Serafina back, but she should be relieved. After all, she'd been strongly averse to the kidnapping from the beginning.

"Nino, what do you want?"

Luca never bothered with pleasantries. He was lucky I'd convinced Remo that war with the Famiglia was the last thing we needed at the current time. "We have a present for you."

Silence. "A present?" Suspicion rang in Luca's voice.

"We'll have Scuderi soon. Dante agreed to exchange him for his niece tomorrow."

"Fuck. I can't believe your insane plan actually worked. You and your brother are as cunning as you are crazy."

My lips tightened. "I didn't call to have my personality analyzed by you. I want to invite you and your brother, and for all I care even the Scuderi sisters, to join Fabiano in the dismemberment of Rocco Scuderi."

"That's a generous offer," Luca said carefully. "What do you expect in return?"

I smiled, leaning back. “Nothing. At least, not at this point. But if we ever approach you and ask for a favor, we’d appreciate it if you remembered that we did this.”

“Right. I bet your kind of favors won’t be for the faint-hearted.”

“You aren’t faint-hearted.”

Luca huffed out a deep laugh. “I’ll have to talk to my brother. I’ll call you back in a couple of minutes.”

“Don’t take too long. You’ll need to fly over.”

“Don’t worry.” Luca hung up.

I put my phone down on my lap and watched Kiara as she played the same sequence for the third time, unhappy with her creation. The low haunted hums of the piano reverberated in my chest and when her fingers moved faster and the notes rang higher, sounding almost angry, my pulse spiked.

Every song Kiara created overflowed with emotions. Her eyes were closed, those dark lashes fluttering against her smooth skin. Like her music, Kiara was a piece of art, and always tore emotions from the darkest recesses of my soul.

Less than five minutes later, Luca called again, but I waited for the last note of Kiara’s song to fade before I bothered picking up. “Matteo and Romero are preparing everything for their flight. They’ll take part in Scuderi’s last hurrah.”

Surprise washed over me. “You won’t?”

“I hate the man and would certainly enjoy cutting off a few pieces of him, but my brother and Romero have a stronger incentive.”

“What about the Scuderi sisters?”

“Aria and Lily are too kind-hearted for that kind of thing, and Gianna can’t stand the sight of blood.”

“Tell Matteo and Romero to meet us in the Sugar Trap, and they better hurry. Fabiano is eager to deal with his father.”

Luca laughed darkly. “I bet he is. I can only imagine how pissed you and Remo are that you never got the chance to rip your own goddamn father to shreds.”

My hold on the phone tightened. “Rumor has it your father didn’t get the end he deserved either. I’m sure if it had been up to you and Matteo, his demise would have been less abrupt and more creative.”

“That’s the past,” Luca said in a clipped voice.

“True and now you have a beautiful wife and children to take care of, which makes our cooperation even more important.”

“My family stays out of this. And if that was a veiled threat, Falcone, you better choose your words more wisely next time. I’m not the only one with people to protect.”

“It wasn’t a threat, just a reminder, Luca. We have no intention of attacking your family, and I’m sure you won’t attack our family either. After all, my wife is your cousin and Fabiano is your brother-in-law.”

“That might be true, but I’d gladly wade through their blood and that of every fucker in Vegas to protect my family, and you’d better remember it.”

“Duly noted,” I said. “But the same can be said for Remo and me. We protect our family. Now enough of the unnecessary threats. Today is a day of celebration.”

I ended the call then and kept listening to Kiara’s playing. When she was done, she twisted around to face me. “You’re going to torture Fabiano’s father to death?”

Her voice was carefully controlled, devoid of emotion, which was unusual for Kiara and showed me how difficult a topic it was for her. “Not me, no. Fabiano will, and Matteo and Romero will join him.”

Kiara kneaded her hands in her lap. “But you’ll be present?”

I stood from the sofa and headed over to her. “Get up.”

Kiara did so without hesitation, looking at me curiously. I sank down on the bench and pulled her down on my lap, pressing a kiss to the nape of her neck before I touched my fingers to the piano keys. “I need to make sure Scuderi doesn’t die too quickly. My expertise is required.”

Kiara shuddered and I scanned her beautiful face, those expressive dark eyes, always so kind and gentle. I buried my nose in her soft curls. “I’m a monster, Kiara. Emotions or not, I’ll always be that way. I like hurting. I like breaking others, slow or fast. If you hope for that to change, it’ll only hurt you.”

Kiara rested her fingers on the piano keys next to mine and began to play the song she’d written for me. After a moment, I joined in.

When the last chord floated away, she turned her head to me and kissed my cheek then the corner of my mouth. “I love you exactly as you are. And maybe you are a monster, but you are my monster.”

I wrapped my arms around her.



“I still can’t believe he’s sending her back. I didn’t think he’d go through with it,” Kiara said the next morning as we were getting ready in our bathroom. She brushed her hair and regarded me in the mirror as I trimmed my beard.

“It was bound to happen. We have Dante where we wanted him. We get Scuderi and he gets Serafina.”

“Nino, you can’t really believe it’ll be as easy as that.”

Remo’s connection to Serafina was definitely unsettling and intense. “Remo’s determined to set her free.”

Kiara set the brush down, turned around and leaned against the marble counter. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I shook my head. Remo’s mind worked very differently from mine.

Kiara sighed, looking concerned. “Promise to be careful. Don’t get hurt. I don’t like the idea of you meeting with the Outfit, especially not when Remo isn’t himself, and Fabiano will be unfocused because he gets to see his father.”

Setting down my electric razor, I touched Kiara’s face. “We’ve got it under control, trust me. We’ll be back soon and then things will return to how they were before the kidnapping.”

Kiara smiled strangely and kissed me. “Okay.”

“Savio and Adamo will make sure you are safe.”

I kissed her again then we headed downstairs to where Remo, Fabiano and Serafina were getting into the car. Kiara stiffened upon seeing them all. I wasn’t sure what had her react that way. Serafina was dressed in her torn wedding dress and looked pale, maybe it was that. I squeezed Kiara’s hand but she didn’t react, only watched as Serafina got into the back of our SUV. Serafina gave Kiara a small smile, who lifted her hand in farewell. I didn’t understand what went on between them. They didn’t know each other well enough to be sad about parting ways.

Remo scowled and closed the door. “Nino, will you take the seat beside Serafina?”

I nodded.

Kiara wrapped her arms around her chest. I touched her arm. “Everything will be fine. Soon this will be over.”

Kiara looked behind me at Remo before she met my gaze. “I really hope you’re right.”

I pressed another kiss to her mouth as Savio and Adamo walked out into the driveway.

“How come I’m always left out of the fun?” Savio asked. “I’d have loved to kick some Outfit ass.”

“We’re not kicking Outfit ass. We’re exchanging Serafina for Scuderi that’s all,” I said.

Adamo and Savio exchanged a look I couldn’t read, then Savio said, “Still more fun than being stuck playing

babysitter.”

“I don’t need babysitting,” Kiara said softly.

“You’re guarding our mansion in case Cavallaro has anything planned.”

“How about you stop the gossiping and get in the car?” Remo called from the driver’s seat.

“Come home safe,” Kiara whispered, standing on her tiptoes and kissing my mouth.



We were all supposed to meet at the Sugar Trap after the exchange. I was the first to arrive and nodded at Jerry who was cleaning the bar. “Hey Nino.”

I moved to our private rooms in the back where I left my rifle, then called Matteo. “Hey Falcone, do you have the bastard?” Matteo said as a sort of greeting.

“We do. How long until you’ll be here?”

“Not long. We landed thirty minutes ago. Maybe fifteen minutes. We can’t wait. After the masterwork that you and Remo created with that fucker Durant, I’m eager to show you fuckers, how we do it in New York.”

“Maybe I’ll learn something new.”

“I doubt it, knowing you twisted Falcone fuckers.”

I doubted it as well. “See you later.” I hung up and walked out of the back room then continued toward the front but Fabiano crossed my path. “Remo’s at the bar and in a fucking bad mood.” He was dragging his father by the handcuffs and gave me a terse nod as he took the man down into our sound proof basement.

Since my emotions had started returning, I’d been torn between appreciation and frustration. Emotions cost a lot of energy—understanding them, dealing with them, not only just bearing them.

Knowing how much more emotional Remo was, I reckoned we'd have a difficult time ahead of us as he dealt with Serafina's leave.

I called Kiara while Remo went ahead into the basement to help Fabiano with his father. I'd only sent her a short text so she'd know everything had gone to plan.

"Nino? Are you all right?"

"Of course. I'm in the Sugar Trap with Remo and Fabiano. We're waiting for Matteo and Romero so we can begin."

"How's Remo?" Kiara asked hesitantly.

I considered how much to tell her. Kiara worried easily and I didn't want her to be unsettled by Remo's outburst. "He's tense."

"When will you be home?"

"Not before midnight. This will take time." Even if the police in Vegas and pretty much all of Nevada was on our payroll, we didn't talk details of our business on the phone. There was always the possibility that the FBI got involved.

"Okay," Kiara said. "I'll try to wait up for you."

"You don't have to."

"But I want to."

The familiar warmth only Kiara could summon spread in my chest. "All right," I said quietly. "Ask Savio and Adamo to take you out, if you want."

I hung up. Talking on the phone always unnerved me because I had trouble gauging another person's mood just hearing their voice, and with Kiara I needed to know her emotions more than anyone else. It would be too easy hurting her by accident.

With other people my emotions were still safely bottled up. I wasn't sure if I wanted it to change. Coming to terms with my emotions when dealing with Kiara and my brothers was challenging enough.

CHAPTER 9



KIARA

I must have slept through the night, because Nino was in bed with me when I woke and the sun was already rising. Blinking back sleep, I turned around in Nino's arm. Slowly his eyelids peeled open and as always the gray of his eyes sent a wave of calm through me.

I raked my fingers through his longer hair at the top of his head, loving the silky feel of it. Nino released a small breath then rolled onto his back, and I put my head down on his chest. "Did everything go well?"

It was strange asking this, considering we were talking about the painful end of a man.

"Scuderi is dead. Remo and Fabiano killed him together."

"Fabiano really considers you his brothers."

"He does, but so do we."

"So, you've forgiven him for everything that happened with Leona?" It seemed impossible that Remo and Fabiano had really faced each other in a death match. I was glad I didn't have to watch it.

"Remo considered it betrayal and so did I, but my view on things changed," Nino said slowly. "We gave Fabiano an impossible choice, one we shouldn't have given him, I realize that now, and maybe Remo does too."

"To choose between loved ones is cruel."

Nino tilted his head with a small frown. "I can't imagine being given that choice..."

Goose bumps rose on my skin. “It won’t ever come to that.”

“I know.”

The look in Nino’s eyes sent a small shiver down my back. He kissed my forehead then sat up. “I need to set up a death fight for Remo.”

“What?” I blurted, stumbling out of bed after him. “Why?”

Then it dawned on me. Remo couldn’t deal with his emotional turmoil. The only way he knew how to handle it was by causing and receiving pain, by spilling blood and killing. “You can’t allow that.”

Nino pulled a shirt over his head and combed his hair back with his fingers. “He won’t let me talk him out of it. I tried.”

I got dressed in a hurry and followed Nino downstairs and into the kitchen. He talked to Roger on the phone, the man who owned the fight arena, while I prepared breakfast. My stomach was in knots as I listened to Nino discuss the details of the upcoming fight. Remo was going to fight two opponents at once, which was pure insanity even by his standards. “This is madness,” I said, when Nino ended the call.

Nino sighed. “This is Remo.”



In the days that followed Remo’s brutal fight, he acted almost like his old self, but sometimes there was look of longing in his eyes that hadn’t been there before. I couldn’t help but wonder how Serafina was faring back with her family.

I was playing the piano when someone knocked against the French windows. Looking up, I saw Adamo with the hood of his sweater pulled over his head and a cigarette dangling from his mouth. I waved him in. He never took the direct route through the adjoining corridor, always through the garden to get a smoke in. He came inside after having disposed of his cigarette, then shoved down his hood. His hair half covered his eyes but I saw they were red.

“Are you okay?”

“Can I listen to you play?”

“Sure,” I said and started playing the song I was working on. Adamo sank down on the floor right beside the piano and stared down at the Camorra tattoo on his forearm. Questions burned on my tongue but I held them back. He’d tell me what bothered him if he felt like it. Turning away from him, I focused on the song. It was for Remo and almost done. I wanted to write songs for Adamo and Savio as well by Christmas, and give each of them their song as a present. They had everything money could buy, so maybe they’d appreciate the gift.

I’d been playing the song twice when Adamo interrupted me in dark whisper. “Nino talked to me about our mother today.”

I froze.

Adamo looked up, his eyes full of misery. “Did you know?”

I swallowed, got up and made my way over to him before sinking to the floor beside him. “Nino told me what happened. He had to because of his emotional state.”

Adamo nodded. “Why didn’t they tell me sooner?”

“They wanted to protect you. The truth is difficult to stomach.”

“I can’t believe she tried to kill my brothers.”

“And you. She would have killed you by taking her own life.”

Adamo nodded. “I don’t get it. I want to understand.” He looked at me.

“Some things are beyond comprehension.” I covered his hand with mine.

“She’s still alive. I thought she died years ago. I ... I don’t know how I feel knowing she’s somewhere.”

I didn't know what to say. It was hard to imagine how Adamo felt. How would I feel if I suddenly found out my father wasn't dead but locked up in a mental institution?

"I said so many shitty things to Remo because I just didn't understand how he could be that way, but now I get it."

"Some things change us, and no matter how hard we try to forget the past, some things just stay with us."

Adamo wrapped his arms loosely around his legs and regarded me with a small smile. "I'm glad you're part of our family. You never judge me when I talk to you."

"I have no right to judge you or anyone."

Adamo laughed. "That doesn't stop most people from dishing out judgement all the time."

"I know," I said quietly, remembering how I'd been judged for my father's betrayal in the Famiglia, and how many still judged me for being Durant's victim. Many people tried to make sense of it by blaming the victim. I understood that now.

"You're part of the Camorra now. Nobody will judge you openly anymore," Adamo said.



Early December I started decorating our wing and the main areas of the mansion and the garden with Christmas lights, baubles and tinsel. Savio and Adamo had bought a Christmas tree and set it up in the gaming room at my request.

"This is the first time we've had a Christmas tree in ... fuck ... I don't even remember how long," Savio said as he stood in front of the tall tree.

Adamo nodded. "I think I was six or seven, and Remo got that ugly silver plastic tree."

"The stupid thing almost burnt us to the ground because the cable was broken," Savio said with a laugh.

"Yeah." Adamo laughed too, and they exchanged an amused look.

My heart swelled. “Will you help me decorate it?” I pointed at the box with baubles and tinsel.

Savio looked at Adamo, then both nodded.

“What do we get in return?”

“Cookies?” I suggested.

“Deal.”

Adamo frowned. “I don’t get how you can stomach all that sweet stuff. And you call me pussy.”

Savio gave him the finger. “The fucking cigarettes probably burnt away your taste buds.”

I pushed the box over to them. “Hey, focus on the task at hand. Can you get the ladder for me, Adamo?”

He trudged off toward the storage and returned with the ladder and set it down in front of the tree. “How about you two decorate the lower part while I take care of the top?” I climbed the ladder. It shook and Adamo quickly steadied it. “I can hold it while you’re up there.”

“Thanks.” I climbed up more, trying to decide how to arrange everything.

Savio scoffed. “I get cookies and Adamo gets booty.”

I glanced between him and Adamo whose face was turning red.

“What?”

Savio gestured at my backside. “Adamo checked out your ass. He seems to enjoy the sight.”

“I didn’t ...” Adamo glared at his brother then smiled apologetically at me. “I mean ... I didn’t check out your ass ... but it’s fine, your backside I mean ...”

Savio cracked up. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, shut up,” he got out between laughter. “You really need to grow a pair. Kiara knows she’s got a fine ass. I think we can all agree on that.”

“I’m glad my wife’s behind meets your requirements,” Nino drawled from the doorway, arms crossed and a smirk on

his face.

I blinked and my shoulders started shaking as I fought giggles and almost fell off the ladder. Adamo tried to steady me and grabbed my hips and briefly brushed my upper butt. He quickly released me and Nino was already at my side. "I'm sorry," Adamo said quickly.

"It's okay. Thanks for your help."

"Nice catch," Savio said. "Next time it's my turn to hold the ladder."

Adamo hissed something under his breath, causing Savio to grin even wider. I watched the two brothers walk off, bickering.

Nino regarded the tree then touched my waist. "If Savio or Adamo do or say something that bothers you, tell them."

I shook my head. "I don't mind, honestly. In the beginning, I wasn't sure how to handle Savio. Now I've gotten used to his sense of humor."

Nino gave me a small smile. "I'm glad that you get along so well with my brothers, even Remo."

"They are my family and I care about them."

Nino wrapped an arm around me and pulled me against his chest.

The way he looked at me, I finally gathered my courage. "I was thinking ... maybe I can stop taking the pill in the new year."

Realization settled on Nino's face. "You want to get pregnant?"

"Yes. I always wanted to be a mother. I know we've been married for only eight months but it can take a while so..." I suddenly worried about having brought it up. Things with Remo still were difficult after all.

Nino's face was frozen with surprise. Then he kissed my mouth. "If that's what you want, then we'll try for a baby."

"Really?"

I pressed my face against Nino's chest, smiling.

Nino touched the back of my head and murmured, "But you need to know something about me before you decide to have my child."

I pulled back. "What do you mean?"

Nino's eyes reflected hesitation. "Even before the thing with my mother, I wasn't quite normal. I had emotional deficits from the start."

I regarded Nino curiously. "You were closed off?"

"That, and I had trouble understanding and reading other people's emotions. I was a quiet kid, and got stressed when I had to deal with crowds. I preferred to spend hours figuring out mathematical problems."

"Were you ever tested?"

Nino shook his head. "You mean for some form of Aspergers or something similar?"

I nodded. Some of what Nino described could maybe be associated with something of the sort.

"I don't see how that would have changed things for me. My emotional deficiency became an advantage, and it wasn't as obvious before the incident with my mother."

"Okay," I said softly. "And you worry that a child might inherit your condition?"

"It's possible. We could do a test."

I touched Nino's chest. "No, I'll accept and love our child no matter what. This is part of who you are and if a child inherits it, then that's how it's meant to be."

Nino looked at me for a long time and then he tilted his head, bringing my hand up and pressing a kiss to my wrist.

CHAPTER 10



NINO

My mind had been going over my last conversation with Kiara for the last two days and even as I climbed into the cage for my fight training with Remo, it was still very much at the forefront of my mind. I'd always known that marriage would lead to children eventually. I wanted them for the name Falcone to live on and right now I was the only one of my brothers who had a woman who was capable of becoming a good mother. I didn't have a single doubt in my mind that Kiara would be a wonderful, caring mother.

Remo climbed into the cage. He looked eager for a fight. I was distracted and Remo landed a few hard hits in my side and stomach in the first few minutes before I used an opening and rammed my knee into his kidney. He jumped back with a groan, then did a roundhouse kick, which I barely managed to avoid.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

I held up my palm to stop the fight. “It's Kiara.”

Remo frowned. “Is it because of yesterday?”

“Yesterday?”

Confusion showed on Remo's face. “She asked me to train with her, had me chase her through the house.”

Kiara was getting more confident. It was reassuring to know that she was really taking her fight training seriously. “I assume it's because she wants to be able to defend future children.”

Remo narrowed his eyes and leaned back against the mesh. “So, is she pregnant?”

“Not yet. She’ll stop taking the pill in January.”

“She told me she wants kids.”

My eyebrows rose. “She talked to you?”

He shrugged. “I got the feeling she was worried if I’d be okay with kids in the mansion.”

I looked at my brother, the scar on his face and his forearms. Scars from defending me and our brothers against our mother. Then the scars on the rest of his body, many he suffered in the time we were in hiding, fights that put food on our table. “And are you?”

He gave me a wry smile, which I returned.

“If anyone can be a good mother, then it’s Kiara,” he said. “She’s like a fucking mother hen, even to me.” He shook his head.

Kiara loved taking care of others. “Our children will be lucky to have her as a mother.”

“You’ll be a good father, too. Even when you didn’t feel a fucking thing, you managed to raise Adamo and Savio with me, and look how well they turned out, the little shits.” He grinned twistedly. “The house is big enough even if you decide to have ten kids.”

“Maybe you’ll have kids at some point as well?”

Remo’s face shut down. “No, I don’t have the necessary patience for a woman. I’m better off fucking whores.”

I narrowed my eyes at him in thought. We both knew there was a woman he couldn’t forget. Bringing her up would have led to a disagreement I wasn’t in the mood for.

Remo pushed away from the cage. “What about that fight you promised me?”



I prepared my tattoo machine in one of Savio’s vacant rooms, not wanting Kiara to overhear the sound of the needle.

When everything was in its place, I sat down and propped my left arm up on the table in front of me and turned on the machine. Savio leaned in the doorway and watched in silence as I began to outline Kiara's name on my wrist over the scars and amidst the flames, then added a few music notes before I started filling each letter with ink.

"I never thought you could care about a girl," Savio said. "And now you're tattooing a name into your skin."

I briefly glanced up from my work. "I don't think it would have come this far with any woman but Kiara. She's ..." I couldn't even find the right word to describe Kiara properly, and I was rarely rendered speechless.

"Yeah," Savio murmured. "That girl makes it fucking hard to dislike her, and I put so much effort into it in the beginning. All for nothing." He flashed me a grin. "She's the only girl I talk to more than a few sentences without getting at least a blow job as reward."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"Jealous?" he asked.

"Jealousy requires an aspect of insecurity. I know Kiara is only mine."

"And people call me arrogant."

Sighing, I returned to the task.

"I've been thinking about getting another tattoo."

"Not a girl's name, I assume," I said dryly.

Savio scoffed. "The girl that puts a leash on me hasn't been born yet."

"What kind of tattoo do you have in mind?"

Savio grinned. "A bull's head."

"Where?" I asked suspiciously. Knowing Savio, I had a good guess where he'd want that kind of tattoo.

One corner of Savio's mouth curled.

"That's going to be quite painful."

Savio gave me a so-what look. “I can deal with pain.”

“Will you add a piercing to make the image complete?”

“Nah, I’m not so keen on piercing my dick.”

“I can start drawing up a few images and you can decide which one you’d prefer. If you want the tattoo to cover your entire pelvis and lower belly, we’ll need a few sessions to get it done.”

“I know. I witnessed the progression of your artwork, remember?”

“I should warn you that a tattoo in that area might stop your recreational activities for a couple of weeks, or at least make them quite uncomfortable.”

“We’ll see.”

Shaking my head, I returned to working on my tattoo. I wanted to get it done today to surprise Kiara with it as a sort of early Christmas present.

KIARA

I got up right after sunrise to cook and bake everything for Christmas eve. This was our first Christmas together and I wanted it to be special. The Panettone dough was allowed to rise while I got everything done for the lamb roast. I didn’t have much experience preparing meat. Nino and his brothers loved lamb so I wanted to surprise them with it. After calling Giulia and wishing her a merry Christmas, I set out to work. Luckily, she could give me a few tips to guarantee the success of my cooking endeavor.

It was close to dinner time and I had changed into a floor-length red evening dress and was setting and decorating the dining table when Nino came in, dressed in form-fitting black pants and a black dress shirt with the top buttons undone, giving view to his colorful tattoos. His eyes took in the table with the red candles, gold-colored napkins and silverware.

“You should have asked one of us for help. It’s too much work,” he murmured as he ran a hand down my side until it came to rest on my hip. “And you look absolutely stunning.”

Smiling, I shrugged. “I love cooking and decorating, so it doesn’t feel like work. And thank you, you look very good too.”

“I have something for you. Part of your Christmas present.”

I hadn’t been sure if Nino was the type to give presents. He and his brothers hadn’t really celebrated Christmas in the last few years, at least not in any traditional way.

Nino stretched out his left arm and rolled up his sleeve, revealing a new tattoo: my name amidst music notes.

My breath caught in my throat as I took in the beautiful ink-art. “When did you do this?”

“This morning. You were busy cooking so I used the chance.”

I reached out to trace the letters then stopped myself. If Nino had inked it only this morning, the skin must be still tender.

“It’s okay, you can touch it.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

Nino smiled wryly. “Kiara, it’s nothing.”

Nodding, I very lightly traced the skin under the tattoo, trying to keep my emotions under control. I’d just put on make-up and didn’t want to ruin it with tears. “Thank you. It’s a wonderful present. I know how important your tattoos are to you, and having my name on your skin with your brothers ... it means a lot.”

Nino cupped my face and pressed a gentle kiss to my lips. “You and my brothers are all that matters in this life. I want you close at all times, even if it’s only in name.”

I blinked. “Don’t make me cry.”

He frowned. “I have no intention of making you cry.”

“I know.” I laughed and blew out a breath. “What time is it? Fabiano and Leona are supposed to arrive at six.”

“We still have fifteen minutes.” He reached into the back pocket of his pants and pulled out a very small parcel. “This is your second present.”

I took it and opened the velvet box, revealing ear studs with a big red ruby in the center and small brilliants all around it. “Gorgeous.”

“Let me,” Nino said, taking them out and putting them into my ears.

“And?” I asked.

“Perfect.”

“Wait a sec,” I said, then quickly walked over to the bar where I’d put Nino’s present. It was quite heavy so I was glad when I handed it to Nino. I could see curiosity in his eyes. “Unwrap it.”

Nino ripped away the wrapping paper, revealing a leather-bound book about anatomy. “It’s a collectors’ edition from 1925 with hand drawn images for all the body parts...” I was hoping it was something Nino liked. Whenever we were in the library together, Nino was often drawn to medical books.

Nino began perusing the book slowly, his eyes flitting as he scanned the pages with the drawings. When he finally looked up, his expression was alight with eagerness. “That’s perfect. I can’t wait to read it and compare it to the newest books on anatomy.”

I stifled a laugh. Only Nino could be excited about something like that. Nino was kissing me sweetly when steps rang out.

“Do I smell meat?” Savio asked, sauntering in, followed by Remo and Adamo, all of them wearing shirts for once.

I grinned. Soon Fabiano and Leona joined us as well, bringing wine. I hugged Leona tightly. “How’s your mother doing?”

“Better. She’ll be released from the hospital in two days. She never knows when to stop,” Leona said with a small sigh. She would have wanted to celebrate with her mother for once

but after an almost fatal overdose, she was stuck in hospital once again.

I caught Fabiano exchanging an exasperated look with Remo, which Leona caught as I led them toward the table. “He doesn’t understand why I still try to help my mother, but he helps her for me anyway.”

I touched her arm. “Because he wants to see you happy.”

We all settled around the table, and as expected the lamb was the highlight for the men. I enjoyed watching everyone more than the actual food. It was just beautiful having my new family at one table, celebrating together, and I couldn’t help but wonder if next year at this time, I’d have a little baby to take care of as well.

After dinner, I led everyone into the living area of Nino’s and my wing, then settled at the piano. “Why don’t you stand around the piano?”

They all did, confused why I’d brought them here.

“I composed music pieces for each of you. They aren’t perfect yet, and they might develop over time, but I think they’re not bad considering the limited time I had,” I said quickly.

Nino squeezed my shoulder. “Your music is always marvelous.”

“This is for you, Remo.” I started playing the tumultuous melody, focusing solely on the keys and my fingers, not daring to look up for anyone’s reaction. When I finally risked a peek, Remo’s arms were crossed and with an unreadable expression he leaned against the piano.

I swallowed. “This is for you, Savio.”

It was an easy-going melody, playful, only occasionally underplayed by darker tones. Savio nodded his approval when the last note rang out. “I sound fun and sexy. You nailed it, Kiara.”

Adamo rolled his eyes.

“Now you Adamo.” This one had been the hardest. Recently Adamo had been quiet and thoughtful, but I didn’t want his melody to be haunting, so I chose to base it on the feelings he evoked in others. It was a smooth melody, one that made you want to relax in front of a fire with a glass of wine.

“It’s so cool that you can create something like that,” Adamo said.

I felt my cheeks heat and shrugged then cleared my throat before I looked at Fabiano and Leona. “For the two of you I created one melody.”

Surprise crossed their faces.

“You created something for us as well?” Leona asked.

“You belong to this family,” I said, then played the last melody.

Leona bit her lip when I was done, came over and hugged me tightly.

Savio pointed at Nino. “What about Nino? Doesn’t he get a song?”

“He’s had his song for a while now.”

“Why don’t you play it?” Fabiano asked.

I gave Nino a questioning look. Not saying a word, he came over to me and I made room for him on the bench so he could sit down. I could feel everyone’s eyes on us as we began playing, our fingers working together without ever getting in each other’s way, our thighs touching. Nino’s warmth and his mere presence gave me new confidence playing this personal song. Nothing mattered in that moment but the two of us.

The last note rang out and our eyes met. I smiled, wondering how this melody would sound if I added a third string to it, one for our future child.

When I finally turned to the rest of our family and caught a dark gleam in Remo’s eyes, a hint of worry flickered in my belly. I gave him a smile, which caused him to give me his own twisted version in return.

CHAPTER 11



NINO

We were sitting on the sofas, having pizza for dinner, when I noticed the way Adamo began to fidget. His expression made me assume he'd say something to set Remo off again. For the last few weeks since Christmas my older brother had been surprisingly restrained, maybe as a favor to Kiara, but it was bound to end. He was bottling up whatever was bothering him, probably Serafina.

Adamo finally sat up and stared at Remo. "Why won't you tell me where our mother is kept?"

Kiara stiffened beside me, her hand with the pizza piece hovering in front of her parted lips. She, like the rest of us turned to Remo.

His expression was worrying, his mouth twisting cruelly, his eyes flashing with the unbridled rage that had consumed him almost daily in the past.

Savio jabbed his elbow into Adamo's side. "Shut up."

"No," Adamo said. "I want to know."

"It doesn't matter where she is. She might as well be in hell for all it concerns us," Remo gritted out.

Adamo chose to ignore the warning undertone of my brother. This kid had tested our patience all our lives, but this time he really should know when to stop. "Why can't we visit her? I have a right to meet her. She's my mother, too. I want to get to know her."

Remo pushed to his feet, his body shaking. "She's the woman who tried to kill you and the rest of us. That's someone you want to get to know?"

“Maybe she changed. Maybe they could heal whatever was wrong with her?”

“The only thing wrong with her is that she’s a psychotic, murderous bitch. She doesn’t deserve to take another fucking breath,” Remo snarled.

“That was a long time ago,” Adamo said quietly. “Maybe she changed.”

“She’s a crazy bitch who wants to see us all dead because we are our father’s fucking sons. For her, we are evil incarnate, Adamo, when will you get it into your fucking head?”

Savio didn’t say anything, only staring with a dark look down at his phone.

I grabbed Remo’s forearm and squeezed hard. When he glowered at me, I told him, “Sit down, Remo.”

Kiara was watching everything with wide, concerned eyes. Remo shook me off and stalked toward the punching bag.

Sighing, I turned to my youngest brother. “Adamo, she’s not the mother you’re hoping for. Whatever you’re hoping to find in her, you won’t, trust me.” The words felt heavy on my tongue. Talking about our mother never came easy to me. Most of the time, I tried to forget she’d ever existed—still existed now because of Remo’s and my weakness. Remo began kicking and punching the bag, hard, angry hits that filled every silent moment.

“She was a victim too, wasn’t she?” Adamo said quietly. “She had to marry our father and bear his cruelty.”

Adamo didn’t know anything about our father’s cruelty, or our mother’s twisted mind games. There was a reason why Remo was so good at psychological warfare. Adamo had been too young to experience either of them, and when he’d been old enough to potentially remember, Remo could already keep our parents at bay. Both of them had feared my brother like the devil.

Remo said, “She didn’t have to. She chose to marry our father. He was initially promised to someone else but our

mother had set her sights on him and so she got him.”

“They broke the engagement?” Savio asked curiously.

“The girl he was originally promised to supposedly ran off. Remo and I suspect she had an unfortunate accident. Our mother has quite a ruthless streak.”

Adamo frowned down at his folded hands on his laps. “People can change,” he said stubbornly.

“Bullshit,” Savio said with a glare. “Why can’t you just accept that she’s not going to be a nice mommy who’ll hug you and tell you she wished she could turn back time. That’s a fucking ridiculous cliché that’s never happening.”

Adamo jerked to his feet. “Then you can let me see her so I can find out what kind of heartless bitch she is. What does it matter?”

Savio stood and pocketed his phone. “Maybe Nino and Remo don’t want you to see her fucking face before they smash her skull in?”

Adamo looked shocked. “You’re going to kill her?”

Remo stopped pummeling the sack and glanced over his shoulder at us with a look that had Kiara suck in a sharp breath. I took a deep breath myself, trying to control the twisting of my insides, a feeling as if acid was eating at them. “One day, yes,” I said emotionlessly.

“You can’t,” Adamo whispered.

Savio shook his head. “I’m off. Maybe there’s a piece of ass somewhere that can distract me from this bullshit.”

Adamo looked at Kiara for help but she didn’t say anything. I touched her thigh gently, knowing she’d agree with Adamo given her kind nature.

“This discussion is over,” Remo said.

“But—”

“Adamo,” I said sharply. Remo was in no state of mind for that kind of argument.

Adamo scoffed, then whirled around and stalked away.

“Even from miles away the bitch still ruins everything,” Remo muttered.

“Not always. We’ll kill her.”

Kiara’s compassionate gaze flitted between my brother and me.

“We will,” I agreed. Remo and I stared into each other’s eyes. It was something we’d been saying for years and still hadn’t been able to go through with it.

KIARA

We went to bed early after Adamo bringing up the subject of visiting his mother. Remo remained downstairs to destroy the boxing sack while Nino took a long shower as if he could wash away the memories of their mother. I knew it didn’t work. I’d tried to wash away Durant so often, my skin had been red and sore from scrubbing.

When Nino finally emerged from the bathroom completely naked, hair still damp, I sat cross-legged on the bed waiting for him. My plan to talk to him went up in smoke when Nino prowled toward me, already growing hard as he bent over me and pushed me back. His lips crashed down on mine, harsher than expected, harsher than ever before, as his fingers slipped between my legs, pushing under my panties and starting to stroke me.

I stiffened with surprise at this less restrained side of him in bed and Nino grew rigid at once, eyes searching mine in concern.

I tangled my fingers in his hair and kissed him back to show I was only startled. Nino kissed me hard then pushed two fingers into me. His eyes never left mine as he claimed me. This wasn’t love-making. It was fueled by his erratic emotions, hard and fast. Nino’s body caged me in as he pressed down, and I surrendered to him gladly, even as he grabbed my wrists in one of his hands and pushed them above my head.

Not a flicker of discomfort entered my mind. Looking into Nino's eyes always assured him I wasn't distressed and I could trust him absolutely. I allowed him to control me because I could tell he felt like he was losing control of his emotions, maybe even himself.

After we both came, I lay sprawled out on my back, my arms still above my head even though Nino had already released them and rolled off me. Ever since I'd stopped taking the pill every time Nino came inside of me felt monumentally different, important, which was ridiculous, but wonderful at the same time.

Nino's chest was heaving as he frowned at the ceiling. Slowly he turned to me, stroking wrists and forearms until I put them back down. His eyes filled with one unmistakable question.

"I'm fine."

Nino didn't stop frowning. "Did it bother you that I restrained you?"

"No, I knew you'd never do anything I was uncomfortable with." I propped myself up on his strong chest then gripped his arm and kissed the spot where my name was tattooed on his wrist. "Do you prefer this kind of sex?"

Nino tilted his head, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully. "No, not in general. At least, not with you. I enjoy the gentle, slower sex with you just as much as I did this."

"So do I. I didn't think I'd like it but I guess with you I enjoy everything we do."

Nino gave a small smile. "We've got a lot to discover."

I laughed. "Is there anything you haven't done?"

"No, I've explored every sexual act I was remotely interested in."

For a second, I felt the urge to ask for details, but then I decided it was better if I didn't know everything.

"Does *that* bother you?" Nino asked.

I thought about it. When C.J. told me she'd slept with Nino, it had briefly bothered me, but that faded quickly. Nino had probably slept with every whore in the sex clubs of the Camorra, not that I had asked. "No, it doesn't really. I know you're mine now and that's all that matters."

"I've never been anyone else's, Kiara. The women of my past, I didn't see them. They were there, but they might as well have not been. There's only you, all I've ever felt is only for you."

I put my chin down on his chest, closing my eyes. "This is too perfect. I'm always waiting for something bad to happen and take it away. It seems too good."

Nino touched the back of my head. "Nobody's going to take it away. I won't allow it. I'll kill everyone who dares to destroy what we have."

We were silent for a while. I still wanted to talk to Nino about Adamo, even though it would mean breaking the moment. "Can I say something regarding your mother?"

Nino stiffened. "Of course, you can always say what's on your mind."

I lifted my head, needing to see his expression. It was perfectly emotionless, the beautiful cold mask he wore so often.

"Maybe you and Remo should reconsider how you handle Adamo's wish to see your mother." Nino's eyes flashed and I quickly went on. "I know you worry how he'll handle it, but if you allow him to live with a fantasy of how she might be, that could cause more damage than letting him see the truth. You can't keep this from him. He's been a Made Man for almost six months now and he's been trying to do what you and Remo expect of him. He isn't a kid anymore. If he wants to see your mother, you should give him the chance. It isn't Remo's and your decision alone."

Nino's face locked down, his eyes the cold mercury I remembered from the beginning of our relationship. "Remo

won't ever allow it. He wants to protect Adamo and Savio from our mother."

"Has Savio ever visited her?"

"No, he never wanted to. He prefers to live in the present and not dwell in the past."

I wondered if it was true. If Savio could really move on that easily from something that disturbing. He had been very young then but he lived in the same mansion with his mother until they all moved to England.

"Nino," I said imploringly. "If you don't give him the chance, he'll always wonder what she's like. It'll haunt him."

Nino withdrew from me. "If he sees her, if he meets her, it'll haunt him just as much. She's twisted and manipulative, and..." He shook his head. "Don't get involved in this, Kiara. It's none of your business."

My chest constricted at his clipped tone, at his words. I rolled away from him, quickly sat up and stood. I needed to wash my face with cold water to hold back the emotion even though I knew it was futile. Tears sprang into my eyes, and I blinked them back as I hurried toward the bathroom. Not my business? He made it sound as if I wasn't part of the family, as if I had no right to be.

I didn't make it far before Nino caught up with me. He grabbed me around the waist and held on to me, his chest pressed against my back. "Don't run from me," he murmured. "I didn't mean it like that."

"How did you mean it then?" I asked in a raw voice.

Nino embraced me tightly and released a low breath. "You are part of this family, of the family we are now. What happened in the past, I don't want it to taint what we have. I don't want my mother to be on your mind, for her to occupy a single of your worries. She's my burden, not yours."

"But I love you and we are family, so we carry our burdens together. You carry mine. You still do, every day."

“You aren’t a burden, never.” He was silent for a moment. “I’ll talk to Remo, but it’ll take a lot of convincing to get him to agree to it.”

“It shouldn’t be his decision. Remo, Adamo, Savio and you should decide as brothers and discuss the matter. This isn’t a Capo matter, it’s more than that.”

Nino rested his forehead against my hair. “This will always be Remo’s matter because he feels responsible. That’s his burden.”

NINO

Remo didn’t sit down. He paced the gaming room, back and forth, back and forth, like a caged animal. The primal anger in his eyes only emphasized the impression.

Savio said, “Let him see her. It’s his decision. He needs to grow up and you always coddling him isn’t helping.” For once he’d put away his phone and turned it off so we could talk this through, even if I had done most of the talking so far. Remo hadn’t uttered a single word.

Adamo sent Savio a scowl, but didn’t say anything.

“Kiara thinks so too,” I said.

“I knew Kiara was the reason you suggested this meeting,” Remo said. “She’s meddlesome. She needs to learn to stay out of other people’s business.”

“We are her family. She wants to help,” I said simply. Kiara gave me a small smile. I’d insisted she be here for the meeting because her presence usually led to more civilized discussions.

Remo waved me off, not in the mood to be reasoned with.

“Please,” Adamo said.

Remo became rigid. He hated the word. If you heard it thousands of times over the years and ignored it all the time, it eventually became tainted, a sign of surrender and weakness.

Savio shrugged. “For fuck’s sake, let him see her. He needs to understand.”

I nodded. “Remo.”

My brother looked at me for a long time and in his eyes I saw every shared pain and regret, every moment of our twisted childhood we wanted to forget, our stolen innocence and broken trust. I forced my insides to become steel, didn't allow the tumultuous feelings stirring deep inside to bubble up.

Remo gave a sharp nod. “It's a mistake, but I won't stop you.”

Adamo's lips parted and he glanced between my brother and me as if he couldn't believe Remo had actually agreed. I was surprised as well.

“You won't go alone,” Remo said. “You don't know her like we do. I don't want her to get a chance to twist your mind.”

Adamo huffed. “I'm not stupid.”

He wasn't but unfortunately Adamo wanted people to like him for who he was, still desperate for their approval. The ordeal with Harper and Mason had proven that, and that he kept seeing C.J. did too. Adamo had grown these past months but not nearly enough.

“I'm out. I don't want to see her. Not ever again,” Savio said, getting up. “For all I care she can rot in that asylum until the end of days. I don't care either way. Is this done now? I want to go out with Diego.”

I nodded because Remo was glaring off into the garden. Savio hesitated, then shook his head and stalked away. Kiara watched him leave.

Remo turned around to me, his expression harsh. “One of us should go with him.” He flexed his hand. “I'll go.”

“No,” I said immediately. “I should do it. I can handle it.” The last time Remo and I had seen her was when we'd taken over Las Vegas. Our mother had managed to talk Cosimo, who'd played Capo at the time, into letting her live in the mansion like a dethroned queen. That had been a brief encounter, and yet something that had haunted us for a long time.

“I could go,” Kiara said.

Remo and I both said ‘no’ at once.

“Why not?” Kiara asked, coming closer. “She’s in a hospital, heavily guarded. We’re not going to be alone with her. I can support Adamo, because I’m not as emotionally involved as you are. Do you really think it’s a good idea if either of you is there?”

I didn’t want Kiara to be near our mother, but she had a point. Remo would lose his shit around our mother. He and I had been discussing how to kill her for years now, but never had the necessary courage. I moved toward Kiara and touched her hip. “You are always compassionate and forgiving. I’m worried how you’ll handle it.”

Kiara tilted her head up, resolute. “I know what she did to you all. I won’t feel sorry for her.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want you in a room with her.”

Kiara sighed. “Then what about Fabiano? He won’t feel pity for her no matter what she says or does, and he’s capable of doing what’s necessary in case she tries anything.”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll ask him.”

“It’s a fucking huge mistake, that’s all I’m going to say,” Remo said. “One day you’ll see it too.”

CHAPTER 12



KIARA

I'm telling you it's a fucking mistake.

Remo's words still rang in my head clear and loud as we pulled up in front of the mental institution. Adamo and Fabiano got out. Nino and I remained in the car.

"Will you come in with us?" I asked Nino.

Originally Fabiano and Adamo were meant to do the visit alone, and then Adamo asked me if I'd join them and so Nino, of course, insisted to come as well.

A muscle in Nino's jaw flexed and for a long time he only stared ahead before he gave a terse nod. "I don't want you anywhere near her."

"Fabiano and Adamo are going to talk to her. I'll stay back. She can't hurt me."

Nino pushed open the car door and I followed. A man with a short gray beard, gray hair and a white coat waited for us on the steps. From the outside it looked like a normal mansion, but upon a closer look I discovered bars in front of many windows and the garden behind the building was separated from the driveway by a tall fence. The doctor walked toward Nino and shook his hand. "I don't think we've met. I'm the new head psychiatrist, Dr. Mitchell."

Nino barely reacted. "Where is the meeting taking place?"

"I thought the gardens would be a good option. The weather is nice and the other inhabitants are in the cafeteria for lunch so you'll have privacy."

"Lead the way," Nino said.

Dr. Mitchell glanced from Nino to us, hesitating, then he turned and led us inside the mansion. I wasn't sure what I'd expected, something more prison-like perhaps, and I was pleasantly surprised.

Inside the floor was sterile stone and the walls were painted in a subdued yellow, probably for its calming qualities. "She's already waiting outside," Dr. Mitchell said.

"Alone?" Nino asked sharply.

"With her caregiver."

Fabiano's eyebrows rose. He was tense, cautious. Nino and he were armed with guns and knives. Adamo hadn't been allowed to carry any because Nino worried their mother might get her hands on them.

We arrived in a vast garden and the doctor pointed toward a bench. A woman with short, dark hair sat with a big man in shrubs. Nino's demeanor changed immediately, a shift in his muscles and expression, something dark and primal awakening that had me worried. Fabiano noticed too and briefly touched Nino's forearm, causing him to meet his gaze. "Nino, shall Adamo and I go ahead and you wait here?"

Nino nodded and turned to the doctor. "You can leave, so can the caregiver."

Dr. Mitchell looked like he would disagree then thought better of it and waved for the caregiver to come over.

Adamo and Fabiano slowly headed for the bench. Eventually only Nino and I remained at the beginning of the path, staring down toward the bench. Fabiano stopped right in front of it. Adamo spoke to his mother and then sat down beside her.

Nino walked a few steps closer, his body brimming with tension. We stopped still a good distance away, out of earshot, but close enough to see the burn scars on the woman's arms. Scars from when she'd tried to kill her boys by cutting their wrists and burning them alive.

She turned around, glancing over her shoulder at us, and my breath lodged itself in my throat. Her eyes were gray like

Nino's.

Nino reached for his gun but I touched his hand. His gaze flew to mine, foreign and hateful, but more than that—haunted.

“Not today,” I whispered. “Let Adamo have this moment.”

Nino nodded and lowered his hand. I linked our fingers, squeezing to show him my support. Mrs. Falcone was still staring toward us, though mainly at me. Her unfaltering attention made me nervous. Something about it was too intense.

Adamo followed her gaze and said something, which made her nod and turn back to him.

I released a shuddery breath. Nino watched everything closely, his eyes burning with hatred I usually only saw in Remo's face.

Fabiano eventually gave a sign and Nino waved at the caregiver who waited in the door. Mrs. Falcone stared at us again as Adamo and Fabiano made their way back.

I was glad when we were in the car, and so was Nino. He started the car at once and drove us away.

“And?” I asked softly.

“She was nice, a bit confused. She called me Remo a few times,” Adamo said.

Nino jerked and the car briefly swerved.

“Hey,” Fabiano said, leaning forward. “Do you want me to drive?”

Nino ignored him, his fingers around the steering wheel tightening.

“What did you think, Fabiano?” I asked.

He shrugged, his gaze still on the back of Nino's head. “Something about her was off, and I don't just mean her being insane.”

Adamo was staring out of the side window with a lost expression.

“Do you want to visit her again?” I asked him.

Nino made a small sound but didn't comment.

“I don't think so. It was strange seeing her. I thought I'd feel something, but she is a stranger ... The word 'mother' is empty for me.”

Despite his words, I could hear the underlying longing in his voice, the wish for more, for a connection that might never be.



I could tell that the encounter still occupied Nino's thoughts a day later as we lay in bed. He wasn't his usual calm self and he hadn't slept at all last night. There was an underlying restlessness that had me worried. Remo had gone off to work in the Sugar Trap when we'd headed out for the visit, and he hadn't returned to the mansion yet. He, too, had my stomach turning itself with concern. First the thing with Serafina, now this. Remo was always toeing the edge of a dangerous abyss. I had a feeling a small nudge could send him over the edge.

I studied Nino's colorful tattoos, lingering on the shadowy figure amidst raging flames on his upper arm and Remo's name making up the glowing ambers. “This will give Adamo peace of mind. Now you can all move on.”

Nino turned toward me, his eyes emotionless. Now that I knew how different they looked when he showed emotions, seeing them like this always cut me deeply. “Neither of us will have peace as long as she's there.”

“Pretend she isn't there. She can't get out of the hospital, so you don't have to worry about her. She's the past, Nino.”

“She's there, always at the back of our minds.”

I sighed. “I know, but it's because you and Remo keep her lodged there, because you treat her like unfinished business.”

Make peace with the fact that she's alive, that you won't kill her, and then you can move on."

Nino frowned as if what I suggested was impossible.

I kissed his bearded chin. "Move on from the past so we can move forward into our future. We want a baby, we want a family of our own, don't allow your mother to ruin that."

Nino cupped my head and pulled me in for a harsh kiss. Gradually it grew softer until he pulled away. "Aren't you going to have an ovulation soon?"

I stifled a laugh. Trust Nino to know my cycle better than myself. "I think so."

Nino kissed me again and his fingers ghosted over my body, alighting it with desire and when we finally made love, it felt different—even if that didn't make sense. But looking at Nino's face I could tell he felt the same way because it felt like finally Nino wanted a baby as much as I did.



Nino twisted and turned in his sleep, waking me. He was having a bad dream. I turned on the bedside lamp. The sounds of distress were familiar and when I touched his shoulder, I expected the worst, another episode like the one he'd had before. I braced myself when Nino jerked awake. He stared at me for several moments, his eyes confused and agonized before slowly realization set in and the tension slipped away.

"Sometimes I think I've come to accept my emotions, and then this happens and I just want the quiet back," he murmured.

"I know," I said softly. "But you'll be glad for your emotions when you hold your child for the first time."

"I'm glad for my emotions when I look at you."

Love flared in my heart and I snuggled up against Nino once more, resting my hand over the tattoo of my name on his forearm. I began to sing quietly and gradually Nino's pulse

slowed under my fingertips. His lips pressed against the top of my head and he extinguished the lights. My voice grew quieter as tiredness dragged me down and eventually, I fell asleep with Nino's calm pulse beating under my touch.

NINO

As the year passed, things quieted down for us. Adamo's interest for our mother decreased slowly. He had visited her a couple more times. However, his last visit had been more than two months ago and his mood had improved considerably overall, which was good for him, but also good for Remo.

My older brother finally seemed to have conquered his obsession with Serafina, even if he definitely hadn't forgotten her. Part of him probably still hoped she'd return to him. The problem with my brother was that if he allowed someone into his heart, he was a loyal fucker and never let them out again.

Kiara was decorating the entire home for our second Christmas together and baking almost all day. Our freezers were already stacked with Christmas cookies.

I regarded her as I worked on my computer on the sofa in the gaming room, finishing up last details for the upcoming grand race. She was rearranging the baubles on the tree for the third time, her forehead puckered.

This was a distraction strategy. We'd been sleeping with each other without protection for eleven months now and she still wasn't pregnant. In the beginning she'd done a pregnancy test every month, but these last three months she'd stopped, or at least not told me about it.

I wasn't sure how to lessen her sadness.

Putting the laptop to the side, I stood and headed over to her. I took a bauble from her and returned it to its previous spot on the tree. "It looked good there."

Kiara sighed and gave me a small smile. "I know."

I touched her cheek. "You're putting too much pressure on yourself. That's why it's not working so far. Try to relax, to forget that you're not using contraception."

“I’m trying. I know it takes longer with some people, especially if they’re feeling stress, and I want this so much that I got obsessed. It was ridiculous how disappointed I was when I got my period after we’d been only trying to get pregnant for a few weeks ...”

“We’ve got time,” I said.

Steps thundered through the house and Remo stormed inside, looking completely deranged. Savio was a few steps behind him, and his dark expression set off my inner alarm bells. “What’s the matter?”

Remo kicked the punching bag so hard the hook groaned and a bit of plaster fell to the floor.

“Cavallaro sent a fucking assassin to Kansas. He killed Russo,” Savio said.

Kiara was confused.

“Our Underboss in Kansas,” I explained, trying to understand the sensations taking hold of me—until I finally realized it was anger.

“Does Stefano know?” I asked Savio. Remo didn’t appear like he was in the mood to speak.

Savio shook his head, glancing toward Remo cautiously. “No, we just found out ourselves, and Stefano’s off looking for new prey.” He moved toward me. “Should I talk to him?”

“No,” Remo growled. “You and him hate each other’s guts.”

“I couldn’t give any less fucks about Stefano. He’s the one who can’t bear that someone’s prettier, not to mention more successful with the ladies, than him,” Savio said with a smirk.

“I’ll talk to him,” I said. “You both aren’t fit to tell someone they lost their brother.”

Remo nodded. “I’ll fly over to Kansas City right away to show presence. You come with me, Savio.”

“When will you be back?” I asked.

“Tomorrow. I don’t want to leave Las Vegas for long at the moment, not when Cavallaro’s discovered his fucking balls.”

I turned to Kiara. “I’ll have Fabiano come over to watch you.” Adamo wouldn’t come home from school for another three hours and Kiara needed protection. I sent Fabiano a quick text and as usual he arrived five minutes later.

“I’m starting to like these new living arrangements,” Fabiano said with a grin as he walked in, but sobered upon seeing our expressions. “What?”

“Cavallaro killed our Kansas Underboss.”

“Fuck,” Fabiano snarled. “That asshole. You want to strike back?” His eyes found Remo’s, because if anyone went on a crazy revenge mission then it would be my brother.

Remo bared his teeth. “Not yet, but we will, trust me. We will strike back.”

“Can you guard Kiara while I search for Stefano?”

Fabiano nodded. “How about you come over to my house? I want to catch a workout in my gym.”

Kiara nodded. “Of course. When will Leona be home?”

“In about two hours. She doesn’t have many courses today.”

Kiara and Leona had grown even closer since Fabiano had bought the villa beside ours and was our new neighbor. The previous owners had sold the house after some convincing from Remo. I kissed Kiara briefly then headed out to find Stefano. It wouldn’t be good if he found out from someone else. Word about what happened would already be spreading like wildfire among our men and it was only a matter of time before the Captains from Kansas called Stefano to give him their condolences and get in his good graces.

I took my new Tesla sports car and drove over to Stefano’s apartment at the Strip. I rarely headed this way. The tourists and advertisements for cheap buffets and booze weren’t to my taste.

I got out of my car and dropped my key off with the bell boy then headed inside and past the concierge.

“Sir? Sir, you can’t come in here without registering with me first.”

I stopped in front of the elevator and pressed the button, then turned toward the overweight concierge stumbling toward me, his face turning red and the alarm button in his hand. I’d been here only once before and there had been another concierge.

“I need to ask you to follow me to my desk and register with me,” he said, trying to sound authoritarian and failing miserably. His other hand moved to the pepper spray attached to his belt.

“If you pull that, I’ll break every single one of your fingers and empty that entire bottle in your face,” I said calmly. “My name is Nino Falcone. Now return to your desk and get back to work.”

The man took a step back. I stepped inside the elevator and rode up to the top floor. Arriving at Stefano’s door, I hammered my fist against the frame.

Steps rang out then stopped. He opened the door, dressed in only boxer shorts and holding a Glock. Surprise crossed his face. “Nino? What are you doing here?”

“Can I come in?”

Stefano shoved his gun into his waistband and opened the door fully. I walked into his open living area. A girl scurried out of the room, clutching her clothes to her body.

“Looks young. Is she of age?”

Stefano frowned. “Of course. I always make sure they are. It’s rule number one.” He studied me with suspicious, dark eyes. “Usually a visit at home from one of you means nothing good. I didn’t break any rules, so I hope my Persian rugs stay clean.”

I nodded. “Cavallaro attacked Kansas City and killed your brother.”

Stefano stared at me as if he wasn't sure he'd heard me right then walked over to the sofa and sank down. Slowly his hands curled to fists. I gave him a moment and found the girl in the bedroom. She had dressed.

“Leave, and don't come back.”

She blinked. “What—”

“Leave. He only fucked you for his job,” I said. She grabbed her purse and ran past me without a word. Stefano didn't even look up.

“Remo and Savio are heading over there now, dealing with the aftermath, but you'll have to join them.”

Stefano looked around. “I guess I'll have to move to Kansas City now.”

“Yes,” I said. “You are the next in line. Kansas City needs a new Underboss.”

“Dante will try to have me killed as well now that he's tasted blood.”

“Dante will try, yes.”

Stefano chuckled and stood. “My father's men won't accept me easily. There's a reason why I worked for you as Romancer. It's what I'm good at.”

“Your father's men accepted your brother.”

“Barely. I'm younger and not very popular over there for what I've done.”

“It doesn't matter. The Camorra isn't a democracy. If Remo declares you Underboss, his Captains and soldiers will accept it, and if they don't they'll pay the consequences. You only need to worry about making one man happy and that is Remo, and so far, you have done a good job.”

“Doing a good job of fucking girls and making them fall in love with you is a different thing than leading men.”

“It is, and you'll excel at the latter because you don't want to disappoint us.”

Stefano grimaced. "I'll fly over to Kansas today."

I gave a nod and left. This assassination would cause trouble. My brothers and I would have to keep it contained, show our Underbosses that this was a one-time thing. Most of them were loyal to the bone, to Remo at least, but our territory was vast and it was impossible to control everything absolutely, even if Remo wanted to. There were people amongst our men who might join a mutiny, men that had lain low when Remo had conquered our territory without mercy, who were scared to speak up back then. Maybe they'd get more daring now. It would give me the chance to weed them out.

Anyone who thought he could take our territory from us would be met with the full cruelty of our natures. The Camorra was ours. We *were* the Camorra. We were Las Vegas. We were even the West, and it would always remain that way.

CHAPTER 13



NINO

Savio, Remo and I were in our airplane on our way to save Adamo who'd been captured by the Outfit.

Maybe we should have expected another hit. Like Stefano had said: Dante had tasted blood. The successful killing of one of our Underbosses had made him daring. Ending the grand race in Kansas City despite the recent attack had been risky but also a necessary sign.

One that might cost us Adamo.

He should have never taken part in that race. We had forbidden him, but Adamo was a kid in many regards. We should have made sure he didn't get the chance to get anywhere near Kansas. We shouldn't have trusted he was with C.J. in the Sugar Trap. It was as much our fault as if was his. We were meant to protect him.

Remo sat hunched in his seat. We'd just boarded the plane but were already up in the air. We didn't have any time to waste.

Savio peered up at me. "Do you think we can get him out?"

We didn't know where the Outfit kept Adamo, and even if we found out, Dante would have the place heavily guarded. We'd try an ambush anyway and it would probably cost all of our lives. My chest constricted thinking of Kiara's tears when I'd left, her shaking voice when she'd asked me to be careful and return to her.

I wanted nothing more, but if I didn't try to save Adamo, I wouldn't be able to live myself, nor would my brothers. We'd save him or die trying. There really was no other option.



The noise of the plane faded into the background until I only heard the screaming.

Pity was a foreign concept to me. When I caused other people pain, it gave me satisfaction figuring out the most effective ways to reach whatever goal I had set myself. Screams didn't faze me, never had. But seeing Adamo getting tortured on our laptop screen, hearing his screams from the speakers, my insides seemed to shrivel. I remembered holding him as a baby, remembered patching him up whenever as a small kid he fell and hurt himself.

Remo was shaking, his face a mixture of anguish and fury. I felt nothing except for a ringing hollowness that spread further and further until there was only cold. No emotions, no pain, nothing. The reassuring calm of the past.

Remo was right we needed to watch Adamo's suffering, so we knew what was at stake. We'd seen and done worse, and not just witnessed it on a screen from afar. But this ... this cut deeply.

A blonde woman stumbled into view, stopping the torture, protecting Adamo. Serafina Mione.

Remo tensed, and his expression became still in a way it never had. As if this was the revelation he'd been waiting for.

Savio darted a concerned look at me. "Fuck."

"Remo?" I asked, when he kept staring at the screen.

He ignored me and lifted his phone. I had a feeling I knew whom he was calling, and more than that—what he was going to do.

I shook my head but he didn't see me, his eyes only for Serafina.

"Dante, I'll give you what you really want. Tomorrow morning I'll be in Minneapolis and exchange myself for Adamo."

Savio took a step closer, mouthing *what the hell?*

“It’s me you want to see burn, not my brother, and you will get your chance.”

Relief showed on Remo’s face and I knew Dante had agreed to the deal. The Outfit Capo wanted Remo not Adamo.

“Understood.”

With a strange smile Remo lowered the phone.

“They will kill you, Remo,” Savio said.

Remo nodded and met my gaze. “They will cut me, skin me, burn me, cut off my dick, and then maybe they’ll kill me.”

“This is madness, Remo.”

“Maybe. But it’s what’s going to happen, Nino. My decision is final.”

Remo sank down on the seat and Savio leaned close to me. “We can’t allow this. Remo needs to stop sacrificing himself. We need him.”

I swallowed. I’d never been separated from Remo for more than a few days. We’d survived only because we had each other. I sank down across from him, hoping to talk sense into him, even if it had never worked in the past.

Remo shook his head. “Don’t waste your time.”

I stood, too restless to sit. Savio was hunched in his seat and I walked over to him. He raised his head with a dark laugh. “Fuck. The little shit always grated on my nerves. But seeing those assholes cut him and burn him...I want to smash their fucking heads in.”

“One day we will.”

“Yeah, but first they’re going to shred Remo into pieces,” Savio said. He ran a hand through his hair, staring up at me. “You’re a fucking genius, don’t you have an idea how to sort out this mess?”

Remo was staring out of the plane window, brows drawn together and fierce determination on his face.

“I don’t think Remo will allow it.”



Remo was the strongest Capo there was. Without him the Camorra would still be a collection of idiots struggling for power—without him Las Vegas would still be in the hands of unworthy men. Remo was Las Vegas. Remo was the Camorra. Remo was a born leader.

I was not. I’d never wanted to be.

The Camorrista would follow me because they feared me, because of their unfailing loyalty to our family, but not because of *me*.

They’d have no other choice if I didn’t figure out a way to get my brother out of the clutches of the Outfit though.

Remo had said I needed to accept his decision but as I watched Remo being dragged away toward an Outfit car, I realized it was something I could never do. I wouldn’t rest until I’d killed every Outfit soldier in the cruelest way possible for taking Remo. I’d kill Dante last so he could witness one man after the other suffer for his mistake, so he’d live with the regret and guilt, until I finally killed him. It would be an act of mercy after what he’d have to endure beforehand.

Adamo groaned in pain when Savio and I carried him over to our car. “Don’t ... don’t let them take Remo away.” The cars behind me were already pulling away taking my brother with them.

“We’ll save him,” I said automatically because I couldn’t imagine it being any other way.

Savio sent me a questioning look but I ignored him. We needed to get Adamo away from here as soon as possible so I could take a look at his injuries. His burnt skin was an angry red and would quickly get infected if not treated properly.

“Is it a clean break?” I asked him as we hoisted him into the backseat.

Adamo blinked at me, dazed.

“Never mind,” I said. I carefully felt his arm, not feeling any protruding bones at least.

Savio and I got into the front of the car and we sped away. Savio was driving as fast as the traffic allowed to get us to our plane quickly.

“We’re staying close by, right?” Savio asked, slanting me an anxious look. “So we can figure out a way to help Remo.”

I nodded slowly, although I wasn’t sure what we could do.

When we reached the plane and were safely up in the air, I called Fabiano. He picked up after the first ring.

“Is Kiara okay?” I asked immediately. Every Camorrista was on high alert. Still, I needed to make sure she was fine.

“Yes, but she’s worried, we both are. Do you have Adamo?”

I glanced toward my little brother who lay on his back on the lowered seat, face pale and sweaty. “We’ve got him. He needs medical treatment, which is why I have to make this short.”

“What about Remo?” Fabiano rasped, and my throat became tight.

“He handed himself over as he’d intended.”

“Fuck, fuck!” Fabiano exhaled. “Fuck.”

“We’re going back and staying in Kansas for the time being, trying to figure something out.”

“Let me join you. Let me help. We need to save Remo.”

“You need to protect Kiara. Savio and I’ll try to figure something out with the Underboss of Kansas.”

“All right. I’ll take her back to the mansion,” Fabiano said quietly. “Kiara just wants a quick word.”

“Give her to me.”

“Nino,” Kiara whispered desperately. “Please be safe. All of you just be safe. You are my family.”

“We will be safe.”

My throat got tighter and I hung up, needing to keep a clear head. I headed over to Adamo and Savio.

Savio was talking to him quietly and looked up when I stopped beside them.

“We need to clean your wound and treat your broken arm. It’s going to be painful.”

Adamo let out a choked laugh, eyes bloodshot. “I can deal with the pain.”

I nodded, taking in his bloody face, the cut on his arm, the burn. His body spoke a clear language of the torture he’d had to endure. His eyes, they showed me that it had left more than physical injuries.

KIARA

I lowered the phone, my heart racing in my chest. They had Remo. I clamped a hand over my mouth and handed Fabiano his phone back. For once his face wasn’t controlled. I could see his worry, his pain, and it was just too much.

I bent forward and cried out, “They need to save him. Nino can’t be without Remo ... they belong together.”

Fabiano put a gentle hand on my back. “We all need Remo.”

I nodded. The man who had scared me more than anything else, he was what kept this family together.

“Nino will figure something out ... fuck.” Fabiano sighed. “I should be there with them. This all started because Remo wanted to give me my father.”

“That’s not true. Remo would have gone through with the kidnapping anyway, but of course he also wanted to give you the chance to do what he could never do.”

“Kill my father.”

Leona came in with a tray loaded with food she must have found in the fridge. The safe house was always kept stocked

with food and water in case an emergency arose. It was a small, unsuspecting house in a middle-class neighborhood.

She asked Fabiano, “What happened?”

“Remo exchanged himself for Adamo. The Outfit got him. They...” He stared down at his Camorra tattoo. His Adam’s apple bobbed. Leona sent me a shocked look then slowly came over to the dining table and set the tray down. She touched Fabiano’s shoulder. She didn’t say anything, no words of reassurance, because what could be said?

The Outfit had Remo. Their enemy, the man who kidnapped and dishonored another man’s fiancé, Dante’s niece.

I wanted to stay hopeful but for once I only felt dread. “Nino and Savio are going to attack Outfit territory.”

Fabiano nodded. “They won’t rest until they’ve saved Remo or they know he’s dead. And even then they won’t stop.”

NINO

When we arrived at the Russo mansion in Kansas City, Stefano waited for us, looking like he hadn’t slept since his brother had been killed by Dante Cavallaro’s men. Savio and I supported Adamo who was too exhausted to walk on his own.

“I prepared a room and one of my doctors is around in case you need help,” Stefano said with a curt nod. He’d officially taken over as Underboss only two days ago and his territory was already in uproar. It was his battle to fight. If he wanted his men’s respect, he’d have to gain it by himself.

We put Adamo into one of the guest rooms, then moved into the liquor lounge with Stefano where we settled on the leather seats. “One of my Captains has been stretching out his feelers, trying to get intel on who organized the attack on the race.”

Savio’s mouth curled. “Do you really think that’s something we give a fuck about right now? We need to save our brother.”

Stefano took a sip from the Brandy and gave us a tight-lipped smile. “If you let me finish, you’ll see that it’s relevant. My man told me that you didn’t manage to crush all rats when you and Remo claimed power, Nino. Some rats left the sinking ship before you could get them, and apparently they found a new home in the Outfit.”

My eyes narrowed. Remo and I had tried to kill all of our father’s loyal men and those that weren’t loyal to anyone but themselves, but chaos had reigned in the first months of our time in Vegas. We’d wasted resources on capturing our mother and let more important men slip through our fingers. Yet, we’d hunted most of them down in the months that followed. “Who is it?”

“It’s a group of men who followed the Eneide brothers.”

“Carmine,” I muttered. Remo had cut Cosimo’s throat for parading around as a Capo for a while but Carmine had taken his leave quickly. “He led the attack?”

“He was part of the attack. They don’t have any say in the Outfit. They’re tolerated but nobody trusts turncoats.”

“Most of the information they have must be outdated, right? We changed so much since we claimed power,” Savio said.

I nodded slowly. They didn’t pose a threat to our power but they could prove to be a thorn in our sides. Eventually we’d have to rip them out.

“If you’re planning a hit on Cavallaro, I want to be in on it. My men are riled up because of my brother’s death. And to be honest, some because I’m their boss now. They want blood, and I want to give it to them, and preferably not my own.”

“You don’t want to avenge your brother?” Savio asked, downing the brandy.

“I want revenge, trust me,” Stefano said with a grim smile. “For my brother, and for being stuck in this hellhole I did my best to escape.”

Savio scoffed. “You’d rather stay our Romancer than rule over Kansas?”

“What? I’d rather fuck women who worship me in the city of sin than order around old-fashioned men twice my age who think they know everything better in this boring hick town? What do you think?”

“I think you need to focus on the task at hand,” I said firmly. “I want information on every possible place they could take my brother. I want intel on every MC chapter in Cavallaro’s territory.”

Stefano took a sip of his whisky, pulled out his phone and called his Captains.

Savio and I studied the map of Dante’s territory that Fabiano had prepared for us. We couldn’t rest until a plan was in place to save our brother.



Savio and I had been trying to come up with a viable option to save Remo all night but with our limited information about his whereabouts we didn’t have much to work with. Adamo had been sent off with our plane to Las Vegas, where he’d be safer than being so close to Outfit territory. He needed to heal, physically and emotionally before he should get involved in any fights.

My phone rang and the number from the Sugar Trap flashed on the screen. It was unusual for them to call me when they could talk to Fabiano who was closer, so I picked up. “What’s up? We’re busy here.”

“I know, I’m sorry, boss. A woman claiming she was Serafina called and wanted to talk to you specifically, said it was urgent.”

It took my brain a moment to process his words. “Did she give you her number?”

“Yeah.”

“Then give it to me.”

I ended the call and took a moment to straighten my thoughts.

“What’s going on?” Savio asked.

“Serafina tried to reach me. She wants me to call her back.”

Savio sank down slowly. “Do you think she wants to tell us he’s...he’s dead?”

I stared down at my cell. “I don’t know. Maybe they’ll make us listen when they end it.” I curled one of my hands into a fist, trying to focus on the muscles in my fingers, on their flexing, instead of the throbbing in my chest, the tightness of my throat. My gaze lingered on my scars, and I sucked in a sharp breath through my nose.

Savio closed his eyes, pressing his mouth together. “I’ll hunt them all down, every fucker.”

After another deep breath, I dialed Serafina’s number, trying to find my calm but my insides seemed to twist and turn.

The moment she picked up, I asked, “Is he dead?”

Savio pressed his palms against his temples, his eyes reflecting the same fear I thought myself incapable of.

“Not yet,” she said tightly.



Savio and I landed with the helicopter where we were supposed to meet Serafina. I gave the pilot the sign to keep everything prepared for immediate take-off in case this was a trap.

“I don’t trust her,” Savio said, scanning our surroundings, gun in hand.

“Neither do I.”

Savio nodded. “It’s a trap I’m willing to step into if there’s a tiny chance we get Remo back.”

A car pulled up, a Mercedes limousine with tinted windows. I climbed out of the helicopter and so did Savio, pointing our guns at the car.

The driver's door opened and Serafina got out, a gun in her hand. I motioned for Savio to stay near the aircraft while I headed for the car. Her barrel was directed at me, but I was the better shot.

She watched me then glanced over to Savio before she sighed, lowered her gun and walked around to the passenger side. I stayed a few steps back, still wary of her intentions. Savio came up behind me, as usual bad at following orders.

“Will you help me? Or do you want Remo to die?” Serafina hissed, glaring at us.

I took a step closer and peered inside the car—spotting my brother, covered in blood. I sheathed my gun. He was unconscious, cut and bruised and beaten, but breathing. I wedged my hands under his arms and Savio gripped his legs. We needed to get him to a hospital quickly.

A high-pitched wail rang out. Tension shot through my body at the unexpected sound and my head shot up, toward the source of the noise. A infant, a girl judging from her pink clothes and longer, slightly curled hair. Beside her a second baby woke up in his seat, a little boy with dark eyes, almost black. Remo's eyes. My gaze darted between the boy and the girl, twins—both Remo's children, no doubt.

Savio inhaled sharply beside me. “Holy fuck. They are Remo's.”

Remo was a father. I was an uncle. Two new Falcons. Kiara would be ecstatic to have them in the mansion.

I looked toward Serafina who seemed frozen. Something had shifted in her posture. She was tense, protective, ready to pounce if we dared to do something to her children.

She needn't worry. Never again.

Remo began to tremble in my hold. “Quick,” I said and Savio sprang into motion, helping me carry our brother over to the helicopter.

We put him down on the floor of the chopper and I crouched beside him, touching his throat.

“I’ll ask Serafina if she needs help with the babies,” Savio said, stunned.

“Do that.”

“They’re coming home with us, right?”

I glanced up at Savio. “It’s where they belong.”

Savio turned and headed toward Serafina while I checked Remo’s chest for broken ribs, finding two, then felt his arms. Cuts littered his skin, some of them opening old wounds, others creating fresh ones.

I sighed. This was the first time Remo was this helpless. I quickly attached him to a drip to make up for the blood loss he’d suffered.

I’d checked every inch of his body for injuries when Savio and Serafina appeared in front of the helicopter, each of them carrying a baby.

Savio held up the little boy to me and I took him. His dark eyes peered at me, bringing back memories of raising Adamo. Serafina and Savio got in with the little girl then settled on the opposite bench with the babies. I hadn’t been sure how I’d feel for a baby. I’d always cared for my brothers, and I cared about Kiara, but I didn’t know if I’d feel the same way for a baby. Yet, seeing those babies who looked like Remo, like Adamo when he was a baby, I felt an overwhelming sense of protectiveness.

Remo never considered having kids, but he’d protect them with all he had, from this day on until his death. I knelt down beside him again, feeling his pulse, needing the reassurance that his heart was still beating.

I wouldn’t let him die.

CHAPTER 14



KIARA

I had to stifle a gasp when I saw Adamo. A few soldiers brought him to the mansion and Fabiano supported him as he limped into the gaming room. His shoulder was in a cast and his forearm covered in bandages. His face was swollen and bruised, and the sight sent a stab of worry through me, but nothing, absolutely nothing, prepared me for the look in his eyes. They'd always been warm, soft, but now they were haunted, dark, harsh, and again I couldn't help but notice how much like Remo that Adamo looked in that moment.

"I don't need your help," Adamo muttered and freed himself from Fabiano's hold.

"Don't be stupid. You're fucking messed up." Fabiano tried to reach for Adamo again but he lashed out with his uninjured arm.

"No!" he roared, stumbling and falling to his knees, wheezing.

I took a step toward Adamo but Fabiano held up his hand, palm outward, shaking his head.

Leona leaned in the doorway, and the look of shock on her face could have been mine. This wasn't the Adamo we knew.

"Adamo—" I whispered.

Slowly he looked up and for a moment I thought he was crying, but his eyes were almost feverish with anguish. "You wanna know what's really messed up? That I'm here and Remo is in their fucking hands! He should have never exchanged himself for me. You should have stopped him."

“Remo can’t be stopped. He would do anything for you and your brothers. Absolutely everything. He’ll gladly put his life down if it means you get to live.”

Adamo laughed darkly, still kneeling in front of us. “They aren’t only going to kill him. They’re going to tear him apart.” He started ripping at his bandages, shoving Fabiano back who tried to stop him, and finally his forearm came into view. Half of the Camorra tattoo was burnt away. “They’re going to send him through hell, and we’re just waiting for it to happen!”

Fabiano’s chest heaved as he stared down at Adamo. “Nino and Savio are going to figure something out.”

“It’ll be too late then. It’ll be too fucking late,” Adamo rasped. “If they kill Remo, I’ll go back and kill them.”

I wrapped my arms around my middle, realizing I’d just witnessed Adamo losing his innocence. Maybe it was bound to happen. He didn’t sound like an angry teen speaking empty threats, he sounded like a man with a mission, and that more than anything scared me.

Fabiano touched Adamo’s shoulder. “If they kill Remo ...” he swallowed, his mouth setting in a harsh line. “If they kill Remo, which they won’t, we’ll walk into Outfit territory together and kill every last man responsible for this.”

Adamo smiled grimly. “We could shatter the Outfit, and you could become Underboss of Chicago under the Camorra’s rule.”

Fabiano stared as if Adamo had completely lost it. He gripped his good arm and hoisted him to his feet. “Come on. We’ll get you into bed. You’re exhausted.”

Adamo didn’t resist and I watched them making their way to Adamo’s wing. Swallowing hard, I closed my eyes. A soft touch made me open them again.

“My God,” Leona whispered. “Whatever happened with the Outfit ... it broke him.”

I shook my head. “It won’t break him. It’ll make him stronger like it did his brothers. Dante and the Outfit created another enemy.”

Leona looked doubtful. “You really think it won’t haunt Adamo?”

“It’ll haunt him for a long time, maybe always, but eventually he’ll get through it.” I was convinced of it but I was scared of the time it would take for him to reach that point.

“But he won’t be the same,” Leona said.

“He already isn’t the same.”

I took a deep breath, needing to distract myself, not just from my worry over Adamo’s mental state but also for Nino and Savio, and most of all Remo. If the Outfit killed him, it would crack Nino. He’d lead the Camorra into war, logical or not. He’d avenge his brother in the cruelest way possible. I wasn’t sure if the man that Nino became afterwards would still be the man I’d come to love. “I’m going to cook Adamo’s favorite spaghetti. Will you help me?”

Leona nodded and together we headed into the kitchen and began to work in tense silence.



I knocked at Adamo’s door, the spicy scent of garlic swirling in my nose. My stomach was knotted too tightly to consider eating anything.

“Come in.”

Pushing open the door, I stepped inside, carrying a tray with a bowl of spaghetti *aglio e oglio*. “I made your favorite pasta.”

Adamo lay on top of the covers, in sweatpants, revealing a bruised upper body. His forearm with the burnt tattoo lay on display as if he’d been staring at it before I’d knocked.

Adamo awkwardly pushed into a sitting position. “Thanks.”

I made my way through the narrow corridor of dirty clothes and positioned the tray across his legs. “Can I stay?”

“Sure,” Adamo said. He picked up the fork and began eating. “It’s good.”

“I’m glad you like it.” I looked at the bluish marks over his ribs, his swollen cheekbone, the burnt eye of his Camorra tattoo. “I’m sure Nino can fix it somehow.”

Adamo glanced up then followed my gaze. “No, it’ll serve as a reminder.”

I nodded, even though I doubted he needed the additional reminder of what had happened. He’d see it in his dream for a long time. The past was a difficult enemy to beat.

“I never got what it meant to feel helpless,” he said when he was done eating, looking at me with angry eyes. “I was in their hands and they could do to me whatever they wanted. I was at their mercy.”

Bile traveled up my throat when I remembered that feeling, being at the mercy of another.

“Sorry,” Adamo mumbled.

“No,” I said firmly. “I’m done running from the past. I’m strong enough to bear it.”

Adamo nodded. “I never want to feel helpless again. I never will let it come that far again.” Adamo glared down at his tattoo. “I always thought my brothers were full of shit for insisting I work out and fight as much as possible. I thought they were trying to be annoying, to show me who was boss—even after the Outfit attacked Roger’s Arena and tried to kill us all, I didn’t get it, not really, because my brothers were there to protect me. They always were. All my life they protected me. They had to, because I was weak, because I didn’t want to own up to what I was.”

“You were a child.”

“But I’m not anymore,” Adamo said harshly. “And even back then I could have been stronger if I tried. Remo and Nino had already fought for their lives when they were kids, and even Savio understood what it took to survive. He got what it took to make sure we all survived. But I didn’t because I didn’t want to, and because of that, because of my selfishness,

Remo is going to die, and I won't ever forgive myself for that. Neither will Nino, Savio and Fabiano."

I touched Adamo's hand. "Of course, they will."

"They shouldn't!" he roared, startling me so much I got to my feet, away from his fury.

Adamo stared at me with wide, anguished eyes, then he dropped his head and began to laugh softly, shaking his head. "Just go, Kiara. Go."

"Try to get some sleep, Adamo. Your body and mind have been through a lot. You need time to heal. Give yourself the time."

Adamo didn't react, and I couldn't see his face because his hair hid it from my view. Before I walked out, I turned to him once more. "Remo won't die. He just won't."

I closed the door, then leaned against it and closed my eyes, allowing tears to fall.



I cleaned the entire house and cooked several batches of cookies and muffins, everyone's favorite dish, then put everything in the two new freezers in the basement. Picking up a dish towel, I began drying the baking sheets I'd cleaned.

The door to the kitchen swung open and Fabiano walked in, his expression caught between shock and relief.

"What is it?"

"Nino sent me a message."

I dropped everything and walked toward Fabiano, shaking with fear.

"Serafina contacted him. She claims she got Remo out."

"He's alive?"

Fabiano nodded slowly, looking almost hypnotized. "It seems so. I don't know the details. I don't know anything

really. Nino's message was short, to the point as usual, and he didn't reply when I asked for more info."

Could it really be? Had Serafina helped Remo? But how?

"Should we tell Adamo?"

Fabiano shook his head. "He's unstable. If Serafina lied and this turns out to be some sort of twisted trap, I don't want to get his hopes up, only to crush them later."

He was right but Adamo needed to see the light at the end of the tunnel, needed it more than anyone else. Still I nodded. I had my cell on the kitchen table, in case Nino tried to contact me. He would be focused on a mission and only contacted Fabiano to give us the details we needed. That was just who Nino was. He'd never waste time for messaging or phone calls if there was an important task ahead.



Fabiano, Leona and I sat on the sofa in the gaming room, not talking, waiting, always waiting.

"You knew Serafina better than all of us, do you really think she saved Remo?" Leona asked Fabiano. She'd been trying to read a book for her classes but I could tell that she was too distracted, like the rest of us. I'd been counting the seconds since Fabiano had told me about Serafina and Remo. The more attention I paid to the time, the slower it passed.

Fabiano pinched the bridge of his nose, looking exhausted. "Fuck, if I know. I knew her as a kid. She was good at getting her will and she was loyal. But getting Remo out of Cavallaro's torture chamber and into safety?"

I shuddered at the thought of what they'd done to Remo. Adamo was hurt bad enough and he wasn't the one who'd kidnapped Serafina.

Fabiano's phone beeped and we all tensed. He took it from the table, his blue eyes quickly scanning the message. His

expression lit up with relief. “They have him. They’re bringing him to Vegas.”

I cupped my mouth, letting out a stunned laugh. “What about Serafina?”

“Nino didn’t mention her, but if she helped Remo escape, she can’t return to the Outfit.”

Fabiano hugged Leona and released a harsh breath. I smiled and stood, giving them time. Fabiano loved Remo like a brother. He’d tried to be strong but he had been as scared for Remo as I.

I hurried upstairs toward Adamo’s part of the mansion, feeling like I could fly. Remo would live. I could only imagine what Nino must feel now. I hammered my fist against the door and Adamo opened it, looking scared.

“Is he ...?”

Tears sprang into my eyes and I smiled. “Nino and Savio got him.”

“Alive?” Adamo whispered, taking a step back, beginning to shake.

“Yes. Serafina saved him. He’ll be here soon.”

Adamo and I stared at each other and then I just threw my arms around him. He winced, but before I could pull back, he hugged me even tighter, so tightly it must have hurt him.



It took several hours before a car finally arrived. Fabiano hurried toward the door while I rushed upstairs to get Adamo. He was in the shower. “They’re here!” I called.

“I’ll be down!”

I stormed back downstairs, taking a detour past the library where Leona had holed up to read in peace. I ripped the door open. “They’re here!”

Not waiting for her reply, I hurried toward the main part of the house, hearing Savio's voice.

"How is he?" I asked, then froze completely, unable to believe what I was seeing.

"Nino took him to hospital," Savio said, but I wasn't looking at him.

Serafina stood in the gaming room with two babies on her arms, twins and without a doubt Remo's kids. They had his eyes and hair, and the boy even his facial features. For a moment I was sure I was imagining things.

Leona appeared behind me and her mouth dropped open. Definitely not my imagination. Remo was a father. They were the cutest little babies I'd ever seen. Those dark expressive eyes drew you in like a moth to the flame.

The little girl began to wail, her face turning red, and her twin began to squirm in Serafina's arm at the sound.

"I need to feed them and change their diapers. Then they need a place to sleep," Serafina said, glancing between us uncertainly. I tried to imagine how she felt, returning to the place where she'd been held captive, to the people who had ripped her from her family and treated her like the enemy.

Savio and Fabiano didn't seem to know what to do either.

I gave Serafina a smile, hoping to reassure her. "Would it be okay if I took you to the bedroom you were in last time? I don't want to open the other rooms in Remo's wing. Or would you prefer to stay in my and Nino's wing?"

Serafina gave me an ironic smile. "I'll stay in Remo's wing."

I helped Serafina settle into the bedroom and prepared the formula she'd brought. As I held the boy, Nevio, in my arms and fed him, my longing for a child of my own returned with a vengeance that caught me off guard. Hopefully, things would fall into place now.

I left Serafina and the children, even if I would have loved to watch the babies sleep, and headed downstairs. Savio,

Adamo, Fabiano and Leona were in the gaming room on the sofas, still in shock over the newest addition to the Falcone clan.

I sank down beside Leona. Savio had his head thrown back and looked like he was moments from passing out.

Adamo gave me a curious look. “How’s she?”

“She seems to be doing fine. Tired, as are the babies. They’re sleeping now.”

“Babies,” Adamo repeated with a shake of his head. “I can’t believe Remo’s got kids. I’ll have to see them with my own eyes to wrap my brain around it.”

Savio nodded, then yawned. “I’m still not over it and I’ve been staring at doll-face and little Remo for hours.”

“Doll-face?” I said with a smile.

“Did you take a look at that face? If you put that kid up on a shelf, nobody would realize she wasn’t a puppet.”

Fabiano laughed. “Fuck. This ... this is the weirdest day of my life, and I’ve had plenty of weird living with you assholes.”

“You were responsible for at least quarter of the weird shit, so don’t play saint,” Savio said with a grin.

Fabiano gave Savio the finger, which he returned. Adamo chuckled, then held his side with a wince.

“Next ass kicking is on me,” Savio said, nudging Adamo lightly.

“If anyone gets his ass kicked, then it’s going to be you,” Adamo returned, some of the darkness disappearing from his eyes.

I blinked rapidly, trying to stop the tears, but I felt like a ten ton weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

“Oh, come on, no crying,” Savio said with a grimace.

Leona rolled her eyes at him, then took my hand. “You okay?”

“I’m just happy.”

“When I’m happy I don’t bawl. I really hope you don’t shed a tear every time Nino gives you a happy end.”

I snorted.

“You’re full of bullshit,” Fabiano said to Savio.

“Well, if all the girls started crying whenever I make them happy, Las Vegas would have its own salt lake.”

“Oh, shut up,” Leona said with a giggle. “Faked orgasms don’t make anyone happy.” Her eyes widened after the words were out and I burst out laughing. Usually Leona was pretty restrained around the Falcones.

Fabiano gave her a surprised look then nodded appreciatively. He’d been spending every free moment with the Falcones before he’d met Leona, but because she wasn’t as comfortable around the family his visits had become less frequent. Maybe this would change now that Leona seemed to be getting used to them and they were living beside us. Especially Remo scared her still. Maybe babies would make him more approachable.

“Usually I’d make you eat your words, but I think Fabiano won’t like it if I show you what an orgasm feels like,” Savio said.

“Did that bull tattoo make you even cockier or did my fuckery tolerance sink?” Fabiano muttered.

Savio shrugged. “The ladies like it.”

“What?” I asked. “The tattoo or your arrogance?”

“Both,” Savio drawled, then pushed to his feet. “It’s time to celebrate. Let’s have a drink.”

“Remo’s still in hospital,” Adamo reminded him.

Savio glared. “Remo’s fucking fine.” He stalked toward the bar and grabbed a bottle of Brandy and several glasses.

After two drinks, I dragged myself upstairs, too tired to stay up, even if I’d promised myself to wait for Nino. He

hadn't said more than a few words to Fabiano's questions, so I assumed he'd have to stay in hospital with Remo for a while.



I kept twisting and turning, unable to fall asleep despite feeling utterly exhausted. Eventually I lay on my side, staring at the door, as if that would make Nino return quicker. When the door finally opened, I sat up so fast, my head spun. I turned on the light and blinked against the brightness until finally Nino took shape. I'd never considered that he wouldn't return because I couldn't bear the thought. Seeing him before me, I realized how worried I'd been.

Nino closed the door and walked toward me. I couldn't wait. I swung out of bed and flew into his arms, clutching him against me almost desperately. "Are you okay?"

Nino brushed a few strands from my forehead, then gave me a tight smile. "Remo's alive and he'll heal completely, so yes, I'm okay."

"I was so relieved when I heard you got him out."

Nino nodded.

I searched his face. He looked exhausted and in his eyes, I discovered a look reminiscent of the one he'd had when he'd had his episode. He'd been through a lot. "Why don't you come to bed? You need to sleep, or do you need to return to the hospital?"

"Remo's here. He wouldn't have wanted to stay in a hospital. He's stable and will heal better surrounded by people he trusts. Otherwise he'll always be vigilant and won't relax." Nino kissed me slow and sweet. "Are you okay with the kids being in the mansion?"

Confusion filled me. Nino knew how much I loved children. "Of course. Why wouldn't I be? I love children."

Nino tilted his head, his fingertips moving to my throat, over my pulse point. "I wasn't sure if it would unsettle you because you aren't pregnant yet."

I shook my head, ignoring the way my stomach tightened. “I think it’s wonderful that we have children in this house now. It’ll be good for Remo, for all of you. How could I resent someone else for having children only because I don’t have them yet? It wouldn’t make my situation any better. I can’t wait to see them grow.” I paused. “They’ll stay here, right?”

Serafina and Remo had a lot to figure out. I wasn’t sure what Serafina felt for him, but Remo had never gotten over her.

“Remo won’t ever let them leave. He gave Serafina a choice, and now she’s made it. There’s no going back. He won’t allow it.” Nino glanced at his watch. “I think I should return to Remo. Someone needs to watch him.”

“You look exhausted. Let me watch him.”

“I have to,” Nino murmured, and I got it. He’d almost lost his brother. “There’s a sofa in the room. If you want, you could sleep there.”

“That sounds like a good plan. I want to be close to you.”

Nino pressed a kiss to my forehead. “And I need you close. The problem with having emotions is that you realize how much you can lose.”

“You won’t lose me or Remo, or anyone else.”

Nino linked our fingers and led me into the room where Remo lay.

Anger coursed through me when I saw Remo in the bed. Most of his body was covered in bandages and the parts that weren’t were bruised. His hair was matted to his head with blood. His chest was rising and falling.

Nino and Remo had done worse to their enemies, but I didn’t care about any of them, only for my family.

“He’s strong. And this will only make him stronger.”

I didn’t doubt it, especially now that he had children to protect. Remo would rise, like he and Nino had risen after their mother had tried to kill them. As long as the brothers had each other, they would prevail.

CHAPTER 15



KIARA

Nino and I both fell asleep on the sofa in Remo's room, and as usual Nino woke around sunrise. While Nino did a check-up on his brother, I took a quick shower before I headed downstairs to prepare breakfast for our new, bigger family. Things with Serafina were still strange, not so much between her and me, but definitely with the Falcone men. It would take time for her to grow used to this new life.

After breakfast I helped Serafina keep the twins entertained. We'd spread a blanket on the floor of the gaming room and had created toys from ordinary things like jars filled with dried chickpeas which worked as a rattle, pans and wooden spoons so Nevio could make noise. "We'll have to go shopping soon. You and the kids need so many things."

Serafina sighed. "I left everything behind."

I had a feeling she wasn't only referring to material things. Since she'd arrived, I'd been wondering how she'd managed to save Remo but I had a feeling she wasn't ready to discuss the events yet. Nevio began fumbling with one of the picture books and I reached for him then looked at Serafina for permission.

She nodded with a smile before she turned the page in the book she was showing to Greta. The little girl had ignored me mostly except for a few shy glances. Nevio was the total opposite. He giggled when I lifted him on my lap and reached for my hair.

"Careful. He likes to tug."

I pushed my hair away then pressed him to my body so he sat upright before I held out the picture book in front of his

face.

Nino stepped into the room. He'd been taking care of Remo all morning. Nevio was blabbering happily and I couldn't help but smile at his adorable antics.

“Remo just woke up.”

Serafina quickly left to see Remo while Nino and I kept watch over her babies. I began to sing a song my mother had sung to me when I was a little girl, and to my relief it calmed Greta. She still eyed me critically, but she was definitely mesmerized by the singing.

Nevio had only eyes for Nino's tattoos though and patted at Nino's forearm excitedly. I kept singing and rocking Greta as I watched Nino with Nevio. It was beautiful seeing how patient and calm Nino was with Nevio who was bouncing and grasping at his skin as if he could tear the tattoos off. He let out a delighted screech, causing Greta to lean forward towards him, wearing a hesitant grin.

My heart was close to exploding from the cuteness.

Savio sauntered in and shook his head seeing us. “Don't tell me you want a few of them as well.”

Nino glanced at me then glared at his brother, who seemed to realize something was up. A brief flicker of realization on his face smoothed into his usual pretty-boy mask.

Savio bent over Greta. “Hey doll-face...”

Before I could warn him, Greta's face scrunched up and she began to cry, those chubby cheeks turning red. Savio jerked upright, raising his hands. “Come on, doll-face, girls never cry when they see me.”

I gave him a reproachful look. “Next time don't lean over her.”

“I think Nevio needs a new diaper,” Nino said.

Savio's mouth curled. “All right. Poo and crying girls. That's my cue to leave.”

“I can change his nappies,” I said, carefully getting up with Greta on my arm. She’d calmed down now that Savio was out of sight.

Nino gave me an ironic smile. “I’ve changed more nappies than you, I think.”

“Adamo,” I guessed.

Nodding, Nino rose with Nevio and together we walked into the guest bathroom that held a few nappies, then put a towel down on the floor.

“We need to buy everything for the babies, and prepare a nursery.”

“That’s what Remo said,” Nino murmured.

I smiled down at Greta, stroking her arm. She peered at Nino who was trying to undress a squirming Nevio. “You don’t have to worry about your brother, Greta. Nino’s going to be very careful with him.”

Nino glanced over his shoulder at me. “It’s good that you talk to her and don’t use baby babbling like some people do.”

“I knew you’d approve,” I said with a laugh.

Nino nodded before he turned his attention back to Nevio whose legs he was holding in one hand to stop the kicking.

“You’ll be the best mother,” Nino murmured.

I bit my lip, watching as Nino finally removed Nevio’s diaper and threw it into the trash.

“You will have a child, or as many as you want, Kiara. You will.” Nino looked up, and the determination in his eyes calmed my anxious mind as it always did.

“I know.”



I was trying not to be nosy, but I was bursting with curiosity over how Remo’s first encounter with his children had gone.

Since I was eager to see him anyway, I grabbed a plate with a sandwich and headed up to his bedroom around lunch time.

After knocking, I stepped inside without waiting for a reply. Remo sat on the edge of the bed, perspiration glistening on his forehead and his expression strained. I hurried over to his bedside and put the plate down.

“What are you doing? You’re supposed to rest,” I said, trying to push Remo back. Even injured he was too strong.

“I’m not bedridden.”

“You’re being unreasonable, that’s what you are,” I scolded. “Now lie back or I’ll get Nino. Maybe he’ll tie you to the bed or knock you out with painkillers.”

Remo’s mouth twisted. “Are you worried about me?”

“Remo. Lie down, please.”

“Because you said please,” he said, and slowly lay down, his legs still halfway out of the bed.

“Do you need help?”

“No,” he said firmly then slowly dragged himself further onto his bed despite the obvious pain he was in. “Happy?”

“Yes,” I said softly. “Very.” I held his gaze, not saying more, because really, I didn’t have to. Remo was perceptive. Swallowing, I reached for the plate and handed it to him. “I got you Pastrami because it’s your favorite on a sandwich.”

“You must have been really worried if you put meat on my sandwich,” he said, then took a bite and nodded appreciatively. “Nino would have been fine without me, eventually, you know? He’s got you. He wouldn’t have broken down.”

I shook my head and sank down on the edge of the bed. “That’s not the only reason why I was worried. Like I said, we are family, and I would have missed you.”

Remo took another bite. “I hope you’re not getting more emotional once you’re pregnant.”

I tensed briefly then relaxed.

Remo sighed. “This emotional talk isn’t my thing, Kiara.”

“I know. I’ll deal with your abrasiveness and you’ll have to deal with my emotionality, that’s just the way it is.” I looked at Remo. “I can’t believe you’ve got two children.”

“Is this your way to ask me how meeting them went?”

My cheeks heated. “Am I that obvious?”

“You’re not the best at mind games.”

“I don’t want to be.” I shrugged. “I’m happy for you. Nevio and Greta are the cutest babies I’ve ever seen. I can’t wait to see them grow up in this house.”

Realization settled in Remo’s eyes. “It’s a fucking miracle, isn’t it? And kind of ironic ...” Then he let out a dark laugh. “The woman who hates me gives me two children.”

“Serafina doesn’t hate you, Remo. She didn’t even when she was still a captive in these walls, and she doesn’t now.”

Remo’s face shut down and he took another bite from his sandwich.

“Get some rest,” I said again, and pushed to me feet.

I left, giving Remo some time to rest even though he’d no doubt try another escape attempt soon. Nothing Nino or anyone else did would keep Remo in bed for long.

NINO

Remo was a difficult patient, which didn’t come as a surprise. He’d never liked to look weak in front of others, even me. Adamo didn’t make it much easier for me. The first time I checked on him the morning after I’d brought Remo home, he wasn’t in his bed, resting, but outside smoking.

“Nicotine is a poison. Your body has to spend resources cleansing those toxins which it should rather be using on healing your injuries,” I told him.

He glanced up. His face was still swollen, so it was difficult to read his expression. “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, right?”

I frowned at his bitter tone. “I need to take a look at your injuries.” I pointed at his forearm. “You should have kept the bandages on. You’re risking dirt getting into your burn wounds.”

Adamo took another long drag from his cigarette before he squashed it under his sneaker. “I’m fine.”

“You are not. Now let me check on you. I’d suggest we head inside.”

“You should take care of Remo, not me.”

“I did, and he’s recovering, but we need you to heal as well.”

Adamo rose to his feet and followed me.

“Don’t blame yourself for what happened to Remo,” I said as I led him toward the infirmary we’d furnished a few months ago.

“Who else should I blame? I got myself caught. They would have never got Remo without that happening.”

I didn’t contradict him. “Focus your anger on things you can actually change. Focus on getting stronger, on making wiser choices...”

“On getting revenge?”

“That too,” I said quietly. “You made C.J. cover for you when you disappeared to that race against Remo’s clear orders —”

“No,” Adamo said harshly. “Leave her out of it. She didn’t know where I was going. I asked her to pretend she was with me, that’s all.”

I regarded Adamo for a long time. “What’s going on between you and her?”

“Nothing,” he muttered, turning his eyes away.

“*Nothing* wouldn’t make her keep secrets for you. You’re spending a lot of time with her. If this is so you can gather experience, that’s understandable, but don’t turn it into more than that, Adamo. People always try to gain something from

being close to us, and a whore from one of our establishments certainly won't be the exception."

Adamo ignored me in favor of glaring at his wound.

He wouldn't reveal the details of his relationship with C.J. to me. I'd have to talk to her myself.

In the afternoon I headed over to the Sugar Trap, knowing C.J. had a shift. I nodded at Jerry in greeting as I stepped inside. "Is C.J. in her room?"

"Yep, but she's with a John. They should be done in ten. Only booked thirty minutes."

I nodded and headed in the direction of the room, then waited by leaning across from the door. Like Jerry said, the door opened ten minutes later to C.J. and a middle-aged man with glasses and a slight paunch. I picked him as an insurance salesman, or something similar, with a pregnant woman at home who didn't want to put out for him in the last trimester.

His face turned red when he spotted me and he quickly excused himself. C.J. looked at me uncertainly. I pushed away from the wall and stalked toward her. She backed off, clutching a towel around her body. I entered her room and closed the door, then took in the ruffled sheets of the oval bed and the condom on the ground.

C.J. picked it up and disposed of it, then said without looking at me. "I can have someone change the sheets and take a quick shower if you don't mind waiting."

"I'm not here for sex. I have a wife."

She tilted her head up, tensing. "I didn't know. Honestly, I didn't. I just wanted to help him."

I moved closer. "What didn't you know?"

She swallowed. "That he'd go to that race ... I just wanted to help."

"Where did you think he'd go? It would have to be somewhere we disapprove of or he wouldn't have to ask you to cover for him."

Her pulse hammered in her throat, her chest heaving in rising fear. “I didn’t ask. Adamo always says it’s better if I know as little as possible so I don’t get in trouble with you.”

I studied her face closely, trying to detect if she was lying. Her gaze rested on my chest. “Look up.” She raised her eyes. She was scared, but I didn’t pick up any deceit.

“What’s going on between you and Adamo, the truth,” I demanded.

“He came to talk, just talk in the beginning—”

“About what?”

She blinked. “About school, about Harper, about racing, anything really. Never business, I swear.”

I nodded. “Go on.”

“But then we slept together. I thought that’s what I’m supposed to do.”

“You have sex, all right, but that’s not all.”

“When we have sex, he doesn’t just stay for the deed. We talk beforehand and then afterwards, and ...” Her cheeks turned red. “And we just lie in each other’s arms sometimes. It’s less like a work relationship and more like friends with benefits.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Why are you doing this? If you think you can get something out of it, you better be careful.”

Her eyes widened. “I’m not using him. Why would I not like to spend time with him? I get compensated for spending time with him like I do with every client, and he’s nice and considerate, and I enjoy being with him.” Her face turned even redder.

“So you’re only doing this because sex with my brother is pleasant for you and allows you to take on fewer of the unpleasant clients.”

She looked away. “Yeah.”

“All right. I don’t have a problem with that, but don’t cross any lines, C.J., understood?” She gave a small nod. “Adamo

might need you now more than ever, so take good care of him.”

I left, satisfied with my findings.

I didn't care if Adamo only fucked C.J., even if his longer sessions cost a fortune. It's not like my brothers and me hadn't used the services of our whores. Of course, we never had to pay that much because we didn't keep them around for hours.

If Adamo needed the additional time, he could get it. In his current mental state, I was glad for anything that managed to distract him. The few conversations I'd had with him since he'd been freed stirred my worries. His anguish and rage were reminiscent of Remo's early days. I didn't think Adamo could deal with it the way my older brother had.

It might destroy Adamo.



Kiara was even more excited about Christmas than in the previous year, practically bouncing with joy as she decorated the entire house and baked for us. Greta and Nevio's presence, while making her realize how badly she wanted children of her own, also kept her distracted. Those two were a lot of work, and Kiara gladly stepped in helping Serafina while Remo had to heal.

As Christmas rolled around, both Remo and Adamo were doing better, and most of their outward injuries had healed. We were sitting in the gaming room, discussing how to organize future races, having to get back to business despite events. Stefano insisted we keep his territory out of it in the next months while he tried to establish his rule. His men had suffered enough losses and another attack from the Outfit could demoralize them. He needed to appear strong if he wanted to convince his doubters and haters.

“I don't like it,” Remo growled. “I don't want Cavallaro to think he's made an impact on us.”

Savio shrugged. “What do we care what the asshole thinks? He’ll pay soon enough for the shit he pulled.”

“He should pay now,” Adamo said, tracing the burn scars on his forearm.

“Revenge takes time. We need to figure out our next moves carefully and not go into this blindsided by fury.”

Remo glared at me, but knew I was right. He was pissed, more on Adamo’s behalf than his own—not to mention that he wouldn’t forgive the Outfit for treating his children as less because they were his.

“I agree with Nino,” Savio said firmly. “I’d rather hit him hard so he can’t get up ever again than aim for a quick hit.”

Remo leaned back with a sigh. It was ultimately his decision. Despite him being Capo, he often listened to what we had to say.

Serafina walked in with the twins on her arms. “Can you watch them?”

Remo sat up, looking at Serafina as he always did—with a hint of confusion and longing. I wasn’t sure if he was unsure about his own feelings or hers.

Serafina met my gaze. “Will you take Nevio?”

I stood at once and took him from her. Nevio grabbed for my tattoos again, eyes widening and mouth parting as if he was seeing them for the very first time. Serafina walked over to Remo and after my brother spoke softly to his daughter, he took Greta. Nothing about Remo was soft, not ever and I’d never heard him speak in that tone before. Savio and Adamo gave me questioning looks as I sat back down. Remo waved a rattle in front of Greta’s face as he joined us and sank down beside me. The look in his eyes as he gazed down at his daughter gave me a better understanding why Kiara wanted children so badly. It spoke of an altruistic, untainted love that was rare in our world.

“I suppose that’s the end of my whoring days in the house,” Savio grumbled.

Remo looked up from Greta, his eyes narrowing. “I don’t want a fucking whore anywhere near my children.”

Greta cried at the harshness in his voice, and Remo’s lips tightened. He quickly managed to calm her again.

Nevio began to chew on my forefinger. He didn’t have any teeth yet so he couldn’t do any real damage. Greta eventually settled peacefully in the crook of Remo’s arm and watched everything with those big eyes.

Adamo gave her a small wave and she watched quietly while Nevio was trying to crawl off my lap. I let him discover the sofa, holding him by his waistband whenever he got too close to falling off.

“He’s going to be a little PIA, I can tell,” Savio said.

Remo’s mouth twitched as he watched his son try to take another nose-dive from the sofa. “I’ve had practice with PIAs raising you and Adamo.”

Savio grinned, leaning back against the sofa and stretching out his arms. “I’m sure I’ve been a delight.” He nodded toward Adamo who hunched forward beside him. “He’s got PIA written all over his forehead and MIA all over his crotch.”

“Fuck you,” Adamo said but he didn’t look as pissed as he’d done in the past. He hardly seemed to care about the jab. Remo sent me a meaningful look—of course he’d noticed it too. Adamo was growing up faster than expected.

“No reprimand for using fuck you in front of your precious offspring?”

Remo stroked Greta’s arm. “Growing up in this house, my kids will probably say fuck before anything else.”

“Or I could try to teach them a more interesting word ...” Savio mused, exchanging a look with Adamo who shook his head with a small laugh.

“If one of my children says pussy, dick or cock as their first word, I’ll send you to Kansas City to help Stefano get his people under control, got it?”

“They could pick it up from someone else.”

Remo raised his eyebrows and Savio smirked.

“Kansas City, Savio.”

He sighed. “There’s really no fun to be had in this house anymore.”

CHAPTER 16



KIARA

“Have you heard?” I asked excitedly as I headed toward Leona. She was sitting on their terrace with a book on her lap. I loved that I could go over to visit her whenever I wanted now that the fence between the houses had been taken down.

“Remo asked Serafina to marry him. Well, it wasn’t really a question, but with Remo that was to be expected.”

Leona looked up and nodded with a tight smile. “Yeah, Fabiano mentioned it. When are they going to marry?”

I sank down in the chair beside her, confused by her mood. “May, after the twins’ first birthday. I can’t wait to organize everything. It’ll be amazing. Will you help me?”

Leona nodded again. “Sure.” I caught the hint of uncertainty on her face and paused.

“Everything all right?”

“It’s nothing ... I mean it’s ridiculous. I—” She shook her head. “I’m being stupid, ignore me.”

“No,” I said, leaning forward. “Is it because you want Fabiano to ask you to marry him?”

“No...I mean perhaps. We’ve been together for two years, which isn’t long considering normal standards but I know how things are in your world, even in the Camorra, which isn’t that conservative. And Fabiano’s been growing up in the Outfit and that is still very traditional, so I’m wondering what’s holding him back.”

“Maybe he’s just waiting for the right moment.”

Leona stared down at the bracelet adorning her wrist. “What if he realized that he wants an Italian woman? Fabiano

is traditional in many aspects, so maybe he decided I wasn't fit to become his wife, a Scuderi."

"Now you *are* being ridiculous," I scolded gently. "Fabiano loves you. It's obvious from the way he looks at you. And he even got this mansion for you. Just give it time. He'll ask you eventually."

"He got this mansion because he wants to be close to his brothers-by-choice," Leona said softly.

Brothers-by-choice, that was the perfect term for Fabiano and the Falcones. I gave Leona a reprimanding look. "And because he wants you two to have enough space for each other and a family."

"You're probably right, and I really should be focusing on my classes and not worry about getting married."

I smiled.

Leona stared off into the distance, then smiled. "What about a bridal shower? A hen party where we, for once, get ridiculously drunk and have fun."

I considered that. "I've never partied."

Leona's eyes grew wide. "We need to change *that*."

"Have you been allowed to go party?"

Leona laughed. "Well, Fabiano was with me every time I went to a club. He's a great dancer."

"We could take Serafina to a club, dance, drink, have fun. It would only be us, because Serafina's friends are in Minneapolis, so..." I stopped. I hadn't really made friends in Las Vegas, not that I'd tried and I just hadn't gone out to meet new people. Leona and I loved spending time together, and I had a feeling that soon Serafina would be an important part of our close-knit group.

"You think you can talk Nino and Remo into letting you go party?"

"I don't think they'd mind, if you disregard the security aspect. That'll be a problem. They'll insist we have guards,

and they don't really trust many people around us."

"It's not a hen night if one of our men is there."

"Yeah, maybe Savio and his friend Diego could guard us."

"That could work. I'll try to convince Fabiano, and you work your magic on Nino and Remo. Serafina *can't* know beforehand!"

I sighed. Convincing both Remo and Nino wouldn't be easy.

Leona and I talked about the latest series we watched until I finally left so Leona could get a bit more reading in and because I wanted to work on a new piano piece. I went to the bathroom because I had a slight headache. Opening the drawer for pills, I froze when I saw my stash of pregnancy tests. I quickly grabbed something for my headache. We had a bridal shower and a wedding to organize, there wasn't time to obsess over my troubles. Nino was right, I needed to relax.

After I'd taken a pill, I settled at my piano and began to play, losing myself in the music like always.

A knock sounded, making me jump, and the melody died in a low moan. Adamo stood in front of the French window, a cigarette in his hand. I smiled and motioned for him to come in. After he took a last pull from his cigarette and stomped it out on the ground, he slid open the door and stepped inside.

"Don't forget to pick up the stub later or Nino will have *your* butt," I said with a smile.

Adamo nodded, no smile, nothing. Shadows spread out under his eyes as he walked over to the piano and sank down beside me on the bench. When he didn't say anything I started playing again, trying to suppress my flood of questions wanting to burst out of me. Months had passed since his capture, and his body had healed and scarred. But he had become more closed off.

After the melody ended, silence descended on us until I couldn't take it anymore. "You're gone a lot."

"I'm with C.J."

I bit my lip. “At the Sugar Trap?”

“There and at her apartment.”

Adamo was fifteen. C.J. at least twenty-eight. “Are you together?” I asked, trying to keep the judgment from my voice so Adamo wouldn’t shut down again.

His eyes rose to mine, and an ironic smile tipped his lips up. I still remembered his honest, kind smiles from before. “We’re friends with benefits.”

I blinked, then nodded, unsure what to say to that. My protective side made me wonder what she got out of it. C.J. seemed nice but why would she hang out with a teenage boy for no reason?

Serafina came in with Greta and Nevio, then paused when she saw me with Adamo. He got up. “Hi, I need to leave anyway.” Without another word, he walked out, not taking the cigarette butt with him.

Frowning, I got up and picked it up and threw it in the bin beside my piano that was reserved for papers with my scribbles.

“He’s still suffering because of what happened?” Serafina asked.

I nodded. I’d noticed that Adamo often avoided Serafina’s presence. When he was around her. Adamo was nice but he made sure he was gone most of the time. “Do you want me to take Nevio?”

Serafina handed him to me and I smiled down at his grinning face. “I wanted to ask, if you want to come along when I go wedding dress shopping?” She was still unsure if we were friends. Maybe she thought I was only being nice because I felt obligated, and while that might have been true in the beginning I honestly liked Serafina, not just because she was a great mother, but also because she was nice and tough, and loved Remo.

“Yes, of course,” I said. “Would you mind if Leona came along?”

“I’d love for her to be there. I wasn’t sure if she’d want to though, because I don’t know her that well.”

“Not yet, but we’re all family so you will sooner or later. And I can’t wait to look for a dress for you. I’m so excited to plan this for you.”

Serafina laughed. “My last wedding took two years to plan and it never happened, and this time we have only months.”

“Are you worried it won’t be a big enough affair?”

Serafina shook her head, gently rocking Greta who was getting squirmy. “No, Remo and I don’t want anything big. Only a family wedding, nothing fancy.”

“That’s perfect. What’s the use of having hundreds of guests you hardly know?”

Serafina’s face lit up. “Right?”

I could hardly hold back asking her about what she wanted to do for her bridal shower. I stifled the impulse. This had to be a surprise.



Nino, Fabiano and Remo did eventually agree on us going dancing—of course, under certain conditions. The three of them would stay home and watch the twins while we had to take Savio, Adamo and Diego with us. And of course stay in contact through Savio in case anyone needed to intervene, which wouldn’t happen. It was already April and there was only one month until the wedding, so it was high time we finally got around to our hen party.

Serafina, Leona and I got ready together in Leona’s vanity while the men were over in the Falcone mansion. I had bought a tight mini-dress for the occasion that made my blood pound faster with nerves when I wore it, and matching red high heels.

Leona shook her head. “Men are going to trip over themselves for a dance with you.”

My eyes trailed over Leona in hot pants, a tight shirt and high heels, and Serafina in a glittery mini dress. “I think they’ll have a hard time choosing.”

We giggled and clinked glasses. We’d finished off a bottle of sparkling wine while getting ready and were already feeling a nice buzz.

Serafina downed the remaining wine and set the glass down with an audible clang. “Let’s head over and show our men why they’d better appreciate us.”

Leona grinned and I shook my head with a giggle.

“They’re going to decide that we’re not allowed to go out after all,” Leona said. “Fabiano is super-jealous. He won’t like this.”

“He’ll get over it,” Serafina said.

“Is Remo jealous?” I asked curiously.

Serafina shrugged. “He said he’d kill anyone who touched me, so I suppose he is.”

Leona rolled her eyes. “Mafia men are so possessive.”

“They are,” I agreed. Nino had never really showed jealousy, but he’d never had reason to.

We found our men with Savio and Adamo in the gaming room, having drinks.

“Fuck,” Savio exclaimed when he spotted us, setting down his glass. He was already dressed for the occasion. Form-fitting dark blue slacks and an even tighter white dress shirt that showed off his muscled body. He’d have more trouble fending off admirers than we would. “We’re screwed, Adamo. We can only lose this gig.”

The other men turned, and their reactions were a mix of slack-jawed surprise and disapproving scowl, Adamo and Savio the former, Remo, Nino and Fabiano the latter.

“What the hell is that thing you’re wearing?” Savio asked me.

“It’s a dress,” I said, flushing.

“I know what dresses look like and that’s not it. That’s the lovechild of a tanktop and a bandana,” Savio said.

Ignoring him, I gave Nino a hopeful smile and he came over and touched my waist before whispering in my ear. “Don’t get too drunk. I want to shove up that dress and bury my face between your legs tonight. I want you to think of my tongue in your pussy when you dance later—to imagine how hard you come when I lick you, and you will again, tonight, if you stay lucid enough.”

My cheeks heated and I had to suppress an embarrassed laugh. Nino pulled back, looking cool as a cucumber.

Savio let out a low whistle. “Your face goes well with the color of your dress.”

I considered throttling him with the strap of my purse.

“How the fuck are we supposed to stop men from slobbering all over them? That’s going to be a hell of a job.”

“If someone touches Kiara, you’ll give me a call, Savio.”

“Nino,” I said with a small giggle. “You won’t ruin Serafina’s hen party by killing anyone.”

Nino regarded me with that stoic calm that told me nothing I said would change his mind. “I’ll only capture them today. I’ll kill them tomorrow.”

“That sounds reasonable,” deadpanned Serafina with a roll of her eyes.

Leona was busy talking Fabiano out of whatever overprotective mode he was in. Only Remo looked surprisingly calm. He gave me a twisted grin and kissed Serafina fiercely. The look she gave him after would have made me blush further if I wasn’t already red-faced.

“You keep a close eye on them, got it?” Remo told his brothers after he’d pulled away from the kiss.

Savio sighed. “Let me guess, you’re going to send me to Kansas if I don’t, right?”

“If you’re lucky,” Remo said.

Nino lightly caressed my butt. “Remember what I told you.”



“The Cosmos is the best club in Vegas right now,” Savio said as he parked in the side alley.

Leona, Serafina and I sat on the backseat of the SUV while Adamo and Savio made up the front. “Have you ever been to a club, Adamo?” I asked curiously.

Adamo glanced back. “Sure. A few times.”

Savio nodded toward the front. “There are Mick and Diego.”

We all got out of the car and headed for the waiting men. Like Savio, they were dressed in form-fitting slacks and dress-shirts that accentuated their muscular bodies. Diego and Mick lost their composure for a moment seeing us.

“I’ll give you one more second to get a grip on your fucking dicks or I’ll kick your asses,” Savio called.

Diego and Mick tore their eyes away. Diego was the bulkier of the two, broad shouldered, wrestler-like, while Mick looked like a runner, tall, with more sinewy muscle. Savio clapped each hand briefly before he nodded toward us. “Leona, Fabiano’s girl, Serafina is Remo’s wife, and Kiara, Nino’s wife. I don’t think I’ll have to say more?”

Diego gave us a polite smile. His gaze had trouble not straying below our faces. Adamo came over to us. “Hey.”

He shook their hands then shoved his own back into the pockets of his black jeans and checked our surroundings. At the end of the alley, we saw part of the queue waiting to get inside.

“So how do we do this?” Diego asked, rolling up his sleeves.

“One on one?” Mick suggested, doing the same.

Savio narrowed his eyes in thought. His sleeves were already rolled up. Leona sent me a questioning look.

“Sleeves up, Adamo,” Savio said.

Adamo scoffed but did as he was asked. Diego and Mick’s gazes dropped to the burnt tattoo on his forearm and Adamo’s face darkened.

“Many people know this means they better stay away from us,” Savio explained, indicating his tattoo.

“Scare tactics,” Serafina said with a laugh.

“We’ll need them,” Savio muttered. “You girls probably want to dance on your own?”

I shrugged, not having given it much thought.

“We want to have fun together and not have you attached to our hips all night,” Serafina said.

“All right,” Savio said. “We’ll dance close to you, but if guys are too touchy each of you will have to dance with one of us so the assholes think you’re our girlfriends.”

“You’re younger than us,” Leona said.

Savio flashed her a cocky grin. “Barely, and we don’t look it.” He was right. They appeared like grown men, not teenagers, hardened by what they’d seen and done, and with a confidence usually reserved for older guys.

Savio gave his friends a sign. “Let’s go.”

Together we headed for the end of the alley and passed the queue toward the two bouncers, tall tattooed guys. Savio gave them a curd nod and they let us through.

“Does this club belong to the Camorra?” I asked Diego because he was closest to me.

Surprise crossed his face, then pride. “Every club in Vegas does. The Falcones kicked the Russians and the MCs out when they claimed power.”

Savio turned briefly and smirked. Diego returned the look.

A hard beat which pounded in my body greeted us inside the club. Everything glowed in a pinkish light and the ceiling looked as if it was made of thousands of crystals which threw the light right back. The club was crowded with convulsing bodies, trapped in the thrall of the music. I took everything in, the way everyone seemed to lose themselves to the bass, some of them with eyes closed. People rarely understood what music did to me, but in this moment, in this club, everyone was a slave to the melody.

Excitement bubbled up in me and my pulse picked up, caught up in the magic of the fast beat. Serafina flashed me a grin, and Leona, too, looked ecstatic. We headed over to the bar and ordered a Cosmopolitan for each of us.

“This is cool,” Serafina shouted over the noise.

I nodded, sipping my drink, taking in everything. Savio, Adamo, Diego and Mick were at the other end of the bar, pretending to be on a boy’s night out, and maybe to strangers it looked convincing, but I saw the concentration and vigilance on their faces.

I turned away from them, taking another sip, and began to bounce to the music. Soon all three of us were buzzing with the need to dance, so we drank faster.

“Here they come,” Leona shouted.

I followed her gaze, and saw a group of three guys heading our way. Nicely dressed, smiling. I was trying to come up with a nice way to let them down. Serafina was quicker. She shook her head at them and lifted a finger, looking like the ice princess she told me she’d been known for in the past. The men came to a stop, unsure if Leona and I shared Serafina’s opinion. I shook my head as well and finally they turned away.

I gave Serafina a grateful smile. “I didn’t think it would be this easy to keep them away.”

Serafina shook her head. “They’ll return later once they’ve had more drinks.”

We made our way over to the dance floor and began to dance close together, grinning at each other. I raised my arms,

twisted and turned, letting the music guide my movements. Trying to ignore the looks of the surrounding men soon became difficult, and I noticed how several of them danced closer and closer to us, so Leona, Serafina and I had to build an even tighter circle. Soon the presence of two guys behind me, the way they tried to dance with me, became overwhelming. I shook my head at them, but they smiled as if they thought they only needed to try harder. Serafina glowered at a guy behind her and shouted something—from the look on her face, nothing nice.

Leona shoved a guy's chest when he came too close.

One of the guys behind me danced even closer and reached for my hip. I shoved his hand away, my pulse picking up. "No. Leave."

He scowled at my rebuke. From the way his eyes shone it was plain that he was drunk. He took a step closer and tried to bring our bodies in for a dance. A tall figure shouldered him out of the way and for a moment I thought it was Savio. Then I saw the curls. Adamo faced off with the guy like Savio and Diego did with Leona's and Serafina's admirers. Mick stayed a few steps back, keeping an eye on the general public.

Adamo shouted something and the guy backed off. After that Adamo danced close to me while Diego danced with Leona and Savio with Serafina. I smiled up at Adamo who moved easily to the music and he gave me a small smile in return. Serafina and Savio had their own private dance battle and they seemed to enjoy it thoroughly and Leona was grinning too, even though Diego looked tense dancing close to her.

Eventually my bladder asked for relief. I leaned up to Adamo. "I need to go to the bathroom."

"I'll go with you," he shouted back. We motioned at Savio who nodded. Adamo grabbed my hand and we made our way through the crowd until we arrived in the back where the restrooms were located. The music was a distant throb that still reverberated in my body, calling for me to return and lose myself again. Of course, there was a crowd in front of the

girls' room, which meant at least a ten minute wait. I really wished I'd gone sooner because I wasn't sure I could wait that long.

Adamo shook his head. "That's ridiculous." He tugged me along toward the men's restroom.

"What are you doing?"

"Saving time." He shoved the door open and we stepped inside. "Better close your eyes until I tell you to open them again."

I squeezed my eyes closed, only briefly catching a glance of men's backs in front of urinals. I let Adamo lead me along, trying to ignore the biting stench, until he stopped me with a soft touch on my shoulders. "All clear."

Opening my eyes, I found myself in front of an open toilet stall. I went inside and closed the door, then considered my options. Touching any part of the toilet was out of the question so I started ripping off toilet paper to build my personal bird nest. It was strange taking a pee surrounded by male voices who were guffawing and bragging, and even their bodily noises were louder than any girl's I'd ever heard. When I was done, I hesitated. "Adamo?"

No reply. Sighing, I opened the door, trying not to see anything I really didn't want to see. Adamo was nowhere to be seen. Stepping out of the stall, several guys glanced my way. If the same happened in a girl's restroom, everyone would start screaming, but these guys seemed not to care that I was there while they peed into urinals. Keeping my eyes straight ahead, I quickly went over to the sink and washed my hands, wondering where the hell Adamo had gone.

I headed for the exit and stepped out into the dimly lit hallway. The girl's queue had barely moved. I caught sight of familiar brown hair further down the corridor. Adamo talked to two guys and one of them handed him a small, clear bag and Adamo handed something back to them. My heart sank, realizing what it had to be.

Adamo glanced my way and he quickly excused himself and hurried over to me, shoving something into his pocket.

“Kiara, I thought girls need longer in the bathroom.”

“The men’s restroom doesn’t really make you want to linger.”

Adamo nodded, looking caught. He ran a hand through his unruly locks. “Listen, please don’t tell anyone. I’m not addicted or anything, it just helps me forget what happened. Without the weed, I wouldn’t be able to sleep at all at night.”

“Only weed?” I asked. It was bad enough but there were many worse options he could consume.

“Only weed,” he said. “I didn’t want you to see, to put you in a position where you have to keep a secret from Nino. You won’t tell my brothers, right?”

His eyes begged me, and remembering the haunted looks he so often displayed, I nodded. “I won’t, but promise to try to stop completely. Talk about what happened instead, maybe that’ll help.”

Adamo nodded but I could tell he wouldn’t. “Let’s get back before Savio gets suspicious.”

We headed back to the dancefloor and Adamo started to dance at once giving me a challenging smile. Pushing my worries aside, I returned the smile and danced with him. Leona laughed at something Diego said and Serafina was holding a bottle of champagne in her hand. She took a huge gulp then held it out to me. I grabbed it and tipped it back, letting the prickling liquid carry away my concern.

I definitely wasn’t lucid when we returned to the mansion. Leona was the only one who could still walk on her own, being more restrained when it came to alcohol—

except for her birthday bash. Adamo lifted me out of the car with a grunt and carried me into the building while Savio held Serafina.

“A little help?” he called, when we stepped into the gaming room.

“Weren’t you supposed to keep an eye on them and not let them get completely shit-faced?” Remo said.

I giggled when Nino came into view and with a small frown took me from Adamo.

“Your wife is like a fucking fury when you try to take her bottle of champagne away from her. I didn’t want her to scratch out my eyes or kick my balls,” Savio said.

“Where are Greta and Nevio?” Serafina slurred.

I peered up at Nino with a grin.

“Upstairs, asleep, just like you will be soon,” Remo said.

“I don’t want to sleep,” Serafina said.

Savio groaned, and Adamo left, shaking his head.

I giggled again.

“I’m not into being puked on during sex, Angel,” Remo said.

Nino rolled his eyes and began to walk away. The last thing I heard was Serafina mumbling something about doggy style.

Nino carried me into our room and I tried to give him a seductive smile. His brows drew together. “I told you to stay lucid. You didn’t. You’ll have to live with the consequences.”

“Nino,” I mumbled indignantly.

He shook his head and undressed me, then himself. I tried to wrap my legs around his hips when he joined me in bed but he gently turned me around so my back was pressed to his chest. “

Sometimes I hate your control...”

He chuckled and kissed my neck. “It’s as hard for me as it is for you, but we need to make sure you behave next time.”

CHAPTER 17



NINO

Having a small wedding in our circles was a social *faux-pas*, especially if a Capo married, but I was glad Remo and Serafina had chosen to keep it in the family. It made the preparations less complicated, particularly the safety measures. Of course, it would have been even less hassle if Remo hadn't chosen to invite Serafina's twin.

"I don't trust him," I said quietly as Remo got dressed in one of the guestrooms in my wing. He wasn't supposed to see Serafina before the ceremony. Kiara and Serafina were really adamant about it. Kiara had been going absolutely overboard taking on the entire organization of the decoration, cooking, song selection, and everything else.

Remo closed the last button of his black dress shirt. "Neither do I, but Samuel would do anything for his sister. I see how close Nevio and Greta already are, even though they're still small. Serafina and Samuel have formed a bond all their lives. He won't do anything that could hurt her."

"I assume neither would you, which makes this is a risk after all."

Remo smiled twistedly. "You're right. I won't lay a hand on Samuel unless he attacks Serafina, which he won't. But I know that nothing would hold you back if you considered Samuel a threat to any of us."

I gave a tense nod. Letting the enemy not only into our city, but into our home, wasn't something I was comfortable with and if Samuel acted out of turn, he'd pay the price for it. I would have killed him last time we captured him, if it hadn't been for Remo's veto.

I glanced out toward the gardens where an arc with white flowers had been set up by Kiara who was now spreading petals in a path from the house down to it. She'd barely had a moment of rest these last few weeks, always caring for the twins, the wedding, for every member of this family, and while she enjoyed doing it, that wasn't the only reason why. We'd been trying for so long to get her pregnant, without success. I'd considered bridging the subject of seeing a doctor and chose to wait until the festivities were over and we had some peace.

Adamo joined her outside for a smoke. I sighed then turned back to Remo who put the small parcel with Serafina's ring into his pocket.

"I'm still concerned how Adamo will take it. Samuel was among his torturers."

Familiar hatred burned in Remo's eyes. "He was. I won't ever forgive the asshole, but for Serafina I'll allow him to live, to be here."

My phone beeped. It was a message from Fabiano. "They're here."

"Then go down and keep an additional eye on him."

Nodding, I headed outside. When I arrived at the arc, Fabiano and Samuel were crossing the Scuderi premises toward our garden. Samuel's demeanor changed, becoming more vigilant when he noticed me. Sadly, he didn't reach for his gun. Kiara had disappeared from view and she'd return soon. The idea of having Samuel close to my wife didn't sit well with me.

Fabiano gave me a curt nod then said something to Samuel, who shook his head and motioned to a spot a good distance to the side of the arc where he stopped, never taking his eyes off me. He and Fabiano looked distantly related even though they weren't. Both the blond of the Outfit they were famous for.

Our eyes met and I saw the same eagerness in his face that I felt, a desire to end this today, once and for all, but for Remo

I'd hold back. In my peripheral vision, I noticed Kiara coming my way with the twins on her hips. She looked beautiful in a red summer dress with her dark hair flowing down her shoulders and the babies on her arms. Her face was glowing with happiness, a sight that always stirred something in me, even on days when the emptiness of the past filled my chest.

Savio was a few steps behind her, stuffing his shirt into his pants and glaring toward Samuel. I met Kiara halfway and took Nevio from her, who squirmed and twisted, wanting to walk as usual. Kiara smiled and her eyes darted toward Samuel. "Do you think he wants to see his niece and nephew?"

"We won't let him near the children without Serafina and Remo present," I said.

Kiara nodded. "I guess that's for the best."

Nevio let out an angry screech when I didn't put him down.

"No," I said firmly. "If you calm down, I'll set you down."

Nevio's eyes flashed with anger and he started wailing. Ignoring his tantrum, Kiara and I headed over to the arc.

"I really prefer doll-face's quiet," Savio muttered then poked Nevio lightly in the belly when he stopped beside us. "How about you stop the bawling, PIA?"

"You're lucky Remo didn't hear that," Kiara said disapprovingly. Savio had been calling Nevio pain-in-the-ass for a while now. Nevio was definitely the more taxing child.

I could feel Samuel's gaze on us and turned to him. He looked from Nevio to Greta, but his expression remaining perfectly guarded. That was the Cavallaro gene.

Savio grimaced. "Fuck. I really wanted to smash his face in. I can't believe he's standing here in our fucking garden, in our fucking city after what he and his family did to Adamo and Remo."

Remo could forgive Samuel for his own torture—he considered it fair game, but not Adamo. That was a mistake

Cavallaro would pay for one day.

“Maybe it’s a first step toward peace,” Kiara said, trying to put a white flower into Greta’s locks. Greta followed everything curiously with her eyes.

Savio scoffed, his eyes flickering with hatred. “There won’t ever be peace between the Camorra and the Outfit.”

Kiara glanced at me, and while I didn’t like the hopeful look in them, I liked lying to my wife even less.

“He’s right.” It was difficult enough to maintain peace with the Famiglia. Luca would cancel the truce the moment we approached Cavallaro.

Greta fumbled for the flower, grabbed it with her small fingers and stuffed it into her mouth.

“Careful,” Savio hissed.

“They are edible, don’t worry,” Kiara said and started laughing. Part of the flower peeked out between Greta’s pouty lips. Her eyes darted from Kiara to Savio then me and Nevio.

Kiara’s eyes flew back to the mansion where Leona was waving at her. “I think my presence is required. Can you take her?”

Savio’s eyebrows shot up. “I never held her. She’ll cry.”

“Give it a try,” I said. Greta had been watching Savio with more interest these last couple of weeks, more willing to tolerate his easy-going nature than my more reserved approach.

Savio leaned down so he was eyelevel with Greta who still had two petals stuck to her mouth. “All righty doll-face, I’m going to take you know. No crying.” Kiara held her out and Savio carefully took her, and then held her against his chest. Greta’s eyes had grown wide but she was still quiet.

“I’m not sure I like the look on your face,” Savio murmured. He bent down to pick up another flower and held it in front of Greta’s face. “Here, have another snack.”

With a laugh, Kiara hurried toward Leona. Greta ate that flower as well then peering up at Savio, she pulled her fingers from her mouth and touched Savio's chin.

Savio sighed, his mouth curling in disdain. "Baby spittle on my face, the highlight of my day."

"You also got a petal in your stubble," I said.

Savio gave me a long-suffering look. "I worked so hard to earn my street credit. This could ruin everything."

I raised my eyebrows. "If that bull tattoo didn't ruin your reputation, nothing will."

He smirked. "You just can't accept that the ladies like it."

"To be honest, I couldn't care less." Nevio let out another screech and twisted in my hold, determined to get down to the ground.

"We'll need a leash for him soon," Savio said.

"I want to see you put a leash on Nevio when Remo's around."

"That kid's name is trouble." Savio peered down at Greta who suckled on her fingers. "Am I right, doll-face?"

She grinned toothlessly, a petal clinging to her tongue. She tried to get it off and started drooling. Savio quickly snatched the petal. Greta grabbed his hand and began chewing on his finger. He gave me a look.

"No lewd comment," I warned.

Savio scoffed. "I'm not that fucking depraved to make that kind of joke around doll-face, trust me."

"We'll see. Nevio and her won't always be babies. One day they'll be teenagers."

Savio shook his head. "Doll-face, promise to stay away from guys like me."

"I doubt any man with a flicker of sanity will dare to approach Remo's daughter."

“And if any asshole does, I’ll chop his cock into pieces and feed them to him,” Remo growled as he came to a stop beside us. One of his eyebrows rose when he saw Greta on Savio’s arm and the petal still stuck to his dark stubble. “I see you used your charm on my daughter.”

Savio flashed a grin. “I’m a ladies’ man.”

Greta made grabby hands toward Remo who smiled and took her from Savio. He kissed her forehead, then he looked towards Samuel who was watching us. Remo’s expression hardened, his eyes filling with contempt.

“I’m surprised you have enough restraint not to slash his throat,” Savio said with a nod at Serafina’s brother.

Nevio twisted again, getting angrier. He began to kick, gearing up for the second screaming fit of the day. “It’s enough.”

Remo’s eyes darted to us. “Nevio, you heard what Nino said. *Enough.*”

Nevio stopped squirming.

“Good,” I said. “Now that you’re behaving you can run around.” I set him down. A grin split his face and then he dashed off, wobbling like a little drunk straight toward Samuel.

“Fuck,” Remo growled.

“I’ll get him.” I jogged after Nevio and got him before he reached his uncle. Samuel hadn’t been looking at him anyway. His narrowed eyes were on Remo, and when I straightened only a few steps from him, they settled on me. I returned his gaze steadily.

A cold smile stretched his lips. “Looking into your eyes, I don’t get how Fina can allow her kids to be near you. No emotions, right?”

I didn’t say anything, only regarded him coolly while Nevio squirmed in my arms once more.

“You could probably kill us all even the babies, without blinking and then have a piece of that wedding cake while

you're still covered in our blood.”

I smiled. “I could kill you now and have my cake with my clothing unsoiled.”

Samuel's eyes flashed with eagerness.

“Nino,” Kiara said, stepping between Samuel and me. “Serafina, will be ready soon, why don't you take your place by the arc?” Then she turned to Samuel. “Hello, Samuel. I'm sure your sister will be very happy to see you. She misses you.”

Samuel's brows drew together but he inclined his head politely.

Kiara took my hand and led me toward the arc. “I know you don't like him, but today is about Serafina and Remo, not blood-spilling.”

“It's not a matter of liking. He poses a threat and almost killed my brothers.”

“A wedding is about bringing people together, so please ignore him.”

I gave her a small smile that was meant to set her at ease, even though my insides yearned for violence and revenge. “You don't have to worry, Kiara. I won't make a move toward him. I'm in this for the long run.”

Kiara stood on her tiptoes so she could kiss me. Nevio let out another screech, causing her to laugh. “Time for your mom and dad to marry. I hope you'll behave.”

“Chances are slim. He's a fatal combination of Remo, Savio and Adamo.”

Kiara tilted her head. “Nothing of you?”

I glanced towards Greta, whom Remo carried around. “Greta's like me.”

“I know, and so does Remo, right?”

I nodded. Remo and I hadn't talked about it, but he was too perceptive not to realize it.



The wedding ceremony passed without incident and Serafina was very happy about her twin's presence, which led to my brother being happy as well. Seeing Remo content at all was a rare experience, so I tried to make peace with Samuel's attendance. There would be enough time to kill him later once Serafina had gotten used to being without him.

I didn't miss Adamo's furious eyes when he saw one of his tormentors. He hadn't argued when Remo and I had asked him if it was okay for Samuel to attend. I made my way over to him, while Serafina and Remo talked to Samuel.

Adamo stood off to the side, smoking. Remo and I had given up trying to bring an end to this habit. He was almost sixteen, old enough to decide for himself. Taking another drag, he tore his eyes from Samuel when he noticed me.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Sure," he murmured. Then he put out the cigarette on his forearm where the burn scars marred his tattoo. I gripped his wrist hard to stop him. "What are you doing?"

Adamo frowned. "With the kids running around, I don't want to leave butts on the ground."

"Adamo," I said tightly. "What the hell are you doing?" I jerked his arm toward me, checking the small burn. There were similar marks all over his burnt skin. I looked into his eyes but he merely stared back.

"It's not like I'm feeling much. The skin there is pretty much dead anyway."

I released him, peering over my shoulder toward the others. No one was looking our way. "This needs to stop."

"Why? Didn't you listen? The skin is numb. It doesn't matter."

"It does," I growled. "Is this because Samuel is here today? You should have said something. Remo wouldn't have

allowed him into the city if we'd known you're dealing badly with it."

Adamo glanced toward Samuel again. "I'm not dealing with it badly. It's good that he's here. Maybe there can be peace."

The look in his eyes wasn't that of someone who wanted peace. I stepped even closer. "Adamo, if you need help, you can always come to us. You know we'd die for you."

"I know," Adamo said. "Remo almost did, remember?"

Giggling sounded and Nevio staggered toward us, falling down twice before he finally bumped into Adamo's legs. Adamo smiled and ruffled his hair. "Hey kiddo."

It was strange to see him like that, no longer the kid he always was for my brothers and me, but grown and angry and jaded. So much like the teenage Remo, it worried me.

Nevio raised his arms and Adamo shook his head. "Go to Nino."

I picked up Nevio and held him with one arm. Adamo motioned toward the arc. "Kiara is trying to get us to come over. Why don't you go ahead? I need to go to the bathroom."

I narrowed my eyes, having a feeling that he wouldn't join us anytime soon. I decided to give him the space he needed and headed toward my wife and the others. When I stopped beside them, Kiara gave me a worried look.

"Everything okay?"

I nodded, not wanting to burden her with this. She had enough to deal with because of her problems to conceive.

"He's been pulling back," Fabiano said, watching Adamo.

Savio grimaced. "He changed."

Adamo disappeared inside the mansion. I should tell Remo about Adamo's new habit to burn himself. However, Remo had a certain way of dealing with problems that might not help in Adamo's situation.

Keeping a secret from him and from Kiara wasn't something I liked to do, but maybe it was for the best until I knew exactly what we were dealing with.

KIARA

A couple of days after the wedding, Serafina, Leona and I poured ourselves glasses of champagne and settled on the sun chairs. We still had a few leftover bottles from the wedding and now that Fabiano had asked for Leona's hand, we had reason to celebrate.

"I still can't believe he asked me to marry him," Leona whispered, beaming at the diamond ring on her finger.

"The wedding seemed to motivate him," Serafina said with a smile.

I raised my glass. "See, I told you he would ask."

Within the first hour we started our second bottle, and somehow we ended up talking about sex. The alcohol helped lower our inhibitions, though Serafina was definitely the one with the least problems to discuss those matters, which wasn't that strange considering who she was married to—being around Remo all the time, you just got desensitized.

"What was the strangest place where you've had sex?" Serafina asked over her glass, her eyes glowing with mischief.

Leona considered that with pursed lips. "The fight cage in the Camorra gym? Or maybe in Fabiano's car on our favorite hill?"

Serafina took a sip. "Fight cage, that sounds thrilling." She drew her lower lip between her teeth with a small smile. I had a feeling Remo would soon get another reason why he loved the cage.

"And you?" I asked her, feeling tipsy and warm.

"During our runs in the canyon, in the pool, in an elevator, in the alley behind the Sugar Trap ... but my favorite was in the gardens here," she said with a small laugh.

"That's not very daring," Leona said.

Serafina gave me an apologetic smile, and I wondered what it meant. “When I was still a captive, Remo and I made out under your bedroom window—while you and Nino...”

Leona’s mouth fell open and she clapped a palm over it with a giggle.

Acute embarrassment washed over me. “Really?”

Serafina gave a small nod.

“Oh God, what did you hear?” I shook my head. “No, don’t tell me. How embarrassing.”

“I think the ones who should be embarrassed are Remo and Fina for spying on you,” Leona said with a laugh.

“As if Remo would be embarrassed about that,” I muttered. I nudged Serafina’s knee. “How can I face him again knowing you listened to us?”

“It was a long time ago,” Serafina said and clinked her glass against mine. “And from what I heard you’re a lucky girl.” She laughed at my expression. Had she heard when Nino had gone down on me?

“He likes to travel to Down Under?” Leona said, her cheeks flushing even as she giggled.

I drank the rest of my champagne. “Don’t Fabiano and Remo?” I shot back, trying to pay them back, but they weren’t as shy about these topics as me, especially Serafina.

“Oh, Remo loves it.”

“Fabiano as well,” Leona said with a conspiratorial smile.

I let myself fall back on the sun chair and stared up at the sky. I was torn between laughter and acute mortification.

Serafina nudged my thigh. “Come on. No reason to be embarrassed. It’s good that we have men who know how to make us happy, right?”

“Right.” I sat up.

Serafina smiled. “Okay, I’ll tell you about another place to distract you.”

“I swear if you and Remo had sex in our bed, I’m going to freak.”

She shook her head. “We had sex on Savio’s flamingo.”

I burst out laughing.

“I’ve always wondered how that works,” Leona mused. “You can’t really be both up there without the thing turning over...”

Serafina filled our glasses again, emptying the bottle. Luckily there was a third one in the cooler waiting for us. I had a feeling I’d need more alcohol.

“Okay, we had a form of sex on there. It’s really comfy relaxing in that thing with your feet dipping into the pool while a guy is dipping his tongue into your pool.”

Champagne shot out of my nose when I snort-laughed, my skin heating. “TMI, Fina!”

Leona was grabbing the edge of her sun chair so she didn’t fall off as she giggled and sloshed alcohol everywhere.

“Does Savio know?” Leona asked.

“I doubt he’d care,” I said. “The flamingo has seen a lot from what I hear.”

Serafina shrugged. “We cleaned it afterward, so...”

I clamped a hand over my eyes, unable to believe the turn our conversation had taken. A few years ago something like this would have been impossible for me.

“What about you, Kiara? What’s the freakiest place where you had sex?”

I peered at Serafina through my fingers then lowered them slowly, sending her an embarrassed smile. I ran my fingers along the rim of the glass as I contemplated how little I’d done so far. We hadn’t ventured out of our bedroom often so far. “We made out in the shower of the changing room in Roger’s Arena once, and in the pool,” I said. “But that’s it. I think Nino’s holding back for me.”

Serafina pursed her lips. “Then you’ll have to show him that you want to be more adventurous. I can really recommend doing it somewhere in the nature or try the flamingo.”

I shoved my glass toward her. “I need more alcohol.”

We had finished the third bottle and had moved on to a peppermint schnapps Serafina had discovered somewhere in the back of the bar when the men found us. By then we were completely trashed.

Remo was carrying Greta and Nevio, and cocked his eyebrows when he saw us. “I see you found Savio’s secret stash of schnapps.”

I took a gulp from my glass and shuddered from the taste. “Disgusting. It tastes like toothpaste.” Then I laughed, and Serafina and Leona joined in.

“That didn’t stop you from emptying the bottle, I see,” Nino said, lifting the schnapps bottle.

Fabiano walked over to Leona and helped her to her feet. She fell into his arms, grinning. “We talked about traveling Down Under.”

Fabiano frowned and he glanced at Remo then Nino who shrugged. “Maybe next year.”

Serafina and I burst out laughing.

“I hope you head *Down Under* more than once a year,” Serafina teased.

Realization crossed Fabiano’s face and he cocked an eyebrow. “Come on, Leona. I’m in the mood for some traveling.”

Remo shook his head. Nevio was babbling and laughing, determined to be in on the fun even if he had no clue what it was. Greta, as usual, watched everything with her quiet scrutiny.

“I guess I should try to get our little monsters to sleep. You’re probably randy as fuck after all the sex talk?” Remo said and gave Serafina his twisted smile. She pushed to her feet, swayed then managed to make her way over to her

husband and twins. “I’m in the mood for a bit of *Down Under* traveling too.”

They disappeared and I stumbled to my feet, but plopped back down on the chair again. Nino came over and I smiled up at him. Slowly my eyes traveled the length of his body, the way his shirt hugged his muscles, and my core tightened with need. Nino bent over me, grabbing my waist to pull me to my feet. I grabbed his neck and kissed him. He responded but he was restrained. I pulled back. “I want you.”

He searched my eyes. “You’re very drunk.”

“I always want you. I don’t need to be sober for it. This isn’t a first date,” I joked. I cupped him through his pants, kneading lightly and feeling him harden under my touch.

Nino’s mouth twitched. “I see alcohol lowers your inhibitions.”

“Does it bother you if I’m like this?” I asked and didn’t stop rubbing him, enjoying how quickly he responded to me, how eager he was for me.

Nino got down on his haunches, leaving me no choice but to release him. “No, I’m glad that you’re finally confident enough to say what you want and act on your desires.”

He wrapped one arm around my waist and leaned closer as his other hand slipped under my skirt and began stroking me. I was already wet and aching for him. I looked towards the house, wondering how much of this would be visible from the windows. This part of the pool area wasn’t as hidden as the pool itself. I didn’t see anyone but the risk remained. Most of it would be shielded by Nino’s broad back though. Nino followed my gaze. “Should I stop and continue inside?”

I shook my head quickly. “No.”

His mouth twitched and he slowly pushed two fingers into me. I gasped at the delicious stretch as he thrust into me.

“Fina told me that she and Remo listened in on us having sex once,” I said between moans, curious about Nino’s reaction and surprised when he only nodded.

“I know. Remo told me, and I heard them through the open window.”

My eyes widened. “You knew they were listening and you didn’t stop?”

“I didn’t care but I knew you would so I didn’t tell you.”

“Oh God, please kick Remo’s ass next time he tries something like that.”

Nino thrust into me again. “I’ll let him know your feelings on the matter.”

I moaned, then shook my head. “No...no, don’t. I’d rather he forget it ever happened.”

Nino nodded, his eyes focused on his fingers, and my toes began to curl at his hungry look. My release hit me and my arms gave out. I fell back on the chair, moaning and giggling., completely overwhelmed and also increasingly dizzy.

Nino’s head appeared above me. “I think that’s it for now.”

“What about you?”

“Tomorrow,” he murmured and picked me up gently. I nodded groggily against his chest, then my vision turned black.

CHAPTER 18



KIARA

I had the headache of my life. Every time light met my eyes a sharp pain slashed through my brain. Holding my temple, I stumbled out of the bedroom. Nino was already gone, I guessed for his morning swim because it was already ten.

When I stepped into the kitchen, Serafina was hunched over the table, looking like a zombie. She barely glanced up and gave me a weak smile.

I tried to return the gesture but only managed a grimace. Remo's mouth pulled into his twisted grin. Nevio and Greta were busy picking at the food cubes on the plates in front of them.

I trudged toward the coffee-maker and poured myself a long black. For once no milk or sugar. Making my way over to the table, I clung to my cup as if it was my lifeline. I'd never felt like this and I definitely would never drink as much again. It had felt good to let loose yesterday, but the morning after ...

Nevio let out a happy screech when I sat down and I whimpered at the twinge the sound caused in my brain.

"Shhh," Serafina murmured, half pleading.

Remo chuckled. "You two look like death warmed over."

Neither of us reacted.

"I hope you don't expect me to make breakfast. I can't cook and I have no intention of learning it."

I glanced up. "Maybe you should."

"No, that's the perk of being Capo," he said then smiled dangerously. "Serafina mentioned she finally told you about us

listening in.”

“Remo,” Serafina hissed, then groaned and touched her head. “I told you not to mention it. I shouldn’t have.”

My cheeks heated and I grimaced. “Don’t talk about it.”

Remo leaned forward. “Next time I’ll give you a signal so you know what’s going on.”

I raised a warning finger. “Don’t you dare. Keep your nose out of my bedroom.”

Remo would have said something else to embarrass me further. Luckily Savio, Nino, and Adamo were drawn into the kitchen by the scent of coffee and they all settled around the table.

Nino regarded me closely “How do you feel?”

“Horrible.”

Nino watched me a moment longer. “Cause and effect.”

“I really love you but that’s making me want to hit you with a spoon.”

Surprise flashed in Nino’s eyes.

“Keep your kinky dominatrix shit in your bedroom, all right?” Savio said a bit too loudly.

“Can you tone it down?” Serafina muttered.

Savio grinned. “What? Don’t tell me you’ve got a headache?” This time he spoke even louder.

“Don’t we get any breakfast?” Adamo asked after a moment.

“Our resident cook is nursing a hangover,” Remo said.

“I’ll make omelet,” Nino said and got up. I sent him a grateful smile. Remo was trying to feed Greta pureed carrots while Nevio fed himself. He hated it when someone tried to feed him with a spoon, so eventually we’d just given up and put a selection of cubed veggies, meat and fruit down in front of him so he could choose what to eat.

Sipping at my coffee, I watched Remo with Nevio and Greta, how patient he was even when Nevio acted like a little monster. Remo noticed my gaze and raised his eyebrows, and I just smiled. He didn't like it when people saw his softer side.

A few minutes later Nino came over with a huge pan filled with scrambled eggs.

"I thought we'd get omelet," said Savio.

"If you're not satisfied with the provided food, you're free to cook for yourself," Nino drawled.

Savio held out his plate. "I see we're all in a bad mood this morning."

I stifled a laugh, then winced. Despite my protest, Nino put some eggs on my plate as well. "You need to eat."

I sighed, then picked up the spoon and pushed a bite into my mouth. Everything tasted stale this morning.

After returning the empty pan to the stove, Nino set down Tylenol and a big glass of apple juice in front of me. "This might help."

He sank down beside me.

Nino squeezed my thigh gently and I forced the pain killers and a large gulp of juice down my throat.

"When did you come home last night?" Nino asked Adamo.

Dark shadows spread under his eyes and he smelled faintly of smoke and beer. "Around four."

"Tomorrow's school. I don't want you out all night again."

"It's almost the end of the school year. Holidays will start soon. It's not like anything exciting is happening," Adamo mumbled, clinging to his coffee cup. "Savio's partying all the time."

"Savio's not in school, and never gets shit-faced," Remo said sharply. Greta peered up at him, her mouth smeared with puree, ignoring the spoon Seraina now held out to her.

“Savio’s also of age,” Savio said, rolling his eyes. “Man, you look like shit, even worse than our two beauties over there.”

“I just had some fun,” Adamo said defensively.

Nino frowned. “You can have fun, but you need to know your limits and not constantly cross them.”

Serafina and I exchanged a look. We hadn’t set the best example last night but it was only the second time we’d gotten drunk.

“All right,” Adamo grumbled, raising my suspicions. Usually he was more confrontational with these matters.

Remo narrowed his eyes. Greta leaned forward and made grabby hands for one of Nevio’s avocado pieces. Nevio picked it up and held it up so Greta could grab it. The piece was smashed between their hands but Greta brought the green mash to her face and stuffed her fingers into her mouth.

“I can’t stand the cuteness,” I whispered.

Savio’s lips curled. “I guess table manners don’t matter anymore.”

Serafina rolled her eyes then kissed Greta’s head. “You’d rather eat what Nevio has?”

Greta didn’t reply and when Remo held out a piece of steamed carrot to her, she took it and shoved it into her mouth, then grinned. By the end of breakfast, both Nevio and Greta had food all over their faces and hair, but looked sated and happy.

After that Nino and Remo left for a meeting with Stefano who was in town while Serafina and I tried to clean the mess the kids had caused while they played on their blanket on the floor.

I leaned against the counter and watched the two, how they interacted, peacefully sharing their toys, how Nevio quieted when it was only him and Greta.

The constant longing became more prominent and I squashed it. Some things took time.



It was mid-June when I was on my way to take a swim. I'd come to love getting in a workout in the pool early in the morning like Nino and it helped me relax. Spotting Adamo leaning against the wall all by himself, I went over to him.

Adamo's eyes were almost feverish as I settled beside him. I guessed he'd only just returned from wherever he'd spent the night. He'd been even more withdrawn since the wedding. Maybe seeing Samuel had done something to him after all. He took another drag from his cigarette before he glanced at me. It took his gaze several seconds to fully focus on me; he had taken something. The look in his eyes could only be from drugs and I didn't think it was only weed. "Adamo?"

"Yeah?" he croaked.

"What's wrong? You can tell me, you know you can trust me."

He nodded toward the burn scars on his forearm. It was the first I'd seen him with short sleeves in a while and my stomach tightened when I saw the many small cigarette burns that hadn't been there before.

"I can't forget it. I dream about it every single night. About the helplessness, the agony, and worst the unrestrained hatred in their eyes. They wanted to destroy me in the most brutal way possible only because I was a Falcone."

My throat became dry. This was probably the first time he admitted it aloud. "Because they knew it would break Remo."

Adamo nodded. "Sometimes I catch myself staring into Fina's eyes just to summon the memories of that day. They are like Samuel's and close enough to Dante's."

Oh God. What was I supposed to say to that? Adamo avoided Serafina but for this reason I hadn't expected. "Why do you try to remember?"

"Because I can't forget! It gives me a sense of control when I choose the moment the memories arise."

“I understand,” I whispered.

He tossed away the cigarette. “I thought I was different. I tried to tell myself that I was, but I’m not.”

“What do you mean?”

“I want revenge. I want to make them bleed, even if I know it’s not going to change a thing, only lead to more violence, to more misery.” He ran a shaking hand through his hair.

“What did you take?”

“What?”

“You are high,” I said quietly.

I could see his defenses coming up. Adamo had learned to keep secrets, and I worried how many he hid behind his mask.

Adamo stood. “Nobody in the Camorra would sell me drugs, Kiara. How could I be high?”

“I saw you buy something from those guys at the club.”

He shook his head. “That was a one-time thing. When they found out who I was, they refused to sell me anything.”

That was likely the truth, but he was lying now anyway. He *had* taken something.

“Adamo, your brothers love you.” I rose and touched his arm. “Don’t let what happened break you. Don’t let it change you. You are the kindest man I know.”

“I’m not kind!” He grasped my upper arms in a tight grip, his eyes flashing with despair even as they went out of focus. If he didn’t get drugs from the Camorra, the only other options were the Bratva, the Cartel or a local MC, and that was utter insanity. Las Vegas was firmly in Camorra hands.

It meant he had to get his supplies when he was allowed to race in other states.

“I’m not kind,” he repeated, his fingers tightening further.

“You’re hurting me.”

Adamo's gaze darted to his hands and he jerked away from me, shaking his head over and over again. "I'm sorry. I'm messing everything up." He backed away slowly, a look of plain guilt on his face and then he turned, ran away and disappeared around the corner of the house.

I'd sworn to Adamo that our conversations would stay confidential. It was why he'd opened up to me at all. Could I keep this from his brothers and everyone else? Should I?

I closed my eyes. I'd wait a few days before I made a decision.



The next day I was on my way to my swim but froze in the threshold to the communal space, surprised to find Nino in the gaming room with the twins. I thought he was already swimming his laps. Maybe Serafina had asked him to watch the twins while she got ready. I paused in the doorway. He sat on the sofa with Nevio beside him. Greta stumbled closer, her dark eyes fixing on the book in Nino's lap. She held on to his knee, still not as steady on her legs as her twin. Nevio had already lost interest in the pages and was palming Nino's tattoos again, babbling in obvious delight.

Nino watched Greta closely. She tried to catch a glimpse at the book but was too small until Nino lifted the book in her direction which in turn made Nevio unhappy, resulting in a warning cry that could very well lead to a full-blown screaming session.

"If I pick you up, you and Nevio can both see the book," Nino explained calmly. Greta peered at him with those huge eyes, melting my heart with her adorableness.

Nino lowered his arms, moving slowly to give her time before he slid one hand under her nappy-clad bum while the other steadied her back. He lifted her off the floor, eyes focused on her face as if he worried she'd start bawling any moment. For a long time Remo had been the only one she accepted. Now that Savio had been allowed to hold her, it

seemed that she'd grown to trust the men in this family. She remained quiet and her expression made it clear that she wasn't too enthused about the situation yet. Nino cradled her in his arm and pointed at the book. Of course, Nevio immediately climbed on top of him as well, and as I watched eventually both Greta and Nevio settled on Nino's lap while he quietly explained the images to them. My heart felt so full, I wasn't sure how it didn't burst, and soon traitorous tears gathered in my eyes.

Serafina appeared beside me and hugged me. "You'll have this soon too. You and Nino deserve to be parents."

I nodded and didn't dare to say anything from fear of bawling. Maybe it was time to stop pretending everything would be fine and make a doctor's appointment. For some reason I was scared of finding out what was wrong, *if* something was wrong. The idea that it had something to do with my past terrified me.



I came out of the bathroom, ready for bed where Nino was already waiting for me.

"Kiara."

Nino's voice was off and made me turn around to him. He sat up slowly in bed, his eyes flickering with something fierce and harsh, something terrifying. I followed his keen eyes to my upper arms and felt the color drain from my face.

Adamo must have gripped me even harder than I thought, considering the bluish fingerprints blooming on my skin.

Nino got out of bed, his body tense and predatory as he stalked toward me. He traced my bruises with his fingertips, making me wonder how his touch could be this gentle when there was murder in his eyes. "Who did this?"

"Nino," I began, unsure what to tell him, how to tell him anything without breaking Adamo's trust, and wondering if

maybe there was no other way to save the youngest Falcone brother.

“Who hurt you?” Nino rasped, and the fury in his eyes, albeit not directed at me, sent a stab of fear through me.

“It’s nothing.” I smiled, even as my face felt stiff with the forced emotion. I reached for my bathrobe, desperate to cover up the bruises and banish the brutality from Nino’s expression but he wouldn’t have it. He curled his fingers around my hand, stopping me.

“Who hurt you?”

His eyes beckoned me to reveal the truth, but to what outcome?

“He didn’t mean to hurt me. It was an accident ...”

I swallowed because Nino’s mouth pulled into a scary smile. “An accident?” He cupped my face, kissing my mouth sweetly, lovingly. “Who did it? Don’t you trust me?”

I trusted Nino with my life, knowing I was safe with him, but with the same certainty I knew no one else was. “He didn’t mean it. He’s hurting.”

“Adamo,” Nino breathed, closing his eyes, and the gentleness slipped off his face. He released my cheeks and stormed out of the room.

“Nino!” I stumbled after him but he was running too fast. “Nino, don’t!”

Adamo wasn’t in his room, which was even messier than in the past. Without stopping, Nino whirled around and stormed downstairs. I managed to catch up to him when he halted for a moment in the doorway to the gaming room. Savio was on the couch, and so was Adamo for once, a fight running on the big screen.

Remo looked over from where he was pummeling the boxing sack. “What the fuck—”

He didn’t get further. Nino advanced toward Adamo who was stretched out on the sofa, gripped him by the throat and thrust him to the floor.

“Nino, don’t! Please!” I rushed toward him, trying to stop him. Nino was kneeling over Adamo, fingers digging into his throat, a look of stark brutality on his face. The muscles in his naked back flexed, making the phoenix and the flames come alive.

“You hurt Kiara?” Nino grated at Adamo.

Remo saw my bruises. He asked harshly, “Nino?”

Adamo’s head turned red under Nino’s choking hold. He made no move to defend himself, only stared up at his brother with eyes full of misery, looking almost desperate for Nino to end what he’d begun. Maybe Remo saw it, too, because for an instant his expression flickered with a look he only ever showed when their mother was mentioned.

Then he grabbed Nino’s shoulder and pulled. “Nino, stop the shit.”

Nino didn’t unfasten his hold until Savio grabbed his second arm and both he and Remo tore at him. Nino released Adamo and let Remo drag him to his feet while Savio checked his younger brother.

“You okay?”

Adamo didn’t react. He stayed on the floor, massaging his throat. His eyes came to rest on me, taking in my upper arms, and once more his expression twisted with guilt.

“I’m sorry, Kiara.”

“I know,” I said softly. I made my way over to Nino whose shoulder Remo was still gripping hard, and touched his chest. After several moments, Nino tore his gaze away from Adamo and faced me, and as always the anger disappeared in favor of something gentle. “I’m okay, all right? Adamo didn’t mean to hurt me.”

“What happened?” Remo asked his brother and me.

Adamo sat up slowly and keeping a close eye on Nino, he dared to stand. “It was an accident.”

Nino took a step in his direction. “That’s an excuse someone who hasn’t fought most of his life could use,

someone who wasn't familiar with violence and pain. But you, like me, don't cause pain by accident, Adamo."

"Not everyone is as good at giving pain as you, at controlling how you dish it out," Adamo muttered.

"I want to know what happened," Remo snapped, forcing me to meet his harsh gaze.

Nino moved between us, pushing Remo away.

"That's enough," I said, side stepping Nino to face Remo. "Nino, you know Remo won't hurt me."

Remo smiled without humor. "Why did Adamo leave bruises on your arm?"

Adamo regarded me with trepidation, fearing what I'd reveal. What would be the consequences? Remo had made it clear that he wouldn't tolerate Adamo taking drugs, but Adamo did, and not just that, he was getting them from our enemies—it couldn't be any other way.

"That look you're sharing, I don't like it one fucking bit," Remo growled, touching my arm to bring my attention back to him.

"It was an accident."

Nino made a small sound in the back of his throat, looking at me as if I was betraying him.

"Bullshit," Remo said. "One of you is going to spill the fucking beans or I'll seriously lose my shit."

Steps rang out and Serafina appeared with the twins on her arm. She frowned at the scene in front of her.

"You better leave. We have something to discuss," Nino said and Remo nodded.

Serafina's eyes darted from me to Adamo who gave her a small smile, and all I could think about was that he looked at her to remind himself of the torture he'd suffered. She turned with a last questioning look at Remo and left.

"The fucking truth, now," Remo said to me.

“I told you everything.”

Remo’s mouth thinned and he exchanged a look with Nino who stood completely still.

“Kiara,” Remo said in warning. “I’m still Capo, and I want the truth from you.”

“I won’t say more than I did. If you want to get more information out of me, you’ll have to use your fancy torturing skills.”

“Yeah, right, with those fucking doe-eyes of yours looking at me like a broken puppy. You know as well as I do that Nino and I can’t hurt a single of your unruly hairs.”

I knew Nino couldn’t hurt me, and I’d always suspected that Remo would at least hesitate before hurting me, but hearing him admit he was incapable of inflicting me pain filled me with warmth. To think that I’d been terrified of becoming a Falcone, of my marriage to Nino, when it had given me a man who loved me, and brothers that meant more to me than my blood relatives. And right now, those brothers were on the verge of attacking each other. Savio looked taken aback by everything.

Remo walked up to Adamo. “Then you’ll have to open your fucking mouth instead.”

“I told you. It was an accident. If you don’t believe me, why don’t you finish what Danilo began and burn off the rest of my tattoo?” Adamo shoved his forearm toward Remo. The upper part of the tattoo with the knife handle and part of the eye was gone, replaced by gnarly burn scars. It gave the rest of the eye that remained a sad droopy look.

Remo stiffened. “You made an oath to me. You owe me the truth.”

“Remo saved you twice, Adamo, maybe you should be grateful,” Nino said coldly.

It hurt to see the brothers like this, to see them hurting. I wasn’t sure if the truth would help them. I couldn’t imagine how it could. Adamo’s drug use would put Remo in an impossible position, especially if my suspicions were true.

“Maybe he shouldn’t have saved me,” Adamo said angrily, then shoved past Savio, grabbed car keys from the side board and rushed outside.

“What the fuck?” Savio exclaimed.

Remo and Nino both looked at me and my stomach sank.

“Does it have something to do with the cigarette burns?” Nino asked me.

Remo and Savio stared at him.

“What burns?” Remo snarled.

Savio sank down on the armrest of the sofa.

Nino touched my arms. “Kiara.”

I closed my eyes. “He’s not over what happened with the Outfit. He’s dreaming about it and looking for an outlet.” I didn’t mention Serafina’s eyes, not wanting to make her feel guilty.

“He’s back to drugs,” Remo said in a low voice. Of course, he’d figure it out.

I looked at him and nodded. Nino shook his head, frustrated.

“I want answers,” Remo said. “What cigarette burns, and where does Adamo get the fucking drugs?”

“I caught Adamo putting out a cigarette on his forearm. He claims he doesn’t feel it because of the scar tissue,” Nino explained.

“Shit,” Savio muttered.

Remo’s face was terrifying, full of fury and cold determination. “Who’s selling him the drugs?” The intensity of his gaze caused me to shudder.

“I don’t know. He told me no one in the Camorra would sell him any.”

Nino and Remo exchanged a look.

“Maybe the Bratva.”

“Do you really think he’d be that stupid to approach our enemies?” Savio asked.

“Drugs make people do stupid things,” Remo growled. “Maybe he knows people at the races who help him.”

“What are you going to do?”

“We’re going to find the people who sell him the drugs and kill them,” Nino said simply.

“And with Adamo?”

“We’ll make sure he stays in his room and goes cold turkey. I won’t have him ruin his life with drugs,” Remo said. “I’d rather lock him up until he’s clean than have him die from the shit.”

“I’ll go looking for him. I know a few places where he likes to hang, but I’ll start with C.J.’s place,” Savio said, getting to his feet and leaving.

Serafina poked her head in again, looking concerned. She carried Greta. “Can I come in?”

Remo nodded, still glaring at the floor.

“Greta’s being fussy. She doesn’t want to sleep. She seems to need closeness tonight.” Serafina scanned Remo’s face. “Why don’t you take her for a bit? Nevio’s just fallen asleep and I’m worried she’ll wake him.”

Remo nodded again slowly, and moved over to his wife. He kissed her then took Greta who immediately clung to him. Serafina whispered something but Remo shook his head. She touched his arm briefly then headed back up.

“Come on,” Nino murmured to me. Before we left, I saw Remo stretch out on the sofa with Greta sprawled out on his chest, beaming at him with her huge eyes. He smiled and stroked her back.

“He’ll be all right,” Nino said quietly as he led me away.

“I know. And you?”

“I will be too. Adamo will be all right. We’ll help him. Once his dealers are dead and he’s clean, we can do something

about the memories.”

We settled in our bed, me on my back and Nino leaning over me, his eyes tracing my upper arms. He leaned down and kissed my bruises. “I can’t stand seeing you being hurt.”

“I’m fine, Nino. It hurts me more seeing you and your brothers argue with each other. So please don’t be mad at Adamo.”

“I’m not. Not anymore. My brothers and I will always be there for each other. Nothing will change that. Remo won’t allow it, nor will I.”

CHAPTER 19



NINO

“So, what, you’re going to keep me locked in here forever?” Adamo said. “A captive in my own home?” Since Savio had brought him home two nights ago, we’d kept a close eye on our youngest brother and he was already showing withdrawal symptoms. Erratic movements, perspiration, shaking fingers. He must have been taking the shit longer than anyone expected.

“You’ll stay here until we’re sure you’re clean,” I said calmly.

Adamo glared. “Why can’t I stay in my room at least?”

“Because there aren’t bars in front of your window and we don’t want to have them installed.”

Adamo shook his head, looking around the room in Remo’s wing. It was where Remo used to keep Serafina. “This is ridiculous. You can’t treat me like this.”

Remo staggered toward him and got in his face. “You know what I’d do to any other soldier who takes drugs and doesn’t tell me where he got them, so maybe you should shut the fuck up.”

“If you tell us who gave you the drugs, it would make things easier.”

“For whom?” Adamo crossed his arms with a bitter smile.

Remo released a harsh breath and then his smile turned dangerous. “All right, then don’t tell us. We’ll just talk to C.J. and ask her. You spent a lot of time with her. I assume she knows quite a bit.”

Adamo turned pale. “No, leave her out of it.”

Remo's smile widened further. "I can't do that. Considering I'm her Capo, she should have told me everything but she didn't. That's betrayal."

"No!" Adamo shouted and threw himself at Remo, aiming a punch at him. Remo blocked him, twisted his arm around and threw him face-first to the floor then knelt on his back. "Never raise your fist against me again."

"Fuck you," Adamo rasped, his face turning red.

"Adamo," I said in an imploring tone as I crouched before him. "You need to stop this. The drugs are messing with you. Remo and I only want to help you."

"Don't hurt C.J., hurt me."

"I have a feeling hurting you won't bring us any closer to the truth, right?" I murmured. "Pain won't make you talk anymore."

"You never tried. Just do it."

Remo released him and got up with a snarl. "Shut up. You know we won't torture you."

"Why can't you just let me make my own decisions? If I want to ruin my life with drugs then let me."

Remo glared. "I won't give you up, not ever. I'll torture anyone to get the info on those fuckers who sold you the shit. I want you to return to who you were."

"I won't," Adamo said quietly, rolling onto his back. "There's nothing you can do about it. I'm not him anymore, maybe I never was."

Remo swallowed hard, his mouth setting in a hard line. He bent over Adamo, gripping his forearm with the burns. "Then become someone stronger. Those fuckers who tortured you, don't give them power even after they're done. Get angry, get brutal, I don't give a fuck, but get the fucking torture out of your head. Move on. It's the past."

Adamo smiled strangely. "If it were that easy, you and Nino wouldn't still act like our mother wasn't alive."

Remo jerked upright. He was on the verge. I gripped his shoulder.

“Adamo, there are two options. You tell us who sold you the drugs or Remo and I will question C.J.”

Adamo glared but worry flickered in his eyes. Maybe Adamo thought he was like us, had become like us, but he was still kinder than Remo and I would ever be.

“Don’t give us that look,” Remo said in a low voice. “I won’t have you deal with potentially dangerous dealers who could use you and your drug addiction to get back to us, to our family.”

Adamo scoffed.

Remo took a step toward him again but stopped himself. “You sure you wouldn’t give them the safety codes if they didn’t sell you the drugs you crave so desperately? Can you look into my fucking eyes and swear you wouldn’t act recklessly for another high? Can you?” Remo laughed darkly when Adamo remained silent. “That’s what I thought. I won’t risk Greta and Nevio’s lives, or Serafina’s or Savio’s or Kiara’s or Nino’s— or yours. Ever. If I have to torture a whore so you give me the info I need, I’ll do it without a fucking flicker of remorse.” Then he nodded toward me. “And believe me, Nino wouldn’t even blink dismembering anyone to guarantee Kiara’s safety.”

Adamo pushed himself into a sitting position. “I would never give away our codes. Not even for drugs.”

“Tell us who sold you the shit.”

Adamo lowered his eyes. “There are these guys at the races. They’re taking stuff themselves. I pay them double so they buy for me as well.”

“They know who you are?” Remo asked.

Adamo nodded. “Everyone knows who I am.”

Remo turned around and stalked out.

“Names, and if you know, where to find them,” I demanded.

“Kay and Josh. They’re always staying with the main race crew in the camp.”

I held out my hand to Adamo and he took it. Back on his feet, he sighed. “I really tried to stay away from drugs, but the weed—it made things better and then one of these guys said the heroine would make it even easier ...”

“Nothing that’s worth anything comes easy, Adamo. You are right, Remo and I we sometimes still struggle with the past, but we still move on because we have people who rely on us, and you have too. We rely on you. We need you as part of our family, so face your fears without drugs.”

Adamo didn’t say anything.

“I’m going to lock you in for now. Later when someone’s here to keep an eye on you, you can move around the house.”

He sank down on the bed and I left. Remo was still in the hallway when I stepped out, leaning against the wall and looking murderous. “We’ll have to set an example. Get it into people’s head that they need to stop selling the shit to him.”

“Let me and Fabiano handle it. You stay here with your kids. Keep an eye on things.”

“You still think Samuel might use the info he gathered while being here for the wedding? For an attack?”

I shook my head. “I think he won’t risk anything with his sister being around, but I think you should stay here. I know you believe you have to protect us all, but Fabiano and I can handle this.”

Remo didn’t like it, but he had his twins to think about and throwing himself into every conflict had to stop. I could see how hard he took Adamo’s drug addiction.

“All right,” he said slowly. “But you’ll make sure everyone gets the message.”

I gave him a look and he bared his teeth in a harsh laugh. “Yeah. You’ll do that.”

“I’ll go in search for Fabiano and tell Kiara that I’m leaving then we’ll head out.”

I crossed the gardens to Fabiano's house. Leona was stretched out on one of the sunchairs and reading. She sat up when she saw me approach. "Something happen?"

"I need Fabiano for a mission."

"He's in the gym, working out."

I nodded but before I went inside, I said, "Serafina, Savio and the twins are at the pool. Why don't you join them?"

Surprise crossed her face. "I will, thank you."

I nodded then headed into the living room. Fabiano's house was smaller than ours and didn't have any wings but was still a huge building. The gym was down the corridor and when I stepped in, Fabiano was doing bench presses. "Shouldn't you be more vigilant?"

"Recognized your steps." He put the barbell bar into the safety rack above his head then sat up and wiped the sweat from his face and chest. "Adamo?"

I nodded. "He gave us names."

"When do you want to leave?" Fabiano asked as he stood.

"As soon as possible."

"Will Remo be coming?"

"No, he should stay here and keep an eye on things."

"How long will we be gone?"

Always efficient when it was about a mission, that what I appreciated about Fabiano. "Overnight, maybe two. The camp's currently stationed near Sacramento."

"All right. Give me fifteen minutes to grab a quick shower and pack a few things."

With a short nod, I went back to our mansion to look for Kiara. I found her at her piano but she wasn't playing anything, only frowning at her fingers on the keys. I sat down beside her. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she said slowly, then gave me a small smile.

I caressed her upper arm with the bruises. She wasn't telling the truth. Given her cycle she was supposed to get her period two days ago. We'd slept together this morning and she definitely hadn't bled. "I have to leave for Sacramento to handle a few things."

"Did Adamo tell you who sold him the drugs?"

"He did." I didn't say more and Kiara didn't ask, merely nodded. She knew what needed to happen.

"How is he?"

"We locked him into the secure room. He'll only be allowed outside if Savio or Remo are around to keep watch."

"Is that really necessary?"

I brought her wrist to my mouth and kissed it. "We don't know how long Adamo's been taking heroine. Or what else he's taken. We might find out in Sacramento, but if his addiction is serious, which I fear it is, he might do something stupid trying to get them."

"I really hope he can get past this."

"He will." I searched her eyes for a hint that Kiara needed me. "Will you be okay?"

"Of course. You need to handle this. I'll be fine. *I am.*"

I kissed her slowly, trying to decide if I should ask Savio to go in my stead.

"I am fine," she said firmer. "Go. Handle things."

KIARA

I watched Nino and Fabiano drive off then returned into the house. Serafina was on the terrace with the twins and Leona, and Remo and Savio were in the gaming room, discussing Adamo. For a moment I considered going outside, distracting myself from the nagging thought that wouldn't leave me for two days.

Only two days.

My period was overdue for only two days and yet I couldn't stop thinking about it, even if it had never meant anything in the past. I wanted it to mean something, to mean that I was finally pregnant. At some point, it just had to work. It had to. I touched my belly and shook my head.

Crossing the entrance hall, I locked myself in the guest bathroom with one of my pregnancy tests from my stash. Ten minutes later, I stared down at the small window as disappointment shattered my heart into tiny splinters. Not pregnant, again.

I felt sick and desperate. Trying to hold back tears, I stumbled out of the guest bathroom and toward the gaming room to fix myself a drink at the bar. I hardly ever drank hard liquor, but right then I wanted to numb my sadness. Luckily Savio and Remo were no longer in there. They'd likely joined the rest on the terrace.

Reaching for the first bottle I could get my hand on, I poured myself a generous glass and managed to down half of it before I started to cough. Tears finally burst forth and I wasn't sure if they were because of the alcohol or because of the hollowness in my chest, this crushing feeling that the one thing I wanted most wouldn't come easy for me, or at all.

Remo came into view, coming in from the garden. I quickly wiped my eyes and rushed away, wanting to drown in my misery, but his steps sounded behind me and eventually I gave up escaping because it was futile anyway. Remo never gave up and I was tired of running. Sniffling, I leaned against the wall and slowly slid to the floor. His legs came into view, but he didn't say anything. I could imagine him watching me.

"Since you hate extensive displays of emotions, you should leave. It'll only get worse from here." Even to my own ears, I sounded bitter.

Remo sank down across from me, holding my half-full glass. He scanned my face and looked at the pregnancy test in my hand. I hadn't even realized that I was still clutching it like a memorial of my failure to conceive. I held it out to him so he could see the result.

“You’d think it would get easier. The disappointment after getting your hopes too high once more.”

Remo took a sip from my drink, then swirled it in the glass.

“That was mine.”

“You left it standing there. It’s a limited edition Don Papa rum that costs a fortune. I’m not leaving it there so Adamo can desecrate it into a fucking Cuba Libre.”

I choked out a laugh and held out my hand. “I need another sip.”

Remo handed the glass to me and I took a large gulp, shuddering at the strength of the alcohol. “Fucking waste of good rum. You hate hard liquor.”

“I do,” I said and returned the drink to Remo. “I thought it would help.”

Remo smiled. “When has alcohol ever helped with anything?”

“It can help you forget.”

“For a few hours, but it lets you crash all the harder when you remember again.”

I bit my lip, knowing he was right. Adamo had been trying to cope the same way and I could see where it had gotten him. “We’ve been trying for so long.”

Remo tilted his head in consideration. There was no pity in his eyes, which was good, and why I loved talking to Remo. “Is Nino shooting blanks?”

I blinked, still, after all this time, stunned by Remo’s directness. “I don’t know, but I don’t think it’s him. It’s my fault. I just know it deep down. Something is wrong with me. Maybe I don’t deserve to be happy. First my parents, then Durant and now this...” I started gasping in air as despair and sadness crowded in my chest. I couldn’t believe I’d said those words aloud. They’d been haunting me for a long time now.

“Kiara, stop it.”

I couldn't. Remo grabbed my ankle, startling me. My head jerked up. He rarely touched me. I swallowed as I focused on his face.

"It's no one's fault, and nothing's fucking wrong with you, got it?"

"It's unfair," I whispered desperately.

Remo downed the remaining rum. "Life's fucking unfair. It wants to crush you, but you can't let the bitch win. You've got to force her to play by your rules."

"You make it sound so easy, but for me it's not. You are strong. Nobody could ever force you to do anything."

Remo leaned forward, squeezing my ankle. "Do you know how many people dare to tell me the truth to my face? How many don't shit their pants when they're alone with me?"

I shook my head. I guessed there weren't many. Serafina, his brothers and Fabiano ... even Leona was still wary around the Camorra Capo.

"You are strong in your own way, Kiara. And you are Falcone. The world's yours. If you want a kid, you'll get one."

I laughed. "I know you are powerful, but some things are out of your control. You can't kidnap one."

"If Nino's shooting blanks you can have my sperm to get you pregnant."

I choked. "Are you being serious?"

He cocked an eyebrow.

I shook my head. "You're really being serious. You think Fina would be okay with you being a sperm donor?"

"We're all family. I want you and Nino to get your wish, and Serafina would understand."

"That won't work if it's me."

"There's all kind of shit doctors can do nowadays. You and Nino should have a check-up. Once you know what's the problem, you can find a solution."

“Maybe there’s no solution.”

“There always is. You can adopt. Might not be the worst idea anyway considering how messed-up Nino and I are.”

“That’s because of your childhood.”

“Trust me, part of it is inherited.” His mouth curled as if he remembered all the things they’d done over the years.

“I’ve been thinking about adoption.” I looked at Remo. “But I don’t want the kids to be less because they aren’t blood relatives.”

“The only blood I give a fuck about is that of the fuckers who’ll treat your kids less for some shitty DNA bullshit, and only because I’ll bathe in it after I slit their throats.”

I crossed the small space between us and hugged Remo for the first time in my life. “Thank you,” I whispered. “You are how I wish my brothers could have been. I don’t care what people say about you, I love you like a brother.”

Remo froze, then he lightly touched my back but didn’t say anything in return—not that I had expected him to.

I pulled away, clearing my throat and wiping my eyes. Remo got to his feet and held out his hand. “Come on. Let’s join the others at the pool.”

I took his hand and allowed him to pull me up.

“I’m not wearing a bikini.”

“Then go change. I’ll go see if Adamo’s in the mood to stop his sulk.”

He regarded me a moment longer then picked up the discarded pregnancy test and walked away.

I released a long breath, feeling slightly better. Remo was right. There was no use pitying myself.



Ten minutes later I arrived at the pool, dressed in my red bikini and a summer dress over it. Seraina and Leona were in

the water, each of them pushing the twins around the pool in small unicorn floats that Serafina had ordered for them. Savio was stretched out lazily on one of the sunchairs, his swim trunks pulled down dangerously low, showing off the upper half of that obnoxious bull tattoo.

Savio inched his sunglasses up with a smirk. “Can’t take your eyes off my minotaur, can you?”

I grimaced. “I still can’t believe you let Nino ink that thing into your skin.”

Savio looked down his six-pack then lifted his waistband, peering beneath it. “You should see the rest. I think you’d change your mind.”

My cheeks flushed. A wet ball flew toward Savio’s head and he blocked it with his forearm. “Hey!”

“Behave,” Serafina warned.

Savio crossed his arms behind his head, looking entirely too pleased with himself.

“You love to rile us up, right?” I said with a small laugh.

“It’s more fun than I expected.”

I got out of my dress and quickly lowered myself into the pool, uncomfortable in my tiny bikini around men other than Nino.

Savio pushed his sunglasses back down. “How about you bake us some of those delicious white chocolate-macadamia cookies?”

“I thought you’d get rid of that sweet tooth at some point. How can you stuff your face with all that sugary shit?” Remo said as he strode toward the pool in swim trunks. There was no sign of Adamo.

Savio shrugged. “I need it so I can give the ladies some sugar.”

I snorted as I made my way over to Leona, Serafina and the twins. “You are absolutely impossible. Do those pick-up lines actually work?”

“No,” Remo said at the same time as Savio said, “Yes.”

Remo waved him off. “Whatever. I’m surprised you didn’t get a fucking lollipop instead of that bull inked above your dick. Would send a clear message.”

“The girls I’m with know what to do with my cock. They don’t need a lollipop to remind them, and if they’re brain-dead, I’ll give them pointers.”

“But you need a bull to remind yourself to be an animal in bed, or what?” Remo lowered himself into the pool as well. Leona and Serafina had noticed my red eyes, but I gave them a bright smile, not wanting them to worry.

“Don’t worry. I don’t need reminding,” Savio said. His phone beeped and he took it from the small table beside his sunchair.

When I took over from Leona pushing Greta’s floaty around, Remo joined me.

“He didn’t want to come out?” I asked.

“He’s moody. Withdrawal is a shitty thing.”

Leona perked up. “If you need me to talk to him, I will. I’ve gone through so much with my mother, so I get it.”

Remo’s eyes darted to her. She flushed but held his gaze for once. “Why not?” he said eventually. “Tell him a few horror stories, I’m sure you’ve had plenty.”

“Yeah, definitely.”

Greta beamed at Remo. “Dad,” she said in that cute, high voice. Remo took her out of the floaty and she smiled. “Want to be close to me, hmm?” He pressed her to his chest and waded through the water. She looked much more content than in the floaty. Nevio on the other hand was kicking up a storm with his tiny feet and squeezing the life out of the unicorn’s neck.

Serafina pushed him back and forth with a grin. I swam over to her and Nevio as he gurgled with delight. I tipped my wet finger against his nose, causing him to screech with

laughter. Leona sat on the edge of the pool, looking relaxed, maybe for the first time without Fabiano being around.

“With those lungs the kid could be the lead singer of Nine Inch Nails,” Savio said as he walked over to the edge of the pool, dragging his flamingo float after him.

“That thing stays out of the pool,” Serafina said.

Savio thrust the float into the pool. “Make me.” He dove in, emerged from the water and hoisted himself on top of the pink atrocity. With his legs straddling the long neck of the flamingo, he stretched out and sighed.

“I feel the irresistible urge to use one of Remo’s knives to give that flamingo a cruel end,” Serafina whispered in my ear. I stifled laughter. Savio threw us a suspicious look as Serafina made an innocent face.

We spent the next couple of hours at the pool and I felt much better after. When I returned into the bedroom after dinner that night, and curled up alone in our bed, the disappointment caught up with me once more.

I missed Nino horribly right then. I had half-fallen asleep when my phone beeped. It was close to midnight and when I checked the message I smiled despite my burning eyes.

Good night, Kiara. I’ll be back soon. I love you.

Nino wasn’t big on messages, especially not to convey his feelings. It was the first time he’d sent me a text saying he loved me. I quickly replied.

I love you too and I wish I could fall asleep in your arms.

I wasn’t sure why Nino had sent me those words, or if maybe someone had mentioned my teary breakdown, and it didn’t matter. I was just glad for the gesture, knowing he was focused on something else at the moment, something that required him to shut down all his emotions.

Holding the phone in my hand, I closed my eyes again.

CHAPTER 20



KIARA

The next evening, I was baking banana bread when Nino entered the kitchen. My stomach burst with relief seeing him, then my mood fell realizing I'd have to tell him that it hadn't worked again. Nino came straight toward me and hugged me from behind, kissing my cheek and when I twisted my head around, my lips.

"It'll work out. We've got time."

"How do you know?" I doubted Remo had run off to tell him the second Nino stepped into the mansion.

"Your expression, and I know it's around the time of your cycle, and you usually do the test."

I sighed. "It's impossible to keep secrets from you."

"You don't need to."

"Are you mad?"

Nino frowned. "Why would I be mad? Like I said, we have time. Eventually we'll have a baby. And it's not like either of us is to blame. This isn't something we can affect."

I pressed my face into his shirt, soaking in his comforting scent. "I'm mad. I'm so mad."

Nino stilled. "At who?"

"Not at anyone, never at you, not even really at me. I'm just so damn angry and it doesn't even make sense."

Nino's brows had risen at my swearing. "Maybe you need to vent."

"I had half a glass of Don Papa rum. That didn't help."

“Let me guess. Remo told you to drink.”

I smiled. “No, actually he told me *not* to drink. At least not the expensive alcohol.”

Nino shook his head with a chuckle, but then he became serious again and pressed our foreheads together. “Maybe you just need to let your anger out. We could do some fight training. I always feel better afterward.”

“Why not? It can’t hurt, can it?”

“It *should* hurt,” Nino said.

I shook my head. “Right.” Nino kissed me again, then pulled back. “Can we go now or do you have to stay for the bread?”

I checked it. It was done and only needed to cool. I quickly took the pan out of the oven before I followed Nino out of the kitchen.

“Banana bread is done,” I called as we passed the gaming room where Savio was working at the laptop. Maybe he’d enjoy a bite tonight. Greta sat beside him on the sofa like a gorgeous little doll and staring curiously at the screen, not the picture book on her lap. Nevio’s delighted screeching sounded outside followed by Remo’s deeper voice. He seemed to be chasing his son around the garden.

“I hope whatever you’re doing is meant for a child’s eyes,” Nino said to Savio.

Savio glanced up then to Greta. “Our betting stats. And it’s not like Greta can read anything. Right, doll-face?”

Greta looked at him with a crooked smile and my heart just melted.

“You’ve really grown on her,” I said softly.

Savio flashed Greta a grin. “I have a way with girls, don’t I?”

She only smiled. Nino stroked my back and I finally dragged my gaze away from them.

Savio put away his laptop and asked Greta, “Why don’t we check on that banana bread? Maybe I can sneak a piece into your mouth before your mom gets all bitchy because of a bit of sugar.”

“I heard that,” Serafina muttered as she came inside, dressed in a bikini, glaring at Savio. He shrugged.

“Sorry, doll-face, I did the best I could.” With a wave he walked off as Serafina picked up her daughter and kissed her rosy cheek.

She gave me an encouraging smile and I knew Remo had told her already, not that it would have stayed a secret long anyway.

“We’re off to the gym,” Nino said then he pulled me along, for which I was glad. I didn’t want to talk about the negative test again.

NINO

“Did you handle things in Sacramento?” Kiara asked as I steered the Tesla down the driveway.

“We found the men who gave Adamo the drugs, yes,” I said. Kiara nodded, regarding me with that quiet concern. She often worried how these acts of brutality affected me and maybe it was good that she thought they could. I ran my thumb over her knuckles.

“He hasn’t left the room. Remo didn’t let me visit him either.”

“You shouldn’t see him without one of us. In this stage of withdrawal, he might very well become violent to reach his goal.”

She shook her head. “Adamo wouldn’t hurt me.”

I looked pointedly at her upper arms and the fading bruises, and when Kiara followed my gaze she sighed. “He didn’t mean to.”

“And he wouldn’t meant to *again* either. He’d be single-mindedly focused on getting another fix. That’s dangerous.

You won't go near him without one of us, Kiara. That's my last word on the matter."

She nodded slowly. "How long will it take for him to become clean?"

"It's hard to say. It depends on the person, on the severity of the addiction, on their understanding of the problem and determination to fight it. Willpower is the key."

"Adamo's got that. He's a Falcone."

I smiled, but it wasn't associated with any uplifting emotions. "Willpower won't be the problem, but I'm not sure Adamo understands the magnitude of his problem, and that results in a lack of determination to fight it."

"You'll help him."

"I will. We will, but it's a fight we can't fight for him. Only he can win it."

We arrived in the gym ten minutes later and after changing into our workout clothes, Kiara and I entered the boxing ring. She'd gained strength in the time of our marriage, not just mentally but also physically. I wasn't sure she realized just how much. I helped her put on boxing gloves. She gave me a curious look.

"We'll both wear them to do some sparring. I think you need a more active training today."

I put on gloves as well—they would soften my blows further.

"Ready?" I asked.

She nodded and took a deep breath. It didn't loosen the tension in her body. Kiara had been bottling up her frustration over her inability to conceive and tried to distract herself, but at some point it was going to be too much.

I raised my hands. "Left right. Left right. Quick."

Kiara landed the instructed blows against my gloved palms, her brows drawing together. "I want to really spar."

“All right,” I said with a nod, and got in position, fists up. I feigned an attack, which Kiara avoided then she aimed a punch toward my ribs. Not bothering to block her blow, I allowed her the hit. She needed to release her emotions and I wasn’t sensitive to pain, at least not to the amount Kiara could summon.

She landed another hit against my stomach.

“Stop it!” she gasped.

I looked at her.

“Stop letting me win. I want you to *fight* me. Stop holding back.” She tried to punch me again. This time I blocked her with my fist, not my elbow which would have hurt her.

“If I don’t hold back, I’d seriously injure you.”

Anger flickered in her eyes. It didn’t make sense.

“I’m not helpless! Not *helpless!*”

Her punches were unfocused, fueled by her overflowing emotions, and I blocked each of them. “I didn’t say you were,” I said calmly, but that only seemed to enrage her further.

“But you treat me like I am! Stop it! *Just stop it!*” She was screaming now.

I wasn’t sure what to do about her unreasonable behavior. She began pummeling my raised fists again. “Hit me back, so I can fight.”

“Kiara,” I tried again.

She didn’t stop. “Not helpless. Not helpless...”

I couldn’t hit her, so I allowed her to hammer against my chest until she only leaned against my skin, letting out a sob. She sank to the floor and I knelt down as well, and quickly took off the gloves then pulled her on my lap, holding her tightly.

“I *am* feeling so powerless, helpless. I just want a baby.”

“I know,” I murmured against her hair.

“I hate feeling helpless again. Like everything is out of my control ... I thought it would never be like that again. I hate it. I hate it so much. And you know what’s the worst? That I wonder if the rape did something to my body, something that stops me from getting pregnant.” She sucked in a choked breath. “Durant would have loved that. I can practically see his triumphant smile, knowing that even in death he still ruins my life.”

I pulled back and nudged her chin up until her teary eyes met mine. “Kiara, stop. Durant suffered. He suffered for what he did. He paid for what he did, and even if it’ll never be enough in comparison to what he did to you, in the end he was a broken man. But you, Kiara, you aren’t broken. You’ll have a wonderful life and you’ll get your wish. Trust me, one day you’ll have your baby. Don’t pressure yourself. You’re still young. We have time.”

She gave me a wet kiss. “But I don’t want to wait.”

I stroked her cheek, wiping away a few tears. “We’ll make a doctor’s appointment. Okay? We’ll figure it out and then we find a solution.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

CHAPTER 21



NINO

One week had passed since we'd found out that one of Kiara's fallopian tubes was blocked. It could be a result of the rape, of an untreated sexually transmitted disease. I had always only used condoms with the women I'd been with in the past and done a test before I'd started having sex with Kiara.

After the initial shock, Kiara seemed to be doing well, having returned to being the caretaker of the household. I leaned in the doorway and watched her cooking up a batch of toddler banana cookies without sugar that Serafina had approved.

She froze with a cookie against her mouth when she spotted me. With a smile, she took a bite then headed over to me and held up the cookie. I took a bite despite my dislike of all things sweet.

"What do you think?"

"Not bad."

Kiara pursed her lips. "They aren't very sweet. Bananas are the only sweetener I used."

"I'm sure Serafina will appreciate the effort."

Kiara took another bit then shrugged. "I like them."

I gently grabbed her wrist causing her to give me an exasperated look. "Nino, I'm fine, honestly. It was hard at first, knowing that it's my fault."

"It's not your fault," I growled.

"That the cause lies in my body," she corrected. "But it could have been worse. It's only one blocked tube. It could

have been both or something else that would have made conceiving naturally impossible, but as it is, it still might work out without any additional help.”

“If we give it time,” I told her.

“Yes, and I’m trying to be patient. I’m on a good way, and maybe it’ll work out in a few months or years, and if not ...”

“It will work out.”

She nodded. “I’m just relieved that we finally know what it is. The not knowing was worse than the diagnosis.”

I brought her wrist up to my mouth and pressed a kiss to her pulse point.

“You know, I was thinking of getting a tattoo there. Your name.”

I froze with my lips against her soft skin, my gaze meeting her kind eyes. “It’s a very tender place, very painful.”

“It’s okay. I know you’ll be careful.”

“I don’t want to cause you pain. I won’t.”

“Then let your tattoo artist do it, the one who did parts of your back.”

“No,” I said firmly. “I won’t allow anyone to lay hand on you, to cause you pain. I would have to kill him.”

Kiara’s brows crinkled. “That’s a bit extreme.”

“I won’t have anyone cause you pain.”

She stared at me. “I want that tattoo. It’s my choice. I’ll gladly take the pain.”

“Let me think of a design, something beautiful,” I said quietly.

She stood on her tiptoes. “As long as it’s not a bull.”

My lips twitched. “That wasn’t my idea.”



Kiara sat down across from me and stretched out her arm. I disinfected the skin of her forearm, still reluctant to ink her. I knew the tattoo would look beautiful on her but the process would be more than a little unpleasant. “Are you sure?”

“I am,” she said.

I took out the prepared design of the tattoo. Kiara’s eyes widened seeing it as I pressed the stencil to her skin to transfer it. With delicate tattoos it was always best not to tattoo without a stencil as guidance.

“A rose?”

“A red rose with thorns.”

“Why?”

“A rose representing your beauty, red because I love the color on you, and thorns because even the prettiest rose should have them. You didn’t in the beginning, but they grew back.”

Kiara bit her lower lip then broke into a smile. “That’s beautiful. But what about your name?”

I frowned. For some reason it felt sacrilegious to put my name on Kiara’s perfect skin, even if a possessive part of me was immensely pleased at the thought. “I could add it in one of the petals or very small along the stem.”

“No,” Kiara said firmly. “Let your name flow *out* of the stem. Because it was you who helped me grow those thorns, to bloom at all. You were the soil.”

I nodded, not saying anything, my tongue suddenly heavy in my mouth. Focusing on the task at hand, I transferred the design from the stencil to Kiara’s skin then carefully added my name in cursive. Once I was done, I reached for the machine. “Because it’s intricate and multi-colored, it’ll take longer. I can’t rush or it won’t be as beautiful as it needs to be.”

“I understand. Take your time.”

I’d never been nervous before doing a tattoo. This time I was. Taking a deep breath, I put the needle to Kiara’s skin. She sucked in a quick breath and tensed. I briefly glanced up, gauging her face.

“Do it.”

I continued, checking Kiara occasionally. Her eyes watered and my chest tightened at the sight.

“It’s okay,” she whispered.

Never before had causing someone pain bothered me. I focused on the tattoo, on the task. The pain would have to be worth it. This had to be my best work. Kiara deserved nothing less.

When I was done, I put down the machine and allowed myself to admire my work for a second. The rose was delicately beautiful, every petal, every thorn spoke of elegance.

“Oh, Nino,” Kiara said in wonder. “It’s so beautiful. I can’t believe how real it looks, how vivid the colors are. Thank you.”

“Thank you for bearing my name on your skin for the world to see.” I had enough self-awareness to know how most people perceived me. They were scared of me, not just because of the Camorra, or because I was a Falcone but because of what I was. Kiara managed to see more in me, parts of me I hadn’t been aware of before she came into my life.

Kiara leaned forward and kissed me.

“How’s the pain?” I murmured, even when there were so many other things I wanted to say right then.

“Worth it,” she said.



In early August we allowed Adamo more freedom, but still kept an eye on him. He didn’t show signs of withdrawal anymore, but things could fall apart quickly, so one of us always stayed in his proximity, even if it annoyed him.

“When will you stop hovering?” he asked during our sparring in the gym one day. “My birthday is soon. I don’t want babysitters around when I go over to C.J.”

“We’ll see,” I said and landed a kick against his side, exploiting his bad defense.

He grunted and jumped back. “I did everything you asked of me.”

“I know, that’s why we’ve gone easy on you recently.”

Adamo gave me a doubtful look. I landed another hit, this time a fist to the ribs. He stumbled back, rubbing the spot.

“You need to improve. Doing drugs shredded your focus and your stamina.”

Remo walked in, not in fighting shorts but dressed in his usual black jeans and t-shirt. I paused. Adamo tried to use my distraction but he really needed to get quicker to succeed. I kicked his legs out from under him and shoved him to the floor. He landed hard, and cursed.

“What’s the matter?” I asked when Remo stopped in front of the boxing ring.

“Jerry called. One of the Johns thought he could beat the shit out of one of our girls.”

Usually our bouncers, Fabiano or one of the lower enforcers handled these kinds of things. “Who?”

Remo’s eyes darted to Adamo. “C.J.”

Adamo shot to his feet. “How is she?”

“Our doctor’s taking a look at her in the Sugar Trap. I’m heading over there now to discuss the matter with the abusive asshole.” Remo’s mouth twisted. “I thought you might want to join me.”

Adamo climbed out of the ring immediately and I followed after him. “Let’s change first. A few minutes more don’t matter,” I said.

Adamo looked like he was going to protest then he nodded.

Twenty minutes later we pulled up in front of our establishment. Adamo was the first out of the car and hurried into the whorehouse. Remo and I followed a couple of steps

after him. In the bar area a few whores had gathered, discussing the events. It was still early, and the majority of clients would arrive later in the day when the strip shows began. Still, it wouldn't do to have the whores gossiping at the bar. That was bad for business.

"Go to your changing rooms, or talk in your back rooms," I ordered. The women quickly left, not before giving Adamo small smiles.

Jerry came out from behind the bar.

"Where is she?" Adamo demanded.

"In her usual room," Jerry said, but Adamo was already hurrying in that direction.

Remo shook his head. "Where's the asshole?"

"I had Snake take him down to the basement."

"Was he drunk?" I asked.

Jerry shook his head. "He'd only had a couple of beers. I don't know what happened."

"Let's talk to C.J.," I told Remo.

We headed down the corridor. The door to C.J.'s room was ajar and she sat on the edge of the bed. Adamo touched her shoulder. A doctor was waiting. The hint of cigarette smoke hung in the air and an ashtray with a few lipstick-rimmed stubs sat on the nightstand. We had a strict no smoking policy in our establishment but I decided to cut C.J. slack today.

C.J. turned around when she heard me and Remo enter. One of her eyes was starting to swell, so was the upper left side of her forehead, and her lip was busted. She was also rubbing her neck.

"Concussion and bruises," the doctor said.

I nodded.

"What happened?" Remo demanded, prompting Adamo to step closer to C.J.

I raised my eyebrows at him.

C.J. released a low breath. “He’s not one of my clients. Lee usually handles him. He pays her extra so he can beat her and humiliate her in other ways.” C.J.’s mouth curled with disgust.

“That’s not part of the services you’re supposed to offer,” I told her.

“I didn’t. Lee did. She needed the extra cash, but she wasn’t there when he showed up so I decided to take him on. I told him in advance that I didn’t do those things and he agreed to book me for the standard.”

“I assume he changed his mind,” Remo said in a low voice.

C.J. briefly glanced at him then down at her hands. “Yeah. Once we got started,” she said, avoiding Adamo’s intent gaze. “He started making demands. I told him I didn’t do backdoor, but he didn’t care.”

Adamo tensed. “Did he force himself on you?”

C.J. shook her head. “He tried. He shoved me against the wall. That’s where I got the bruise on my forehead. He held my mouth so I couldn’t scream. I bit him. He got even angrier and punched me twice. I fell to my knees and bit his dick. That ended everything.” C.J. regarded me and Remo. “You told me I could decide what I did and I don’t do anal,” she said defensively.

“Your choice. I don’t give a fuck,” Remo said.

“Where’s Lee?”

C.J. shrugged. “I haven’t seen her yet. She’s been strange since she returned to work.”

Lee had worked for us in the past but when she got pregnant, we forbade her from working as a whore and she disappeared without a word only to show up again a couple of weeks ago, asking if she could start working for us again.

“What happens now?” C.J. asked.

Adamo crouched in front of C.J. with a bitter smile. “The asshole will pay, I promise.”

Remo smiled darkly. “Oh, he will.”

“I want to do it,” Adamo said at once.

“You don’t have to,” C.J. said immediately, touching his arm. He stood and stepped back.

“But I will.”

“All right, then let’s get this going,” Remo said, already the familiar eagerness ringing in his voice. I wondered why he’d involved Adamo in this. Did he hope this would help Adamo deal with his own torture? I wasn’t sure it would work for him like it had worked for us. Adamo wasn’t the good boy he wished he was but he definitely wasn’t like Remo and I either.

I studied C.J.’s beaten face, the way she gnawed on her lip. “Why don’t you go home? Take a taxi and let Jerry pay it from the cash register.”

I left, following my brothers to the basement. The second we entered the room with the John, Adamo jumped him and punched his face hard. Remo grabbed Adamo and pulled him back, but the eagerness in Remo’s eyes made it clear he fully approved. “Whoa. Not so fast. We need to talk to the gentleman first.”

Adamo whirled on Remo with an incredulous look but then he saw Remo’s smile and nodded.

The man kept his feet, standing and holding his bleeding nose. “What the fuck? Is this how you treat customers? Your cocksucking whore bit my dick.”

We looked down at his crotch. He wasn’t wearing pants.

“She must have a good aim to bite something that small,” Remo commented.

The man’s face turned even redder. “How dare you? This was the last time I fuck one of your disgusting whores!”

He wasn’t one of our gamblers and had never dealt with us in any other way than using the services of our girls. He obviously didn’t understand what we were—*who we were*.

“That’s absolutely right,” Remo said, wearing the madman smile that had made his claim to power easier than it should have been for someone his age.

The man stilled like a rabbit that realized he’d taunted the wolf. “I’ll talk to the police.”

Adamo snorted. “How stupid are you?”

“He obviously doesn’t realize just in how much trouble he is,” Remo said pleasantly. “How about we show him?”

Adamo nodded with a grim smile. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it up, then took a drag. Remo’s eyes flashed with anger, then Adamo pulled the stub out his mouth. “You like to humiliate girls?”

I watched as Adamo advanced on the man who let out an uncertain laugh. “How old are you, boy?”

Adamo took another pull from his cigarette and stopped right in front of the man, then chuckled. He fell silent and regarded the glowing tip with a small frown.

“What the hell is this? What’s wrong with you?” the man shouted.

Remo and I exchanged a look. Adamo had never tortured anyone, and we hadn’t forced his hand.

“Everything,” Adamo murmured then he gripped the man by the neck and pressed the cigarette to his dick. Remo’s eyebrows shot up and I took a step closer because the man was thrashing wildly, screaming shrilly. He had at least fifty pounds on Adamo. But Adamo stumbled back before the guy could hit him and let the asshole drop to the ground, clutching his cock.

Adamo frowned and his chest heaved. I could tell that he wouldn’t do more today and so did Remo.

“How about we’ll all have some fun now?” Remo said. He grabbed the man by the throat too and smashed his face against the wall. The sound of his nose breaking was followed by muffled screams.

Adamo raised a shaking hand, pushed the cigarette into his mouth and lighted it up again, then took a deep drag. I let Remo handle the guy for now and went over to Adamo.

“You okay? You didn’t have to do it. Remo and I can handle these things.”

“I know,” Adamo said past the cigarette. “But I wanted to.” He met my gaze and I wasn’t sure what kind of reaction he expected.

“You did well for your first time.”

Adamo laughed. “I want to do more.”

Remo glanced up from the guy on the floor. “Feel free to get it off your chest.”

Adamo quickly shook his head and took another drag, then snatched the stub from his mouth and for a moment I was sure he’d press it to his own skin again. Instead he dropped it on the stone floor and ground it out.

“Can I go to C.J.?”

I glanced at Remo who shrugged, but I could see worry in his eyes.

“Don’t break our trust,” I told him.

“I won’t,” Adamo said, then without another look at the John he left the basement.

“Will you stand there all day or will you help me?”

I moved toward the John.



Fifteen minutes later, a knock sounded. Remo snarled, looking up from the fucker on the floor. He’d pissed himself. I wasn’t sure if Remo wanted to kill him or keep him alive. Maybe he didn’t know himself.

I reached for a towel and wiped my hands clean before I headed for the door to open it. Jerry waited there. His eyes

briefly flickered to my blood-spattered shirt then quickly up to my face, trying not to look at Remo and the man on the floor.

“I took out some trash and heard mewling in the dumpster. Can you check? I think a cat might have left her kittens in there. Or maybe someone dumped their unwanted puppies. I’m worried passersby will get nosy if we don’t take care of it.”

“You realize that asking your bosses to rummage in the trash won’t give you any bonus points,” Remo muttered already moving away from the asshole. Grabbing another towel he began cleaning himself but his shirt like mine was a mess. Considering that we were about to root through garbage that wasn’t a problem though.

Jerry’s eyes flitted between Remo and me. “Umm ... I need to tend the bar. I don’t have a change of clothes, but I’m sure I can figure something out.”

Remo opened the door all the way, moving past me and giving Jerry a good view of the bloody mess inside the room. Jerry quickly backed away, turning pale despite years of working for us.

“Don’t piss your pants,” Remo muttered. “We’ll handle it.”

Jerry headed back into the bar while Remo and I made our way toward the backdoor. “If we find kittens or puppies, don’t mention anything to Kiara. She’ll insist we’ll keep them. I don’t want our house to be turned into a fucking zoo.”

We stopped in front of the dumpsters and listened.

“I don’t hear anything,” I said.

Remo narrowed his eyes at the dumpsters. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they suffocated in there by now. It’s warm and stuffy.” With a sigh, he stepped up to one dumpster and I climbed the steps of the other. Most of the trash was in black plastic bags but for some bottles and food scraps had been just dumped inside.

“Fuck,” Remo gritted out as he shifted a garbage bag to the side. “How come I rule over the fucking West and still have to get rotten tomatoes all over my hands?”

I opened my mouth for a reply, shoving a bag away when a small, human foot caught my attention. For a moment I froze, not sure if my mind was playing tricks on me, then I sprang into action. I tore away another bag, throwing it behind myself.

“Remo!”

I grabbed the baby, which lay unmoving amongst the trash. It was only dressed in dirty underpants. Pressing the little body against my chest, I jumped down the steps and knelt down on the ground. Remo was already there. “Fuck! Is it breathing?”

I shook my head as I pushed my finger into the baby’s mouth cleaning it from possible objects that could get into its airways once I started CPR.

Remo was snarling into the phone, “We need you to come over right this fucking second. We found a baby in the trash. It’s not breathing.”

I cradled the baby in my hands and carefully blew air into the small body. Luckily the baby responded quickly. If it had still been making sounds not too long ago, it hadn’t been without air for very long.

When its small chest began moving and it started breathing on its own, I turned to Remo who was staring down at me with a mix of murderous fury and blatant worry. “I need cold towels and someone needs to get formula ASAP.”

Remo turned and headed back inside. I got the baby out of the dirty pants, seeing it was a little boy, then straightened with him in my arm. I was on my way into our office when Remo came hurrying back, holding towels. I took one from him then headed inside the room, put the little boy down on the sofa and began wiping him with the cold fabric.

“He’s overheated, dehydrated and malnourished. We need to take him to the hospital. Our own doctors don’t have the necessary expertise.”

Remo gave a terse nod. “All right. I’ll take him and make sure the doctors and nurses do their job, and keep their noses

out of our fucking business and after that I'll have a talk with the boy's mother."

Only one whore had been pregnant in the last year—Lee. When she'd returned, Lee told us she'd given her child up for adoption. She'd started working again to pay for her heroine addiction.

I said, "I can take him to the hospital."

Remo touched my shoulder looking from the baby up to my face. "You are going home and talking to Kiara."

I stared down at the little boy in my arms, realizing what Remo was saying without actually saying it. I nodded slowly and handed him to Remo, who held him carefully against his chest.

"I'll wait for you in the hospital and make sure he's protected."

With a last glance at the dirty baby in Remo's arm, I turned and hurried back home.

CHAPTER 22



KIARA

I hummed as I cooked a batch of vegetarian sweet potato chili for tomorrow and didn't turn when the door swung open behind me. To think that in the past I would have tensed, fearing the worst, it made me smile at how far I'd come.

Arms came around me and Nino kissed my throat, then my cheek. I turned in his embrace to peer up at him. Something in his expression, a flicker of hesitance, made me put the spoon down and turn to him fully. Had something happened to Adamo? He'd been doing better, right? Or had it just been pretense?

"What's wrong?"

"One of the whores got pregnant and when Remo found out, he forbade her from working. She returned a couple of weeks ago, telling everyone she'd given the baby up for adoption. Today Jerry heard mewling coming from the trash. He thought a cat had given birth to kittens in the dumpsters..."

My heart was already squeezing tightly with realization.

"Jerry told Remo and me because he still needed to work the bar. We found a baby, a few weeks old, malnourished, dehydrated."

I swallowed. "She threw her baby in the trash."

"She didn't take good care of him even before. Remo's taken him to the hospital. He's waiting for us."

I blinked at Nino, understanding what he was suggesting. I sucked in a sharp breath, tears springing into my eyes and I began to tremble. Nino frowned, worry flickering across his face.

“I know you want to get pregnant, give birth to *our* child but—”

I interrupted him with a desperate kiss, cupping his face, crying. “I’ll love this baby with all my heart. Thank you, thank you so much.”

“It was Remo’s idea.” Nino pressed his forehead to mine for a moment. “Let’s go.”

I nodded slowly, but couldn’t move, too overwhelmed. Was this really happening? And should I even feel as happy as I did? After all, something horrible had happened. I turned off the stove, taking another deep breath.

“Kiara?” Nino asked softly.

“Let’s go,” I said, squeezing his hand.



Thirty minutes later, we stepped into the hospital room. Remo stood over a small baby lying in its bed and attached to beeping machines and a tube going into its nose. He was speaking in a hushed voice to the boy while stroking his arm. The baby’s eyes were open and watching Remo.

“Finally,” he said, as he straightened and with a last look at the baby came toward us. His gaze flickered over my teary cheeks and a hint of softness crossed his face that he so rarely showed to the outside world. “He’s about five weeks old. They say we can take him home tomorrow if we insist.”

“They won’t alert the authorities?” I asked as I approached the bed and bent over the little boy. His hair was soft and honey brown, and his eyes were bluish. I knew that often changed within a child’s first year.

“We *are* the fucking authorities in this city,” Remo said.

My eyes landed on the name tag on the crib. Boy. Falcone.

I traced the name, feeling my throat clog up once more as I glanced over my shoulder. Both Nino and Remo were watching me.

“I didn’t know what name you wanted for him, but his last name was easy,” Remo said.

I rushed toward him and threw my arms around his middle. He touched the back of my head briefly. “I don’t care if the world hates you, I’ll defend you against all of them.”

“I don’t give a fuck if the world hates me as long as the people who matter don’t,” Remo said, untangling my arms from his waist. “Now take care of your son.”

I gave him and Nino a teary smile then paused. “What if the mother asks for him?”

Any gentleness disappeared from both Nino’s and Remo’s faces. A shared past that carried into the present.

Remo’s eyes shone with hatred and anguish, and once again I wished someone had protected those Falcone boys when they needed it most. “She threw him into the dumpster like garbage. She left him for dead when she should have protected him, when she should have kept him safe till her last fucking breath. She isn’t his mother. You are, because in the few seconds you know him you already love him more than she ever did.”

Nino closed his eyes for a moment and when he met my gaze they were controlled and calm but I’d caught the blaze of emotion.

“When is his birthday?”

“I’ll find out. I’m heading over to the Sugar Trap now to talk to her. Jerry told me she was in her room with a John when he checked.”

I grabbed Remo’s forearm. “Don’t kill her.”

Remo’s expression reflected stark cruelty and utter hatred. “She threw her own child into the dumpster while she fucked a John and you think she deserves to live?”

I ran my thumb along the crisscross scars on his wrist and his face became even scarier, if that was even possible. Nino put his hands on my shoulders. “Kiara. Let Remo handle this.”

“Maybe she doesn’t deserve to live, but maybe she doesn’t deserve death either. Hear her out, then judge her. There must be other options than killing her. Her death won’t change anything, not for the baby or for you.”

Remo ripped free from my hold. “I respect you but sometimes your kindness blinds you to the fucking truth. Go over to him and look at his stomach then repeat what you just said.”

Dread settled in my bones, immobilized me. Not Nino who walked over to the crib, pulled up the tiny gown then became very still, very dangerous and when his eyes settled on me I knew the woman would die. “He’s got two cigarette burns on his stomach.”

Remo regarded me, his mouth twisting cruelly, and cocked one eyebrow.

“Please find out as much as possible about him.”

“Choose a name for him because he sure as fuck won’t carry the name the whore who tried to kill him gave him.” Remo stepped out and thrust the door shut, making me jump. I joined Nino beside the bed and peered down at the boy.

“Nobody will ever hurt you again, nobody will come close,” I promised, stroking his tiny head then his cheek, wondering if anyone had ever shown him love so far. My heart broke and at the same time something fiercer, darker rose in my chest.

Nino kissed the side of my head. “I told you the same shortly after we married.”

“I know, and you kept your promise ever since. Will you protect our son like you protect me?”

“I’d lay my life down for you and him.”

My heart was already full with love for the little baby I barely knew but I wondered what Nino felt. For him it was difficult to form emotional bonds and I figured it would take time for him to come to love our son, like it had taken time for him to love me.

“What should we name him?” Nino asked eventually.

“I always wanted to name my son Alessio, but what do you want?”

Nino shook his head. “I never considered having kids, not like you did. I think Alessio is a strong name that fits into our family.”

“Alessio then?”

He nodded and I bent over our son and kissed his forehead. “Alessio Falcone, welcome to your family.”

Nino gently rubbed my back as I peered down at the tiny baby. A small scratch marred his left cheek and I gently brushed over it.

“Maybe he was cut by something in the trash,” Nino said neutrally. “He’s lucky the bags didn’t cover up his head and choke him.”

I swallowed. “You’re safe now.”

A nurse came in for a check in fifteen minutes later, and relaxed when she spotted me, probably relieved that Remo was gone, but her relaxation only lasted until she noticed Nino leaning against the wall, watching everything with vigilant eyes.

“Hello,” she said hesitantly.

I smiled.

“You are ...?”

Nino pushed away from the wall. “We are the boy’s parents.”

The nurse blinked, confusion flickering on her face. “But —”

Nino raised an eyebrow with an expression that sent a small shiver down my back.

The nurse nodded quickly. “Of course. Right.” She moved toward the crib and Nino stepped up to it as well, causing her to stiffen.

“I’m just going to remove the tubes so you can try to feed him with a bottle, if that’s okay?”

Nino gave a sharp nod. “Go on.”

The nurse was careful and gentle with Alessio, but he began to cry when she pulled out the feeding tubes from his nose and my heart broke hearing his wails even if it was necessary. I couldn’t stop imagining how often he’d cried in the past, how often those cries had gone unanswered or even been punished.

The nurse said, “I’ll get a bottle for you.”

The moment she was outside, I rested my palm very gently on top of Alessio’s chest, trying to show him that I was here. “Shhh. You’re safe. Your dad and I will protect you.”

I could see the surprise on Nino’s face as he was mulling over his new role—a father. “Maybe you can try to be less scary toward the nurse?” I said softly.

Nino took my hand and pressed a kiss to my wrist. “I don’t care if she’s scared. She needs to know her place and understand the consequences, if something happens to Alessio.”

The nurse stepped back in, robbing me of a chance to give a comeback. With a small shake of my head, I rolled my eyes. Nino was already focused on the woman—

like Remo he saw almost everyone as an intruder.

I took the bottle from her. “Thanks.” Alessio looked smaller than the babies I’d seen so far.

The nurse hovered beside me.

“We can handle this,” Nino drawled. “We’ll call you if we need anything.”

She turned and left without another word.

“I can’t hurt him because of his wounds?” I asked.

Nino shook his head. “The burns aren’t very fresh.”

Taking a deep breath, I carefully picked up Alessio and pressed him to my chest, and it felt perfect—as if it was meant to be, he and I and Nino, becoming a family. “Maybe it’s fate,” I whispered thickly. “All of us have experienced horrors in our past but we’ll create a beautiful future together.”

Nino stroked my hair, not saying anything, only smiling. He didn’t believe in fate or anything like it. “Try giving him the bottle, see if he’s hungry.”

I brushed the dummy over his tiny mouth and he opened it, starting to suck eagerly. My eyes drank in his beautiful face. He sucked so quickly he barely breathed in between. I pulled back the bottle a few inches. “Shhh. You’ll get the bottle. Not so fast.”

“It’s probably because he had to go hungry in the past. We need to show him that he’ll always get what he needs from now on.”

I nodded, unable to say anything. Alessio moved his lips, wanting the bottle again and I slowly slid it back in, making sure he didn’t choke.

Nino and I both stayed in the hospital with Alessio overnight, making sure he got everything he needed and was well protected. After initial protests, two nurses rolled in a bed for us to spend the night on ... after Nino had a talk with them. I pushed it right next to the crib so I could watch Alessio while I lay in bed. Nino slid in beside me but he didn’t stretch out. With his back against the bars of the headrest, he kept vigil.

Alessio fidgeted a lot and cried a few times but always quieted when he felt our touch or got the bottle. I often caught myself lying awake, listening for Alessio’s soft breathing, trying to reassure myself that he was still there, still Nino’s and mine. Nino didn’t sleep at all. Whenever I woke, his eyes were open, keeping watch, protecting us.

“Sleep, Kiara,” he murmured eventually. “I’ll make sure you two are safe.”

I knew he would.

CHAPTER 23



KIARA

The next morning Alessio was released from hospital. Like Remo had said, nobody tried to stop us from taking him home. He was really our son; nobody would ever know him as anything else. Nino had arranged a baby seat for the SUV so we could transport Alessio safely, and I sat on the backseat beside it to calm our baby. He started crying the moment Nino started the car and eventually I managed to soothe him by singing for him and pressing my palm reassuringly against his chest.

Nino's phone beeped once more. He'd been getting several messages since yesterday, and I wondered if some of them were from Remo, informing him about Alessio's birth mother. Maybe it was selfish and cowardly, but I wasn't sure I wanted to know what Remo had done to her.

Leona and Serafina had sent me several texts, congratulating me and I couldn't wait to show them our son.

Our son. I still couldn't get over how wonderful it felt to think that, to say that. It didn't matter that he wasn't our blood and it never would. He was ours.

Nino opened the gates with a press of the button and drove up the driveway toward the mansion. "This is your home, Alessio."

Nino and I got out of the car then he carefully lifted Alessio out of his seat. Our baby looked so tiny in comparison to Nino, breakable. My heart felt impossibly full watching Nino holding Alessio, being careful and gentle with him.

"Do you want to carry him inside?" he asked quietly.

I nodded, because even if the sight of Alessio in Nino's arm made my heart sing, I just wanted him close, wanted to smell his sweet baby scent, feel his warmth and stroke his soft cheek. Nino handed him to me and I pressed him to my chest.

His small fingers flattened against my skin and it was the best feeling in the world. Nino touched my back. "Come on. Let's go inside so he can meet the rest of his family."

I nodded but I couldn't stop peering down at Alessio's honey-colored crown. He loved being close to me and always quieted down when he felt my warmth, and I relished in the feel of his small body against mine. I beamed at Nino, deliriously happy.

Nino smiled at me. "You haven't been this happy in a long time."

"I've always been happy with you, but this makes it even more perfect."

When we stepped inside the gaming room, everyone was already waiting. Fabiano and Leona, Serafina and Remo with the twins, and even Savio and Adamo. Serafina stood and walked over to me. "Oh, he's cute."

"He is," I agreed.

Nevio stumbled over to me, curious as always and grabbed my knees. He pointed one tiny finger up at Alessio. "You want to see him?"

A jerky nod. Nino picked him up and held him close to me. Nevio tilted his head, watching everything with his dark eyes.

"Alessio's going to be Greta's and your best friend, Nevio."

"They'll get in trouble together, that's for sure," Remo said as he came over with Greta who was as curious about the new arrival as her brother but not as bold.

"See, Greta?" Remo murmured. "Now you aren't the smallest person in this house. We need to teach you how to kick ass so you and Nevio can protect Alessio."

Savio snorted. “Good luck. That kid doesn’t have a single aggressive bone in her body. No way will she ever kick anyone’s ass.”

Remo glowered at his brother. “I’ll teach her.”

I had to agree with Savio, which didn’t happen very often. Greta was soft-spoken, gentle and cautious, and I doubted that would change with time. Not everyone wanted to fight, and that was okay, even if Remo disagreed.

“If she doesn’t want to fight, Alessio and Nevio are going to protect her,” I said, pressing a kiss to Alessio’s soft hair. The others gathered around Alessio and me as well, and I showed him to everyone.

“Hey Alessio,” Fabiano said with a small smile. “Finally, another blue-eyed boy in this family.”

“You could just start working on blue-eyed kids yourself,” Remo suggested with a twisted grin.

Fabiano’s eyes widened in alarm, and Leona shook her head quickly.

“Not yet,” she said. They exchanged a look and laughed.

“I think there are enough babies in this house now,” Savio said.

Remo’s mouth twitched. “We’ll see.”

“Oh man,” Adamo said. I rolled my eyes at him and he gave me a small smile, one that reminded me of the ones from the past. “He *is* cute though.”

“I know he is,” I said.

Nevio and Greta were still curiously, considering the newcomer. I couldn’t wait for them to be older and play together in the garden.

Alessio began to squirm and mewl softly, smacking his lips. “You’re hungry, aren’t you?”

“Do you want me to prepare a bottle for him?” Serafina asked at once.

Smiling, I nodded. “That would be great.”

She handed Nevio over to Nino then hurried away.

“I can’t believe someone would throw a baby into the trash,” Leona said in disbelief, coming closer.

Remo and Nino exchanged a dark look.

“He’s too thin and he’s got cigarette burns on his stomach,” Nino said. “And the whore didn’t even remember his birthday.”

“She gave birth to him in the apartment of a shitty dealer she fucked in return for drugs and didn’t take him to a doctor until a few days later.”

My throat tightened as I regarded Alessio. Nino had briefly mentioned that we’d have to choose the birthday of our son but it seemed like such a monumental thing to decide that we hadn’t made up our minds yet.

Leona shook her head with glassy eyes.

“Fuck,” Savio muttered. “We’ve done some crazy shit but dumping a baby, burning it, that’s just fucked up.”

“He’s safe now,” Remo said.

“And in a few years, he’ll be strong enough to defend himself,” Fabiano added.

“You’ll be as strong as your dad and your uncles,” I told my boy.



I settled on the sofa with Leona and Serafina while the twins played with each other on the floor.

I couldn’t stop looking at Alessio as he drank from his bottle, resting peacefully in the crook of my arm.

He was a small baby with thin arms and an almost elfish face, too thin. “We’ll work on those chubby cheeks, won’t we?” I murmured as I stroked his soft cheek then trailed up to his hair. He watched me quietly. Even if his fussy moments

would be a lot of work, I preferred them to his very quiet moments, because I always worried that they were a sign of the things he'd already had to endure at such a young age.

Serafina cooed softly and tugged at his small feet. "Makes me want to have another one."

Nevio threw a wooden block away, then another, grinning like that was an achievement.

"But I'll give it a few more years," she added. Nevio continued throwing things around. "Or maybe even longer."

Leona laughed. "I can't believe you want more after giving birth to twins."

"Well, I'm not too excited about labor. You didn't miss anything," Serafina told me then grimaced. "I shouldn't have said that."

I shook my head. "No, it's okay. I'd love to give birth, even if it's painful, but I'm perfectly happy with Alessio. It doesn't matter how he came to us. He's our son."

"He is," Serafina murmured and pressed a kiss to my cheek. "And you'll be an amazing mom."

"Considering that I never had a good or even decent mother, I wonder how I'll ever be a good mom," Leona said, touching Alessio's head gently.

"I don't have a role model either. My mother was weak, and then she died, and my aunt always only saw me as burden. I'll raise Alessio like I would have wanted to be raised, with love and care."

NINO

The other men and I moved to the room adjoining the gaming room, which used to be our father's office but now harbored only our boxing ring and the pool table as well as part of our liquor cabinet. With our family expanding we needed more room in the gaming room, which was slowly turning into a general common room for all of us. Remo raised a glass. "To the new dad." We all downed our drink and Adamo hissed at the strength of the alcohol.

“I’m surprised you killed her,” Adamo said with a frown as we all sank down on the armchairs arranged in a half-circle.

“I would have been surprised if he didn’t,” Fabiano said, exchanging a look with Remo. “She deserved death.”

Savio shook his head. “What was he supposed to do to her? Let her go? Hand her over to the police? Not really an option.”

Adamo shrugged. “She could have worked in one of our other establishments.”

I said, “For one, it would cause discord among the whores if one of them was known as a child-murderer. Second I don’t want her to cause any kind of trouble for Alessio in the future.”

“I get it,” Adamo mumbled. “But you are still pissed at our half-brother for killing our father, yet you took from Alessio the chance to kill his mother or meet her.”

Mentioning Growl around Remo was never a good idea. My personal feelings toward our half-brother bordered on indifferent but I didn’t want another fight between Remo and Adamo. Our mother had caused enough discord between them. I leaned forward, narrowing my eyes. “She isn’t his mother. Kiara is. Alessio won’t ever find out he isn’t our blood.”

Remo downed his drink. “From this day on this kid is a Falcone. Anyone who dares telling him differently will have to deal with the consequences.”

I gave Remo a grateful smile. Lying to family wasn’t something Remo or I liked to do but this was for Alessio’s benefit. Finding out about his real mother would do nothing good, only bring pain.

“You’ll have to decide his birthday,” Remo reminded me.

If it was up to me, I’d have simply chosen a random date at the beginning of July. Alessio would never know that it might not be the day he was born, and in the long run of a life a few days more or less really weren’t of importance. Kiara, however, needed time to consider the possible dates.

“Do you know who his sperm donor is?” Savio asked.

Remo’s lips curled. “She went bareback with several customers in the past, there’s no telling who got her knocked up, and like I said, it doesn’t matter.”

“Could be important for genetic diseases,” Savio said.

“The whore who gave birth to him was a junkie. She consumed drugs when she was pregnant. The doctors warned us that it could have long-term effects, lead to Alessio having deficits concentrating, or have a penchant for drugs himself.”

Adamo sank deeper into his chair. He had returned from C.J. like promised, and hadn’t taken any drugs despite not being under supervision. Maybe he was on the right track. I hoped Kiara and I wouldn’t have to see Alessio through something similar in the future.

“But this was a good reminder that we still have business to attend to as well,” Remo said in a low voice, holding my gaze with the familiar look of hatred in his eyes.

“We do. Maybe it’s time.”

Adamo asked, worried, “You want to kill our mother?”

“She deserves death,” I said, trying to sound poised and calm despite the chaos in my chest.

“That’s not your decision alone,” Adamo said. “She’s mine and Savio’s mother as well.”

“I don’t care if they kill her. She’s dead to me anyway. But I don’t want to be involved in it. I don’t want to see her ever again, not dead or alive,” Savio muttered, filling his glass again.

Remo began pacing the room. Silence fell over us as we watched him, knowing he was close to an outburst. “She tried to kill us all, Adamo. She would still kill us if she got the chance. Sick or not, she’s dangerous. You weren’t there. Not really.”

“She isn’t the same woman as she was. You have no right to kill her without all of our consent,” Adamo insisted.

Remo leaned down, bringing his face close to Adamo's. "Do you really think you know her? Don't be naïve. You keep trusting the wrong people."

Adamo jutted out his chin. I raised a hand before this could get out of control.

"We don't have to decide it today. Right now, I have to help Kiara with Alessio, and your birthday is soon, Adamo. After that, we'll have another discussion, and find a solution."

"We won't decide today," Remo conceded, straightening. "But there is only one solution."



Kiara rocked Alessio gently against her chest as we made our way to our bedroom. It was earlier than our usual bedtime, but Kiara hadn't slept much and I not at all last night.

Surprise filled her face when she spotted the rollaway crib beside our bed.

"Remo and Serafina went out shopping for Alessio this morning. They got this and a few other things for the nursery."

"I'll have to thank them tomorrow," Kiara said as she ran her fingers along the white crib. The inside was a soft blue with white clouds. "Where are we going to have his nursery?"

"I thought the room next door would make sense as long while he's still young, and I reckon you want to have him sleep in our bedroom the first couple of weeks."

Kiara gave me an apologetic smile. "I really do. Is that okay for you?"

I moved over to her, stroking her throat and peering down at the small baby sleeping against her chest. "Why wouldn't it be? He needs us now. After what he's experienced, he needs to learn trust, and I know having him here will make you happy."

She nodded, her eyes filled with so much love sometimes it still caught me off guard. Sighing, she turned to the crib and carefully laid Alessio down then stayed bent over him and just

watched him. I pressed a kiss to the crown of her head. “I’ll grab a quick shower.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

When I emerged ten minutes later Kiara had changed into a nightgown and was lying on her side, watching Alessio. She’d removed the bars on the side of the crib facing the bed and was stroking his belly gently.

I climbed into bed behind her and pressed against her back. She released a small breath. “Sometimes I’m scared he’ll disappear if I close my eyes, and that this will turn out to be a dream.”

“It’s not,” I murmured against her neck. “And nothing will take him away from us. He’s ours. Have you chosen his birthday?”

Kiara released a small sigh. “I’ve been thinking about it all day. It seems wrong to decide something like that for a small person.”

“We have no way of finding out his birth date.”

“I know, and I think we should just say he was born July 1st. It’s the beginning of a new month, a new start. The possibility of new adventures...” She trailed off. “I know I’m putting too much meaning into a simple date, but I feel like he needs a special day.”

“That sounds good. First of July, it is then.”

She nodded. “I’ll always be grateful to Remo and you for bringing him into this family. Many men in our circles wouldn’t want a child that wasn’t their blood, especially not a child from a prostitute. They’d insist to have an heir.”

I trailed my fingers up and down her slender arm. “Alessio is my heir, Kiara. Blood or not. Remo and I don’t care about that. We took Fabiano in and he’s become our family. And I can’t see how it would matter that his birthmother was a whore. It’s got nothing to do with him. He’ll grow up to be a Falcone.”

“Look at everyone in this house. All of our pasts hold horrors in some shape or form, but somehow we’ve come together. Sometimes I’m scared it’ll catch up with us. It’s too perfect, too good.”

I shook my head. “The past is just that. It can only catch up if we allow it to, and we won’t.”

Kiara smiled, and with that beautiful image I extinguished the lights. I believed in the words I’d just said even if Remo and I were still tethered to our past through our mother.

That was *our* weakness and wouldn’t taint our family.

CHAPTER 24



NINO

Despite a lack of sleep a newborn entailed, Kiara seemed to glow with energy and happiness as she took care of Alessio. He hardly slept more than two hours in a row, a fussy and nervous baby who needed lots of attention. That was probably why his birthmother had burnt him. Some people should never consider having children, so very unlike Kiara who had an endless supply of patience, not just for Alessio but for everyone.

While Kiara prepared a bottle for him, I cradled him on my thighs. He was already mewling, desperate for food. “It’s okay, Alessio. Your mom’s bringing you your milk soon.”

I gently pushed up his shirt, checking the two burn marks on his belly. They were still red but healing. “Can you give me the salve?” I asked Remo, who’d been kicking the boxing sack, which he refused to have removed from the living area despite Kiara’s and Serafina’s not so subtle hints.

Stopping his assault, he grabbed the tube from the table, sank down beside me and handed me the salve. I put a bit of it on my fingers and rubbed it between them, so it wouldn’t be too cold then spread it on Alessio’s wounds. He stopped the mewling only moving his mouth as if he was already suckling the bottle.

“I can’t believe how fucking small he is,” Remo said, touching his finger to Alessio’s palm. “Nevio and Greta were already five months older when I first saw them, and I already thought they were tiny.”

When I was done with his burns, I pulled back and immediately Alessio mewled again so I kept rubbing his belly with my thumb. Kiara showed up with the bottle and I was

about to hand Alessio to her because she'd handled the feeding and almost everything else so far, eager to finally be a mother, but she shook her head.

“Your turn.”

I took the bottle from her and she settled on the armrest. The moment I touched the dummy to Alessio's lips, he eagerly began to suck but I kept stroking his belly since it seemed to calm him. Remo got to his feet and squeezed my shoulder then walked out into the garden.

“What do you see when you look at him?” Kiara asked, raking her fingers through my hair the way I always enjoyed.

I regarded the small child in my lap, the way he clung to the bottle as if it could be taken from him at any point, the red marks on his belly, the way he responded to gentle touch. “You. I see you.”

Kiara tilted her head with a curious expression. “Me? He doesn't look like me.”

“That's not what I mean,” I said, trying to put into words what I felt because that was what Kiara had actually been asking. “I see you because he needs protection and care like you did when you were given to me. I see you because he means you're happy. I see your love. That's why I'll come to love him like I came to love you. You know, it takes time for me.”

“I know, and your words are already more than I expected.” She leaned forward and kissed my cheek.



When we brought him to bed around seven that evening, I wrapped my arms around Kiara from behind, nuzzling her neck. We hadn't been intimate since Alessio had joined our family. Kiara couldn't relax with him in the same room and she didn't want to leave him alone yet. I pressed my erection against her lower back and she released a small sigh, and

looked at me over her shoulder. “I can’t with him in the same room.”

“I know,” I murmured and held up the baby phone. “We can leave him here and still make sure he’s fine.”

She bit her lip, torn between her need to protect him and her need for physical closeness. I stroked her side. “Put on your new red dress but no panties and come down to the piano. Bring your red silk shawl. I’ll be waiting for you.”

Kiara nodded.

I turned and headed downstairs. After putting the baby phone on a side table on loud, I sank down on the bench in front of the piano. My cock was straining against my pants. I desired Kiara in a way I hadn’t thought possible. Being with a woman for a couple of years, I’d have thought I’d grow tired of her body, her scent, her taste, but far from it.

I started to play the song I’d created with Kiara until I heard the sound of heels. Kiara descended the stairs in her knee-length elegant red dress and the matching sling-pumps, clutching the red silk shawl in one hand. She looked curious and eager as she approached me. I didn’t stop playing until she was beside me.

“No,” I said when she was about to take a seat beside me on the bench.

Kiara frowned. I slipped the shawl from her fingers and lifted it to her face. “Can I cover your eyes?”

Surprise flashed in her dark eyes, then a flicker of excitement. “Okay.”

I carefully knotted the shawl at the back of her head. “I just want you to feel and for that to work we need to limit your senses,” I rasped.

Kiara released a small breath, shivering. I closed the lid over the keys then hoisted Kiara up on the piano. She gasped. I gripped one heel and set it to the elevated edge of the piano, then did the same with her other foot so she sat in front of me with spread legs. The flowy skirt gathered between her thighs, covering her up.

“Keep your legs like this,” I ordered.

Kiara nodded, her breathing already deepening. Gripping the hem of her skirt, I pushed it up and bunched it around her waist, laying her pussy bare to my view.

Desire raced through my veins, seeing her opened for me, her pink folds already glistening with her lust. I leaned forward and ran my nose along the small white scar on her inner thigh then inhaled. Kiara quivered. “Nino?” Need and a hint of insecurity rang in her voice. I peered up, found her cheeks reddening.

“Lie back,” I murmured and she did. “Relax. Feel. Listen.”

I pushed her skirt even higher then pulled her closer until her pussy hovered over the edge, tantalizing and teasing. I lifted the lid again and hit the A key. The low note reverberated in the piano and, seeing goosebumps rise on Kiara’s skin. She could feel the hum everywhere, even in her pussy. I played the low note again but this time I kissed her knee and trailed my tongue down her calf and circled her ankle with the tip before I moved back up and hit the next note on the piano.

Kiara breathed faster, her breasts rising with every intake, nipples pebbling against the luxurious fabric, and her arousal increased. I kept on this little stimulation, hitting the two lowest notes over and over again while kissing and licking her calves and ankle until she was panting. “You’re going to drip on the piano,” I said in a raw voice, leaning forward and licking up the droplet making its way down Kiara’s perfect butt cheek.

She arched with a small moan. “Nino, please.”

“Relax. Listen. Feel,” I told her.

I played a new, higher note and licked along her inner thigh right to the crook between her thigh and pussy, then inhaled again and my own arousal almost made me give up my plan. Fuck. I wanted to dive in, devour her pussy and then bury myself inside of her.

“Nino, please just ...”

“Just what? What do you want?” I licked over her scar then sucked the skin into my mouth and hit the low note again. Kiara’s thigh muscles twitched against my lips.

“Nino...”

“Say what you want.”

“I want you to lick me,” she admitted.

“Good.” I pressed my mouth to her pussy and licked, long and slow like the A note. As my fingers found the higher notes, hitting them faster and faster, I fluttered my tongue over her clit. She tensed and hitting the A note once more, I sucked her clit between my lips and she came in my mouth, arching up on the piano, an apparition of red fabric and white skin against the black lacquer. Closing my eyes, I allowed myself to feel the music, to savor Kiara’s taste. Perfection.

Drawing back, I closed the lid again then opened my fly and pulled out my cock. Grasping her hips, I pulled her down until her feet found the floor and she was leaning back against the piano with her pussy hovering above my dick.

“Bend your legs.”

She did and my tip pressed against her folds. Moaning, she tried to lower herself further but my hand on her hip held her fast. “Not yet.” I rubbed my thick tip along her pussy lips nudging her clit every time. She panted and my own breathing turned ragged. I couldn’t resist any longer.

“Ride me.”

She lowered herself, her fingers clinging to the piano lid behind her as she impaled herself on my length. She started moving her hips, up and down, rotating at the same time, chasing pleasure while driving me to the brink of my own control as I watched her. Reaching for the shawl, I tugged it away. Kiara’s eyes blazed with lust and need, and she rocked even faster against me. Our eyes held each other, her lips parting in a small cry and she clenched around me, tipping me over the edge with her. She kept rocking against me even as I pulled her to my chest until finally she became slack on top of me.

“Wow,” she breathed. “I didn’t think music could be erotic.”

“When you are concerned everything can be erotic,” I drawled as I trailed appreciative kisses along her chest and throat.



“Where in the ever loving fuck is he?” Remo snarled. We’d gathered in the common area to discuss Adamo’s disappearance.

“Not with C.J., that much is clear. She was the first person I checked. Diego said Gemma asked a few of her friends who know the people Adamo hangs with occasionally, but nothing,” I said.

Kiara walked back and forth on the terrace, listening, Alessio strapped to the sling in front of her chest, trying to get him to sleep, but she was listening, I could tell.

I added, “I think we must consider the very valid option that he found someone who’d sell him heroine and now he’s sleeping off his high.”

“If he bought it from the wrong people, he could be dead. Either they kill him, or they sell him low quality drugs that are cut with rat poison or the hell what else. He could be lying in a ditch with an overdose right about now,” Remo ground out. He kept rubbing his thumb up and down the scars on his wrist.

“You did everything you could to protect him.”

“Maybe he’s just at the race. You know he wanted to race this weekend and was pissed when he wasn’t allowed to,” Savio said, one arm braced against the bar.

“One of the crew would have told us,” I said.

“Not if Adamo managed to sneak in again like last time.”

Remo went over to his punching bag and landed a hard kick. “You mean the time he got himself captured by the fucking Outfit?” He exhaled, then gripped the bag hard.

Savio gave me a look that made it clear he was done trying to talk to Remo.

“Their camp is close by at the moment. Northeast of L.A.. We could head over there and check,” I said.

Remo grunted. “He would hide from us.”

“We could try anyway.”

Remo nodded slowly. “But if he’s shit-faced, if he really punched that shit into his veins again, you better hold me back or I might just beat him to within an inch of his life this time.”

Savio shoved away from the bar and plopped down on the sofa. “I guess that means I’ll have to stick around and play babysitter, figuratively and literally.”

“You and Fabiano. We’re lucky he got the house beside ours.”

“As if luck had anything to do with it. That plastic surgeon almost shit his pants when Remo talked to him.”

“He was lucky I didn’t just kill him, so there you go,” Remo muttered.

I headed outside to tell Kiara. From the worried look on her face she knew already. “You’re leaving to search for Adamo?”

“Have to. This kid ... he’s ...” I shook my head and stroked Alessio’s hair.

“Find him. Help him,” Kiara said. “We’ll be all right. Maybe you’ll find him before his cake goes stale.”

“I think you should eat it today. His birthday will be over by the time we find him and I suspect he won’t deserve a reward.”

Kiara pursed her lip. “It’s his birthday cake.”

Serafina sat on the grass and the twins were in the small baby pool she’d gotten them but she looked toward us. “We can bake something fresh once he’s back. Nino’s right, the key lime pie won’t last long.”

When Remo joined us outside, she looked at him and her face reflected the same concern I'd seen on Kiara's.

Remo and I weren't only responsible for our brothers anymore, we had wives and children. He gave me a pissed look, thinking the same and eager to kick Adamo's ass. I wasn't sure what to do with Adamo, how to handle him. If it wasn't him, the solution would have been clear—torture, then death.

"I don't know what to do with him if he's drugged again," Remo said when we sat in the car, ready to head out.

"We'll figure it out. We can try again. Lock him in longer this time."

Remo started the car. "What if it's not enough?"

I didn't say anything, because for once I couldn't think of other options.

KIARA

I was stretched out on the sofa beside Alessio, trying to get some rest after a sleepless night. Alessio was sleeping soundly now. Despite my tiredness I couldn't fall asleep. I loved watching his sweet face too much. Nino and Remo had been gone for one day and we hadn't heard from them yet, which wasn't unusual considering Nino despised unnecessary messages.

My phone buzzed on the table beside me. Turning awkwardly, I reached for it, trying not to wake Alessio. Adamo's name flashed across the screen. I picked up at once, surprised he'd call me. "Where are you? I baked you a cake for your birthday yesterday but you just disappeared. We're worried about you." I hoped he hadn't celebrated his sixteenth birthday alone. Maybe Savio was right and he'd spent it at the races, maybe with friends he'd made there, but why hadn't Remo and Nino found him yet?

"Kiara..." The word was slurred.

"Adamo, what's wrong? Where are you?" I asked, sitting up carefully.

“With my mother ... I was there to see her...”

Shock washed over me. I'd thought Adamo had put her out of his mind like his brothers seemed to have done. Why had he visited her, on his birthday no less?

“And now? Where are you now? Still in the hospital?”

“Nah ... ” he said quietly, a hint of hesitation in his voice, as if he wasn't telling me everything. “Didn't stay long ... she's not right in the head ... she's ...”

“Adamo, why don't you come home? Take a cab. Don't drive. You are drunk, right?” He couldn't be far. The mental institution was in the outer suburbs of Vegas.

Adamo laughed. It was a soft, despondent sound. “Drunk, drugged.”

I began pacing the room, growing more and more nervous. “Do you want me to pick you up?”

“Don't tell my brothers,” he said quickly.

There was no way his brothers wouldn't find out. They'd suspected his relapse after all.

“I won't. I can pick you up by myself. I'll take a car. There are enough to choose from.”

“When's the last time you've driven a car?”

I hadn't driven a car in years, only during driving lessons when I was still in school.

“Adamo, tell me where you are. Let me help you.” I glanced down at Alessio who was moving his fingers in his sleep. If it was just me, I wouldn't have hesitated to drive the car even if I was inexperienced. However, I wouldn't risk it with Alessio in the same car, and I couldn't leave him with Serafina. She had the twins to take care of, who were enough work, especially Nevio. Leona was on campus, and Savio and Fabiano couldn't take care of a newborn.

“You won't drive yourself. You'll send someone, right?” he said miserably.

“No,” I lied even as I felt bad, but I couldn’t drive no matter how much I wanted to, and maybe Adamo needed someone who could carry him if he passed out.

“She ran away,” he said.

“Who ran away?” The conversation was confusing me. With my lack of sleep, I just couldn’t keep up.

“I thought it would be nice to see her on my birthday. She was nice. She told me it was okay if I needed to escape reality now and then. She stayed at my side while I got myself a fix.”

Anger bubbled up. “Adamo, who ran away?” A horrible suspicion was taking root in my head. I didn’t want to give it room to grow. It couldn’t be.

“Our mother, she ran away. Today. Gone. I don’t know where she went.”

I frowned, trying to understand what he was saying and wondering how much of it was the result of his drug haze. “I thought you saw her in the hospital. She can’t leave there. Remo’s given clear orders...” A feeling of dread was taking hold of me.

“He gave the orders that only one of us brothers could get her out.”

I closed my eyes. “You helped her get *out* of the hospital?”

“Yeah ... she was crying and apologizing. I thought we could ... I don’t know... I didn’t want her to die.” He released a shuddering breath. “But she used me. She ran off when I fueled up the car. I don’t know where she went. She isn’t right in the head. Fuck, Kiara. I’m such an idiot.”

Adamo was adrift and looking for an anchor but he kept looking in the wrong places when a safe haven was always waiting for him in these walls.

“Come home,” I urged. “We’re all worried about you.”

“Remo and Nino will never forgive me for setting her free.”

“Of course, they will. They love you. They’ll go through fire for you, just come home. Everything will be fine.” But I wasn’t sure it was true. Remo and Nino hated and feared their mother equally. She was the thorn in their flesh, the tether to their cruel past and the gasoline that could fuel the fire of their monstrosity.

I said, “Let me help you. Let me pick you up.”

“No.” His voice was already fading as if he was lowering his phone. “I’ll have to find her. I’ll have to ... have to ... so Remo and Nino forgive me.”

“Adamo!”

The line went dead. I tried calling him back, but he rejected the call. Alessio woke from my shout and began crying. What was I supposed to do?

CHAPTER 25



KIARA

Remo and Nino were the strongest men we knew, but there was one thing with the power to destroy them still after all these years. Their mother. Serafina knew it as well I did. We had to protect them and our families at any price, but how?

Serafina and I sat on the sofa in the living room, watching over Greta and Nevio as they played on the floor. I rocked Alessio gently in my arms, hoping to get him to sleep.

“We have to find a way to get her before they find out what happened,” she said fiercely.

“The hospital will certainly alert them soon. Something will come up, or one of the other doctors will want confirmation, and Remo will get the call.”

Serafina shook her head, scrunching up her face in despair. “What was he thinking? How could he believe a word she said after what she did to his brothers?”

“He wasn’t born when it happened. For him it’s an abstract scenario he can’t comprehend, but she was there in front of him, crying and begging. She was real and he wanted to help her. You know how much he struggles.”

“Because of what my family did to him.”

I looked into her eyes, wondering if she noticed how Adamo used her to remind himself of the past. I didn’t think she was aware about the extent of his struggles, maybe none of us was. Adamo had become a master at hiding his addiction, his battles. “We have to protect them,” I whispered. It was ridiculous, us trying to protect Remo and Nino, but in this case they needed protecting.

“Fabiano is the only one who can help us.”

I traced Alessio’s hairline gently as I held him in my arm. “He’s loyal to Remo. It won’t be easy to convince him to go behind Remo’s back.”

Serafina huffed. “It isn’t betrayal if he protects Remo from himself.”

“I have a feeling he and Remo won’t see it that way.”

“What about Nino? He bases his decision on logic. I bet he would agree with our plan to involve Fabiano.”

“Maybe.” Nino had come so far from the man I first met more than two years ago. He still had trouble with emotions, recognizing them, feeling them, showing them, but we were on a good path, or had been. The thought that this could set him back, it terrified me. When I hadn’t known Nino any other way, his lack of emotions had been tolerable. Now I knew how he could be if he actually felt them. I didn’t think I could survive faked emotions from him ever again.

“But it’s different where their mother is concerned.”

“Fabiano is our only chance. It’s either that or telling Remo and Nino.”

Serafina and I stared into each other’s eyes, and hers like mine filled with tears. “I’ll call Fabiano. We’ve got at last two hours before our husbands will be back.”

They’d sent us a text that they hadn’t found Adamo and would return soon. I dialed Fabiano’s number. He picked up after the second ring. “What’s wrong, Kiara?”

“Can you come over? Serafina and I need to talk to you. Please don’t tell Remo and Nino.”

There was a moment of silence on the other end. “I’ll be there in five minutes.”

He stayed true to his promise and stalked into the living room exactly five minutes later, eyes tense with apprehension, one hand on his gun as if he expected an ambush.

Alessio was asleep in my lap by now. Nevio and Greta still sat on their blanket on the floor and played with multi-colored wooden blocks.

“What’s the matter? Did something happen?” Fabiano asked urgently.

Serafina and I exchanged a look and Fabiano grimaced. “That look doesn’t bode well. What’s wrong?”

Serafina stepped up to him and touched his arm. They’d been friends as kids and in the last few months the tension between them after the kidnapping had finally lessened. “You have to swear that you won’t tell Nino or Remo what we’re going to tell you. Not unless we tell you to.”

Fabiano stepped back so Serafina had to drop her hand, his expression hardening. “I betrayed Remo once and I won’t ever do it again.”

“It’s not betrayal if you’re helping them.”

“I owe my Capo the truth. I owe him loyalty.”

“Do you think Kiara or I’d ever do anything to betray our husbands?” Serafina hissed, stepping close to Fabiano. Looking like an angel, she still managed to appear fierce. “You are the only one who can help us save them.”

“From what?” Fabiano asked, becoming intent and tense, ready to go into war to protect his brothers-by-choice.

“From themselves,” I whispered. “Please Fabiano. We need your help.”

“Then tell me what’s the matter.”

“First you’ve got to swear that you’re not going to tell them,” Serafina insisted.

“That’s not going to happen, Serafina.”

Serafina glared then turned and stalked over to Greta and Nevio, who’d stopped playing at Fabiano’s arrival.

Fabiano caught my gaze, his expression questioning. “Kiara.”

I sighed and put Alessio down into his crib before I faced Fabiano. What choice did we have? We needed his help. Serafina gave a small nod, her lips pinched with worry.

“Their mother has escaped from the hospital.”

Fabiano’s eyes went wide then he shook his head. “Impossible. Remo gave the staff clear instructions. They’d never dare to go against him.”

“He gave them instructions to allow only a Falcone brother to release her.”

Fabiano frowned, then realization set in. “Fuck!” he snarled, causing Greta to drop her wooden block and began crying. He snapped his mouth shut and muttered under his breath. “What the fuck is wrong with the kid? First the fucking drugs, now this.”

Serafina cradled her daughter in her arms and as usual Greta calmed quickly. Fabiano sighed then glanced back toward me. “You realize Remo and Nino won’t rest until they’ve caught her.”

I bent over Alessio who was deep asleep, such a quiet baby when he wasn’t hungry. It hurt my heart to think he’d become that way because in his first weeks his cries had been ignored or been punished with pain. “Not if you catch her before them.”

Fabiano froze. “You want me to hunt her?”

“Hunt her and kill her,” Serafina said as she set Greta back down to Nevio who had begun clanking the blocks together.

Kill her? We hadn’t spoken about that. Serafina gave me a pained look.

“Kiara, don’t look at me like that. You know as well as I do that she’ll always haunt them for as long as she lives. Even now when they’re finally happy, she manages to ruin everything again. I want her gone from their lives once and for all. I want the past to end so we can focus on the future, on our family. I want her dead.”

Serafina was Remo's wife through and through. She loved fiercely and brutally, and protected her children and Remo relentlessly. I gave a small nod, even as my stomach turned thinking I was deciding about someone's life. But there was no limit to the length I would go to make sure Alessio and Nino were safe. I hadn't intervened when Remo had killed Alessio's birthmother, had I?

"You want me to kill her?" Fabiano asked slowly then laughed darkly. "Remo would never forgive me. Not in one million years if I took that kill from him and Nino. His fucking half-brother killed their father before Remo could. I won't do that to Remo. If anyone ends that woman, it'll be the Falcone brothers, not me."

I closed my eyes. Fabiano wouldn't budge on the subject.

Serafina stalked toward him. "It's not just about them anymore. They have children. They have us. They have to be fathers and husbands."

"Trust me, if they don't handle her himself, they won't be men you'll want to live with."

Serafina shook her head then whirled around, turning her back to us and slowly sank down beside her kids.

I didn't say anything, terrified of Nino's reaction when he found out. Fabiano stepped up to me, his hands curling over the edge of the crib. "How's Alessio?"

"Gaining weight and the burns have healed." I met his gaze. "Do you want children?"

Fabiano smiled, but his eyes were worried. "First, Leona and I need to marry next year ... if that still works out."

"Do you think Remo and Nino will still be chasing their mother then?" I couldn't imagine being without Nino for that long. Even if he returned home now and then, their life would be dedicated to the chase and not our family.

"I don't think so, but it might complicate the planning and everything else. I guess we'll have to wait for their reaction." He ran a hand through his hair, mouth tightening. He was as concerned about their reaction to the news as we were. He

knew them, had known them a long time before Serafina and I did.

Fabiano strolled over to Serafina and the twins and knelt down beside them. Serafina didn't look his way, her shoulders stiff. Fabiano handed Greta one wooden block after the other which she took after a moment of consideration and piled them up. Nevio, of course, got up and staggered over to Fabiano, keen eyes on the gun in his holster. Fabiano caught Nevio's grabby hands. "No."

That was a word Nevio wasn't very fond of and his face scrunched up in an indignant cry. Fabiano chuckled, grabbed him and catapulted him up over his head. "One day you'll be Capo, young man, but until then you'll hear many no's."

Serafina turned to them, smiling slightly despite the tears trailing down her cheeks. Greta crawled over to her and settled in her lap. Feeling sentimental, I picked up Alessio, waking him. He mewled softly, blinking up at me. I pressed a kiss to his cheek and cradled him against my chest. "I'll feed him."

I left, heading for the kitchen. There was no reason to panic yet. Maybe Nino and Remo would handle their mother's disappearance better than we hoped. They'd grown so much since I'd come to live with them.

The past was just that, the past. Right?



After Fabiano had sent Remo a text that he and Nino needed to come home as fast as possible, we waited. Fabiano and Serafina were still on the floor with the twins and I was stretched out on the sofa with Alessio on my chest when Remo and Nino returned. The moment they saw us, they fell silent. Nino's brows drew together when he saw Fabiano then his eyes moved on to me. My eyes were red and so were Serafina's.

"What's going on?" Remo asked Savio, who'd been sitting on the sofa for the last hour, mulling over what we'd told him.

Before Savio could reply, Nino walked over to me as I carefully sat up so as not to wake Alessio.

“Kiara? Has anything happened?”

I stood, then linked my hand with Nino’s. Serafina stayed on the floor with the twins, regarding Remo as if he was a ticking bomb. Fabiano rose to his feet, and I shivered, fearing what lay ahead.

I said, “Your mother escaped from the hospital. We don’t know where she is.”

Nino’s fingers became slack, something haunted flickering in his eyes, and his gaze went to Remo, who was frozen except for the look on his face. He looked the man I’d been scared of in the beginning.

“What?” The word reverberated with the promise of punishment, with pure unfiltered hatred.

“Adamo went to visit her and she tricked him into getting her out. When he wasn’t paying attention, she ran.”

“I still can’t believe this shit,” Savio breathed. He wasn’t as shaken as his brothers. Even though they’d told him about the events of that fateful day, he at least couldn’t remember them.

Remo curled his hands into fists and lowered his face to glare at the floor, shoulders shaking. Nino still hadn’t moved. The look on his face wasn’t any less unsettling than Remo’s.

“Where is he now?”

“I don’t know,” I said, not taking my eyes off Nino’s beautifully cold face. “He wanted to catch her so you’d forgive him.”

Nino let out a choked scoff.

“What are you going to do now?” Savio asked.

“Catch her. Kill her,” Remo said in a low voice as he watched Greta and Nevio on the floor. He knelt and touched their heads.

“You’re going to hunt her?” I touched Nino’s chest.

“We have to.”

“I could hunt her and bring her to you,” Fabiano suggested, and I could have hugged him. My relief was short-lived seeing Nino’s and Remo’s expressions.

“No, not this time, Fabiano,” Nino said.

Remo leaned forward and kissed his twins, then staggered back to his feet. He pulled Serafina against him who pressed her lips together.

“She needs to die.”

“I know,” she said.

“When will you leave?” I asked.

Nino glanced at his brother. “Right away.”

Remo sighed. “She could still be close. I don’t want to give her time to leave our territory, or refresh old contacts.”

Serafina looked at Remo. “Old contacts?”

“When we took over, we killed most of our father’s men and the men who deemed themselves worthy of ruling over the Camorra, but we didn’t get all of them. Some of those cowards ran off. We thought they were in Mexico or Europe, but they found refuge in Outfit territory.”

“We should head out to the mental hospital first, look through her things,” Nino said. He sounded cold, effective and his eyes were emotionless.

“Do you want me to come?” Savio asked quietly.

“You and Fabiano stay here and keep watch,” Remo said.

Serafina shook her head. “Remo.”

“No,” he growled. “This ends now. We will end it once and for all.”

“I’ll grab a few things,” Nino said. Taking Alessio, I followed him up to the bedroom. He stuffed a few clothes into a backpack, then another knife and gun in addition to the bowie knife and gun strapped to his chest. I touched his arm and peered up at him. A battle was raging in his eyes, cold

against pain, hatred with love, then nothing again. “Don’t worry,” he said simply.

“How can I not?”



Serafina’s eyes held the same trepidation I felt. It was a miracle that men like Remo and Nino could love us in the first place, that they could control the demons that had a hold of them. Now I feared that this could be the tipping point for both of them. A catalyst that might snuff out their humanity.

We’d all gathered in the driveway to see them off.

“You’ll return as often as possible, right?”

Nino lowered his head. “Yes. This will be over soon.” I wanted to find consolation in the gray calm of his eyes but they were guarded and cold.

“Don’t lose yourself in the chase,” I begged. “We need you.”

Nino regarded me, then Alessio sleeping against my chest in his sling. “I lost myself many years ago and am still finding myself every day.”

I touched his chest, feeling his steady heartbeat against my palm, trying to find calm and solace in it. Today it didn’t work.

“Will you return to me as the man you are now or as the man you were when we first met?” I loved him, would always love him even if he returned to the emotionless man from the past, I couldn’t *not* love him.

Nino rubbed his thumb along my cheek. “I *will* return to you.”

I swallowed, grateful that he kept his promise not to lie to me and at the same time wishing he had. “And we’ll wait for you. Please return quickly. I love you so much.”

“And I love you no matter how I return.” Nino kissed my mouth then pressed a kiss to Alessio’s forehead before he turned and headed for the car.

Serafina's expression was a mix of anger and despair as she talked to Remo but he shook his head once more, grabbed her face almost roughly and kissed her. Then he got down to one knee and bowed down so he was on eyelevel with Nevio and kissed his forehead. He straightened, went over to Savio who held Greta and kissed her forehead as well. Then Remo gave Savio a nod, which he returned with a determined expression.

They drove off. I let out a choked gasp and closed my eyes. Someone touched my shoulder and I found Fabiano beside me.

“Kiara, they will get through this. I've lived so many horrors with them, fought so many battles, faced so many enemies, people who thought they could beat us, but Remo and Nino are still standing and those people aren't.”

“I know they'll come out of this as the victors,” I said firmly. “But I'm worried what it'll take to get there.”

“Nothing worth having comes easy or without a fight,” Fabiano murmured.

I nodded, then glanced at Serafina and saw the same determination. We were willing to fight because what we had was worth everything.

CHAPTER 26



KIARA

In the first few days, Remo and Nino returned every night and left before sunrise again. As they extended their search radius, they stayed away longer. It seemed impossible that they would find their mother. She could be anywhere. Maybe in Mexico, maybe in Outfit territory, maybe somewhere else. She was a ghost, had been haunting them in one way or another for so long.

“They’ve been searching for three weeks, we should tell them to give up,” Serafina said one night at the dining table.

“They won’t listen,” Savio said, looking up from his cell briefly.

Fabiano nodded. “He’s right. It’s the one thing where Nino doesn’t listen to logic. They both can’t.”

Remo and Nino weren’t just looking for their mother. Adamo had disappeared as well. Nothing would make them give up their endeavor.

Leona came in with a big bowl of spaghetti with tomato sauce. She’d cooked for once. Fabiano and her spent most of the time in the mansion now that Remo and Nino were hunting.

She said, “I don’t get it. Why do they have to catch her? They should be glad she’s gone. What does it matter if she starts a new life somewhere else? I get crazy mother problems, but maybe they should let it drop.”

Savio took the ladle from her and filled several plates. “Did your crazy-ass mother try to kill you? Burn you?”

Leona gave a small shake of her head, a blush taking over her throat and cheeks, blotting out her freckles.

“Then you don’t know shit.”

“Savio, don’t talk to Leona like that,” Fabiano snapped. They held gazes, both not willing to back down. Men and their dominance battles were something I’d never comprehend. It didn’t help that the tension had been mounting because of recent events.

Leona held up her hand. “No, it’s okay. It’s none of my business. I have no right to put my nose in your family matters.”

“You are family too,” Serafina said, trying to wrangle a bib around Nevio’s neck.

Savio sighed and nodded. “Fabiano is, so you are too.”

Fabiano inclined his head then touched his fiancée’s hip.

Leona blushed an even darker red and filled Fabiano’s plate, then her own. Greta and Nevio had already started stuffing their cute little faces with their food, the former wearing her bib without protest, the latter getting smashed avocado all over his clothes.

I ate a bite of the pasta, but I couldn’t really focus on food or anything but the thought that my period had been overdue for more than two weeks. Alessio was asleep in his crib upstairs. Pushing my chair back, I stood.

“What’s the matter?” Serafina asked worriedly.

“Nothing. I just need to go to the bathroom. Can you keep an eye on the baby monitor for me?”

All heads nodded and I handed the monitor over to Serafina who tried to catch my eyes, obviously concerned. Avoiding Fabiano’s suspicious gaze, I quickly moved into the guest bathroom and locked myself in.

I stared at the drawer with the pregnancy tests. Slowly I sank down on the toilet lid, considering if it was worth it. Should I take the test and risk having my hopes crushed, or just wait it out?

Taking a deep breath, I opened the drawer and took a test out. I wasn't even sure how many of them I had used since Nino and I had started trying to get me pregnant. But this time was different. I had Alessio and in the few weeks since he'd become part of our family, I'd grown to love him so much. He was my son. Blood was completely irrelevant. Even if the test was negative, it wouldn't be like the last times, because I already had a child to love.

Twenty minutes later I closed my eyes, dropping the second test to the floor and began to laugh softly. The same result as the first. A knock sounded.

"Kiara? Are you all right?" Leona asked.

I took another deep breath, washed my hands and opened the door. She scanned my face, then took in the two tests on the floor.

"I'm pregnant," I whispered, and hearing those words the reality of the situation really sank in. For the first time a test was positive, two of them even. After all this time, all the tears and obsessing, I was finally pregnant. As if having Alessio, had set me free, had removed some sort of blockade.

"Oh, Kiara," Leona said and hugged me tightly. "Will you call Nino?"

I shook my head. "I need to see a doctor first. Make sure it's really true. I don't want to crush his hopes if it's a false alarm. He and Remo have enough to carry because of their mother."

Leona gave me an understanding smile. "I have courses tomorrow, but I could skip if you need support."

I squeezed her hand. "Thank you, but you shouldn't skip. Savio's taking me and Alessio to a pediatrician for a check-up tomorrow. There's a gynecologist in the same building."

Leona smiled. "Will you come back to the table?"

"Can you keep it a secret for now? Even from Fabiano?"

"I'll try. I'm not the best at keeping secrets from him though. He's just too attentive."

“That’s not a bad thing,” I said with a laugh.

We returned to the table. Serafina, Savio and Fabiano gave me curious looks but I only smiled. Under the table, I pressed my palm to my belly, wondering if it was really true.

Serafina handed the baby monitor back to me. “Here.”

“Thanks.” Alessio was still stretched out on his back, sleeping tight. Would he soon become a big brother?



After Alessio’s check-up, which went well, Savio wanted to head down to the underground garage. I pressed the button for the floor below ours. “I still need to go to another doctor.”

“All right,” he said slowly. His expression turned pained when he saw we were heading to the gynecologist. “Seriously?”

I gave him a pointed look and set Alessio’s carrier down on the reception desk of the practice. Savio looked around with a frown as if he was worried one of his friends could catch him in a place like this, or maybe one of the girls he slept with.

I told the receptionist, “I need to see the doctor.”

“Do you have an appointment?” she asked, barely glancing up from her computer screen.

“No, I—”

“How long have you lived in Vegas?” Savio asked coldly.

The woman’s head shot up with a frown. “What?”

He leaned on the counter and stretched out his arm with the tattoo, a smile on his face that raised the little hairs on my neck. “The name is Falcone, Kiara Falcone. Now tell the doctor to hurry, we don’t have all day.”

She looked clueless. The other receptionist stood at once. “I’ll ask her to see you right away.”

“Was that necessary?” I whispered.

Savio shrugged. "I didn't like the tone she used on you."



Savio waited outside the door while the doctor did her check-up, and afterward I couldn't get the smile off my face.

I walked out, causing Savio to straighten at once from where he leaned against the wall.

"Is he the father?" the doctor asked.

Savio's eyes widened in alarm.

"No," I said quickly, then smiled and we took our leave.

Savio waited until we were in elevator before he asked, "You're pregnant?"

I nodded as I took Alessio from the carrier because he'd started crying. The moment I pressed him to my chest, he quieted as usual. Savio grabbed the carrier.

"Fuck, the mansion will be overrun with these little monsters soon."

"You're exaggerating."

"If one of them turns out to be like Nevio, we're doomed, that's all I'm saying."

I chuckled. Nevio was a very active, very loud child, the complete opposite from his sister.

"If you tell Nino, he'll return right away, and I don't think he'll leave again. If you tell him you don't want him to go, he won't. You know you've got him wrapped around your little finger."

The elevator came to a stop and we headed toward the Porsche Panamera. Since we had three kids in the family, some of the sports cars had been exchanged for vehicles with a bit more room.

"I know he would have stayed if I'd asked him but he needed to do this."

“Maybe Leona is right, you know?” Savio murmured. “Maybe it’s for the best that she just disappeared, so neither of us has to kill her. With a little luck, she ends her own life.”

Savio’s gaze darted away from me, searching the parked cars to our right, and he became tense.

“Get in the car!”

He was about to pull his gun when five men jumped out from behind the other cars. Two of them gripped him from behind, stopping him from drawing the weapon. I stumbled back when Savio rammed the back of his head against the face of one of his attackers, who released him with grunt. Savio did a high kick against the chin of another, causing his head to fly back with a sickening crunch. The man dropped to the ground unmoving.

I whirled around, pressing Alessio to my chest and ran back to the elevator. The sounds of fighting followed me and then steps. What was I supposed to do? Calling the police was out of the question, but I needed to get help for Savio. Fabiano was the only option but he couldn’t leave Fina and the twins alone. My mind stumbled over each thought, not able to hold on to one. I didn’t dare look back and suddenly I was doused in liquid. It dripped down my hair, my neck, onto Alessio’s head and his romper. He began to wail.

“Stop!” A woman ordered. “Stop or you’ll burn.” It was a melodic, soft voice. One meant for soothing words and lullabies.

I sucked in a sharp breath, and then the stench of gasoline clogged my nose and I froze, staring down at Alessio in horror. He, too, was covered in gas. Slowly I turned around to stare into gray eyes. Like Nino’s, but unlike his, they didn’t give me a sense of calm.

Mrs. Falcone had a half-empty bottle in one hand and a lighter in the other.

“Stop the shit or the baby and the girl will burn!” one of the attackers snarled.

Savio was holding another man by the collar. His eyes darted to me, then his mother, and slowly he released the man, sliding his knife out of his chest. The man dropped to the ground, eyes wide and lifeless, and soon blood spread around him. Only three men were still standing, two of them bleeding, the third now pointing a gun at Savio. The man with the gun hit Savio over the head, causing him to fold into himself and fall to the ground.

Alessio started crying once more and my rocking did nothing to soothe him.

Mrs. Falcone smiled at me. “You are Kiara *Vitiello*? And this must be your son?”

I clutched Alessio protectively against me, taking a step back. Images of what she had done to her sons formed in my head, stirred terror in my insides. “What do you want?”

She pointed toward a black limousine. “Head over there.” Her mouth twisted into a too wide smile. “Please.”

Quaking from fear, I moved toward the car then got into the backseat. Savio was shoved into a second car. Mrs. Falcone got into the passenger seat of the car I was in and one of the men took the steering wheel. Alessio’s cry rang out harshly in the small space.

I tried to wipe the gasoline from Alessio’s head but it clung to him. Rubbing his back, I began humming. Yet, Alessio kept wailing, his little face turning red.

Mrs. Falcone pursed her mouth. “Get him to stop.”

“Shhh,” I cooed against my son’s temple.

“Stop him.”

“I’m trying.”

“Stop him! Or I will!” she screeched, whirling around in her seat and staring at us with a wide-eyed expression.

I froze, my hold on Alessio tightening, but he, too, had become completely quiet, as if he could sense the danger we were in. I kissed his forehead despite the gasoline, never taking my eyes off Mrs. Falcone.

She nodded once, then turned back to the windshield. “I’ve been waiting for a long time for this moment.”

“Please,” I whispered. “Don’t do this. You can start a new life.”

She peered over her shoulder. “I don’t want a new life. All I want is to finish what I’ve begun, don’t you understand?”

The feverish determination in her eyes made me shudder. I pressed my cheek against Alessio’s head.

“You don’t have to be scared. I won’t hurt you or him, if my sons do what I say. He’s not Nino’s, right?”

I swallowed. “We adopted him.”

“Good, then you two can live.” All I could think about was the baby in my belly, Nino’s baby. What would she do if she found out I was pregnant with her son’s child?

I tried not to panic. It would only transfer to Alessio and make him cry again. Remo and Nino would figure out a way to save us.

NINO

We were on our way back home after four days on the road and without a trace of our mother. “Our wives and children need us,” I said again, because Remo was dangerously silent since I’d convinced him to return to the mansion for a few days.

I added, “We don’t have a lead, Remo. I want her gone as much as you do, but we can’t spend every second chasing her, not anymore, not like in the past.”

“Every moment that she’s out there is a moment where she can ruin everything. You *know* her.”

“I—”

The ringing of my phone stopped me from saying more. It was Kiara’s number. I picked up at once. “Did something happen?”

“Hello Nino,” a woman said and it took my brain a moment to recognize the voice and my insides froze over. “I

know we haven't spoken in a while, but I'm only calling you to tell you we have your Kiara and her baby. I don't know if you care, but I think maybe you do, so if you want to see her alive, you and Remo come home now."

Remo slowed the car, taking in my expression. "Nino?"

My mother's voice went on calmly, "Tell Remo, Kiara and the baby are covered in gasoline and if he doesn't behave, I'll have to let them burn. We'll be waiting for you."

She hung up and I could only stare at my cell. Images from the past, of hungry flames eating away at the drapes, slithered through my mind, followed by the horrible realization that today it might not be I who burned, but worse, Kiara and Alessio.

"Nino, say something."

"Our mother has Kiara and Alessio. She's going to kill them if we don't come home."

Remo's phone rang and he picked up, saying immediately, "Fabiano, what the fuck is going on?" My brother closed his eyes, his chest heaving. "Take Fina and the twins into the panic room in your mansion if you've got time. Maybe our mother doesn't know about them." Remo nodded. "Let them in. Don't risk that she hurts Kiara or Alessio."

Remo opened his eyes and looked at me. I was still clutching my phone in my hand.

"We have to save them," I rasped. "Help me save them."

Remo gripped the back of my head and hugged me. "You'll never have to ask me for something like that. Never. We will save them, and if anyone burns today, it'll be us." He pulled back, his eyes harsh. "I know it's fucking much to ask right now, but shove your emotions down as far as you can. If we want to save them, I need you to be the sociopathic killer, not the husband or father, got it?"

I gave a nod. "I will kill them all."

"You and I will." He hit the gas and took us back home.



The gates swung open and in the driveway, we found three cars that didn't belong. Two men stood guard in front of the entrance. I recognized them at once as Carmine, Cosimo's younger brother, and beside him another one of our father's former lapdogs.

Remo and I got out, and Carmine with a wide grin pointed his gun at us. "The wind's turned, hasn't it?"

Remo's mouth curled. "Your brother begged and cried like a little girl before I killed him. To think that a pussy like him had dared to call himself Capo for even a second makes me want to jab a knife into my brain so I can cut out the part remembering it."

Carmine's face turned red. "You ... you are going to die today."

"So, will you," I said calmly. He'd gained weight around the middle and his hairline had receded.

"Inside," he ordered, "But first you give us your weapons. Don't forget, that woman and the baby will burn to coal in a blink if you try anything."

Remo and I removed our holsters and gave them to Carmine, who glared at Remo. "Inside, now!"

We made our way into the mansion with them pointing their guns at our backs. I searched the adjoining corridors for more attackers, but didn't see any. Remo alone could have taken the men who held us at gun point and together we wouldn't have had any trouble, but we couldn't risk it as long as Kiara and Alessio were in our mother's hands. The torturous images from the past kept licking at my consciousness like hungry flames, waiting to banish the here and now. With sheer force of will, I shoved them down.

My heart picked up when we arrived in the gaming room. Kiara sat on the sofa and cradled Alessio against her chest. Her hair was sticky and the stench of gasoline hung in the air.

My insides constricted. I only gave her a small nod, remembering Remo's words. Savio lay on the floor, bleeding from a headwound, and looking up at me dazedly. I didn't discover any other wounds. If things went down, he'd still manage to put up a decent fight despite his injury. Fabiano's hands were bound behind his back and he was kneeling beside two other former Camorrista. Remo shot him a look and he gave a small nod.

Serafina and the twins were in the panic room.

And then I spotted her, the woman who'd destroyed what little innocence Remo and I had possessed as children. In a moment she moved to Kiara's side and held up the lighter. "You are going to put down all of your weapons, or they'll both burn."

"We took their weapons," Carmine said, perspiration glistening on his receding hairline. His brother's screams all those years ago would be nothing in comparison to what Remo and I would do to him today for threatening the people we were meant to protect.

Our mother shook her head with a benevolent smile. "No, no, you didn't. I know Benedetto's sons."

"We are your sons too," Savio ground out, rolling onto his back and touching the spot of dried blood on the side of his head with a grimace.

She ignored him. "A gunshot could set Kiara and her boy on fire too. A little spark and everything goes up in flames, do you really want to risk it? Hear their agonized screams?"

Remo looked at me, hoping I'd contradict her, but I couldn't. Not with absolute certainty and the fire would spread too fast. I couldn't risk this, couldn't risk Kiara and Alessio being consumed by flames. Remo and I bent down and reached for the guns strapped to our calves.

"Careful now," Mother said. "You know how excruciating it is to burn alive. I can't imagine how it would feel to die that way."

“Maybe you’ll find out today,” Remo said, his eyes full of hatred.

Inside me there was quiet, a terrifying stillness, only interrupted by bursts of what I could assume was fear, fear of losing everything. Not my life. I didn’t care about that.

Carmine took the guns from us with a nasty smile then backed up again to the other men.

“What did you promise them to do your bidding?” I asked.

Mother smiled. “Money. Power. Revenge.”

“Power,” Remo scoffed. “Do you really think my men will follow either of you? They’ll laugh into your pitiful faces and then smash them in. And even if you manage to seize power by some stroke of luck, you won’t have it for long. Luca will wipe the floor with assholes like you and just claim the Camorra for himself.”

“We’ll see,” Carmine said. He was obviously the leader of the remaining traitors. That they’d chosen a man like him showed how weak they were.

“Help him to his feet,” Mother said, indicating Savio.

An older man, one of my father’s old Captains, grabbed Savio’s arm to pull him to his feet.

Savio jerked his head forward, breaking the man’s nose with his forehead. “Go fuck yourself, motherfucker.” The man staggered back, clutching his nose, then he raised his gun and pointed it straight at Savio’s head. My own body went into fight mode but I forced myself to stay put.

Our mother waved the lighter. “I told you. They’ll burn.”

I looked to Kiara and Alessio. She was stroking his back, her gaze on me. She wasn’t crying, only looking at me with absolute certainty that I could save them, and no matter the price, I would. Those kind eyes had helped me tear down parts of the walls from the past and today I’d smash the rest of them. Maybe I wouldn’t survive; it didn’t matter, as long as I took my mother and those traitors with me so Kiara and Alessio could live in peace.

Savio staggered to his feet and moved toward us, limping slightly. There wasn't a bullet or knife wound in his leg, so I hoped he'd only twisted his ankle.

"Where's Adamo?" Mother asked, flicking the lighter open, causing Kiara to flinch and me to take a step forward. Mother smiled at the orange flame before her gaze latched onto mine then to Remo. Her expression, full of manic excitement, it had haunted many nightmares of my past.

"He disappeared after you tricked him into helping you."

"Poor boy," she crooned. "He's weak, lost. He isn't like you or Benedetto." She regarded the flickering flame of the lighter again and every fiber in my body tensed. I wouldn't reach Kiara in time if Mother touched the flame to her hair or clothes. Her eyes became eager again. "What about those kids and wife of yours, Remo? Where are they?"

Remo's nostrils flared.

"Everyone knows about that kidnapped girl and those twins that look like you," she continued. "Especially that boy. Your spitting image. Your tainted blood."

Remo gave her a wide grin, full of maniac darkness. "You know me, don't you? You really think I could ever have a woman in my life without killing her?"

Mother tilted her head and closed the lid of the lighter. "You killed her?"

"Her and those useless kids."

Mother regarded him closely, but from the look on Remo's face even I would have believed his words to be true if I didn't know what Serafina and his twins meant to him.

"Why don't you douse us with gasoline? That way you can guarantee we don't act out of turn and you can let Kiara and Alessio go," I said carefully.

Mother's laugh was girlish, too high, too fake. "Oh no, no. I won't let the past repeat itself. She stays. You'll behave as long as she does. You don't want her to get hurt, do you?"

I swallowed hard, trying to suppress the need to attack, to dish out the pain she deserved.

“We need to hurry up here,” Carmine said, looking at Remo. My brother appeared to be imagining all the ways he could break the man before him. “We don’t know if they didn’t alert their soldiers. As long as they still live, every fucking Made Man in the city will follow their command.”

Mother gave him an indignant look then sighed before smiling at us. “Okay, this is how it goes, boys. I want you to cut your wrists, all right?”

Savio scoffed.

Remo’s face transformed into a mask of absolute fury. “I should have killed you right after they cut Adamo out of you. Father wouldn’t have stopped me. He would have found a new woman to terrorize.”

I held Kiara’s shocked gaze and she shook her head, asking me not to act on my mother’s demands, but that was a promise I couldn’t give, because my life wouldn’t matter without her in it.

Mother smiled. “And I should have killed you first, in your sleep, but I didn’t know how strong you were. I do now, my son.”

“Don’t call me that!” he snarled.

She glanced from Savio, to me then to Remo at last. “This could have been over many years ago. It must end this way, don’t you see?”

I could only stare at Kiara who was clutching our son with tears in her eyes, and the love in her face grounded me, gave me peace and certainty. She’d live no matter the price.

Mother opened the flap of the lighter and I took a step forward. “No!” she screamed. “All three of you will cut your wrists now. I’ll wait until you’ve passed out before I burn down the mansion and your bodies in it. If you don’t, I’ll burn her and the baby right in front of you and have my men shoot you anyway.”

Carmine and the men exchanged looks, obviously not in on the plan until now. Hadn't they realized how crazy our mother was?

"You'll burn them anyway. The moment we've passed out, you'll kill them," I said tonelessly.

Our mother shook her head with a soft smile. "No, no, she's a victim like I was, and the boy isn't yours, so he can live as well. We have to go but not them, boys, don't you see?"

Savio stared at her in disgust. "Fuck, if I'd known how batshit crazy you are, I would have killed you myself."

"See?" she said. "It's in you like it is in them, like it was in your father." She regarded us. She motioned at Carmine, who gave her an incredulous look, then he handed me my knife back. "Either you'll cut your wrists now, or I'll burn them. I'll count to three."

Kiara began crying softly, rocking Alessio.

I brought the blade to my forearm, then slashed horizontally, never taking my eyes off Kiara.

"No!" she gasped, but it was the only way, and she knew.

"Good," Mother crooned. "Now the other." I slashed my other wrist, feeling the warm liquid slithering down my palms then my fingers before it dripped to the floor. There was no pain, no fear, nothing, only the determination to save my wife and son.

"Two," Mother counted. "Savio, Remo."

I glanced at my brothers and held out my knife for them to take, feeling empty inside, and at the same time filled with a terror like never before, not for myself, but for Kiara and Alessio.

Remo grasped the knife with a growl, and holding my gaze he cut his wrists open and my shoulders sagged.

"Fuck," Savio breathed, closing his eyes.

Fabiano's eyes glistened as he pressed his lips together. I could see him working on his bindings but from his look of

despair he wasn't making progress.

“One,” Mother warned.

Savio opened his eyes, snatched the knife from Remo and slashed his wrists. I gave him a grateful look before he lowered his gaze to the blood running down his hands. I wished he didn't have to share this experience with us.

CHAPTER 27



KIARA

This wasn't happening. It couldn't be.

I sucked in air but it didn't reach my lungs. I took in the growing pool of blood on the floor, dripping from the veins of the men who'd become my family. All of them putting down their life so I and Alessio could live, but I couldn't let them, couldn't allow it. Remo had Serafina and the twins who needed a father and husband, and Savio was too young, he needed to get the chance to find what we had—someone he loved and who loved him back. I wouldn't take that from him.

Mrs. Falcone pointed at one of the men. "Now get me that knife."

"We want the rest of our money. We aren't your soldiers, remember that."

Mrs. Falcone only smiled. "There's plenty of money in the glove compartment of the car. It's yours. Now give me that knife." She'd closed the lighter but it wouldn't take long to open it again.

Remo laughed darkly and wiped sweat off his forehead, spreading blood all over his face. "She tricked you. She doesn't have more money. Or did she show you?"

The men exchanged looks.

"Not another word," Mrs. Falcone warned, raising the lighter once more. "I've had enough time to hide money before you arrived in Vegas."

A shadow in the corner of my eye caught my attention, and from the brief flicker of recognition on Nino's face, he'd seen

it too. Someone was crossing the garden from Fabiano's mansion.

"We want our money. We need it to establish control. You said you could hide several millions."

"She's a lying bitch," Remo growled.

"Don't call me that!" she shrieked.

Remo's mouth curled. "Do my eyes remind you of Father?" He smiled. "Oh, they do, don't they? He didn't turn out to be the prince you hoped for, right? Was it worth it killing his fiancée to become the alpha bee yourself?"

"You ... you ..." she gasped, moving closer to Remo, panting. He was taunting her, drawing her away from me.

And then everything happened too fast. Adamo stormed inside through the French windows and barreled into his mother's back, clamping his hand down on her fist with the lighter and at the same time he drove a knife up into her stomach. Her eyes grew wide and they both tumbled to the floor.

For a moment, the whooshing in my ears was the only sound, then the screams crashed through the blissful cacophony.

Nino stormed toward me. One of the men stepped in his way with a raised gun. I jumped up and kicked his shin at the same time as he fired. The bullet tore through Nino's upper arm but then he was upon the man, broke his leg with a kick to the knee before gripping him by the back of the head and jerking his face down on his knee. The man fell to his side, gurgling. Nino took the gun, feeling the man's chin. "I broke your jaw. I hope you can scream anyway." He gripped the man's fingers and jerked them back, causing him to cry hoarsely. "Not the best screams I've heard, but they'll do. *Later.*" He straightened, stepping over the man. Remo and Savio had knocked out the other men and were freeing Fabiano.

"Are you all right?" Nino asked, cupping my cheeks with his bloody hands and kissing my cheek, my forehead, my

temple then my lips before he pressed a kiss to Alessio's head.

I nodded dazedly. "But you're not. You need a doctor." Nino's gaze wasn't as focused as usual. I grabbed his bloody hand and squeezed. Blood was still sliding out of the cuts. I pressed down on his wrist wound but the red on his upper arm spread quickly. "Nino, you need to treat this."

Nino still stared at me as if he worried I'd vanish into thin air any moment. "It'll take a long time for me to bleed to death from a wrist laceration of this depth."

"Nino," Remo rasped, kneeling beside their mother who was sprawled out on the ground in a pool of blood, Adamo's knife still stuck in her belly. She was gasping for air. Adamo sat in her blood, chest heaving. Savio hunched next to him; he was pale. The hit to his head and the blood loss were taking their toll.

"Go," I whispered to Nino. "Go to Remo."

Nino released my hand and slowly made his way over to his brothers. They were all covered in blood, still losing it from the cuts on their wrists.

Fabiano staggered toward me, bleeding from a cut on his forehead that hadn't been there before. "We need to get you out of those clothes and wash the gasoline off."

I nodded but couldn't take my eyes from the four brothers gathered around their mother. Remo curled his hand around the handle of the knife, then Nino closed his own fingers around it. Remo looked at Adamo who gave a shaky nod, then at Savio who tilted his head in agreement. And then Remo and Nino changed the angle of the knife and jabbed it the rest of the way in. Their mother jerked, then the tension left her body, and relief flooded me. I clutched Alessio closer to me, breathing out.

Remo gripped Nino's shoulder, said something then jumped up and disappeared into the garden, storming toward Fabiano's mansion.

Nino staggered to his feet and walked toward me. His expression was beautiful ice, shut off from his emotions, and

maybe it was for the best right now. Adamo closed his mother's eyes and let his head fall back, staring up at the ceiling.

Nino touched my arm. "Remo's on his way to the panic room to check on Serafina and the twins," he said emotionlessly. My eyes took in the blood trail leading out onto the terrace. Nino squeezed my hand and I glanced down toward his wrists, still dripping blood. "You need to shower, get rid of the gasoline," he urged.

I motioned at Fabiano. "Fabiano, Adamo, get bandages. We need to make pressure bandages to stop the bleeding until the doctors arrive."

Fabiano lowered his phone that he'd been using to alert the Camorra doctors and ran off.

"Kiara," Nino murmured. "You need to shower."

I peered into his eyes, determined, worried. He wouldn't relax until I did, I could tell. "If you let Fabiano and Adamo dress your and Savio's wound."

After Savio had stumbled to his feet, he sank down on the armrest of the sofa and stared down at his hands, one of them clutching one wrist as the other kept bleeding.

Fabiano returned with two first aid kits, and thrust one against Adamo's chest. "Get up and help. Now."

Adamo stumbled to his feet and with a last glance at their mother, he walked over to Savio. Fabiano made Nino sit down but his gray eyes were only on me.

"We're okay. You have to be okay too," I said, then quickly moved upstairs and into our master bathroom.

Alessio had stopped crying as I rocked him. The moment I stepped into the shower with him and the warm water rained down on us, he started again. I began humming as I tried to wash the gasoline out of our hair and skin. Soon my sobs broke through the melody and I had to stop.

"Shhh, Alessio, shhh. Everything is okay now."

It took ten minutes to get clean, not just from the gasoline but also the blood sticking to our skin. When I turned the shower off, I froze. Nino sat on the edge of the tub and was watching with a haunted expression.

He was covered in blood from head to toe.

He got up slowly, grabbed two towels and handed one to me so I could wrap Alessio in it. Once he was swaddled, I handed him over to Nino, then dried myself. Nino's eyes rested on mine. His bandages were already turning pink.

"You need to be stitched up."

He sighed. "I almost lost you today. I'm sorry, Kiara."

"Why are you sorry? It was your mother. You slit your wrists to save me and Alessio."

"I promised to protect you, to keep you two safe, but today I failed. I won't ever again. I won't ever hesitate to kill someone I deem a threat."

I touched Nino's cheek and he pulled Alessio and me against him. "You couldn't know what would happen. It's not your fault, Nino."

He nodded slowly and kissed the top of my head.

"The doctors are here!" Fabiano shouted.

I pulled away. "Go downstairs. Get stitched up."

Nino shook his head. "I won't leave your side."

Sighing, I moved to the bedroom and pulled on a dress, then dressed Alessio in a romper. "I hope he didn't get any of the gasoline fumes into his lungs."

"We let the doctor check him first."

Nino took my hand and led me back downstairs. Everyone had gathered in the gaming room once more, even Serafina. She had her arms wrapped around Remo's waist while one of the doctors took care of his wound. Her eyes were red from crying. The second doctor was attending to Savio who'd stretched out on the sofa only in his briefs, pressing a bag of

frozen peas against his head. His blood-soaked clothes lay on the floor beside him.

Fabiano was talking to the third doctor and sent him over to us the moment we arrived. After the doctor had taken a quick look at Alessio, Nino sank down on the other sofa then held out his wrists so the doctor could tend to them. I cradled Alessio against me then went over to Fabiano, touching his shoulder.

“Thank you, Fabiano.”

Fabiano gave a tense nod.

“Where are the bodies?”

“I dragged their mother outside. Carmine and the other men are still alive. We’ll deal with them later to find out what they know.”

I nodded and went over to Remo.

Serafina hugged me tightly. “I’m so glad you and Alessio are all right.”

I swallowed, realizing she had almost lost her husband because Remo would have laid his life down for me, for Nino, for our son, and the baby neither of them knew about yet.

I asked her, “Are Greta and Nevio okay?”

“They are upstairs in their room, playing. They thought Remo was covered in paint. They don’t understand what happened.”

“Good,” I whispered, then pulled back and turned to Remo. Tears sprang into my eyes as I met his gaze, and words got stuck in my throat. He nodded before I’d uttered anything, his eyes dark and angry but also soft somehow. Remo, the constant enigma.

“Thank you,” I got out.

“You don’t have to thank me, not for that. I did it for you, for Nino, for all of us.”

“I know.” I hugged him. “You saved not just me and Alessio.”

Remo frowned down at me and I touched my belly. He exhaled, looking to Nino who watched me but couldn't see my hand. "He doesn't know yet?"

"I didn't have time to tell him yet. But I will tonight."

Remo nodded, then released another harsh breath. "Are you done?" he asked the doctor. "I have someone to tear apart."

I stepped back and moved toward the sofa, sinking down on my knees beside Savio. The doctor was stitching him up and Savio's eyes were closed. They opened when I touched his shoulder. Despite everything, he gave me a smirk, and though it didn't reach his eyes, I was glad to see it.

"Have you come to grope me while I'm too weak to fight you off?"

I choked on a teary laugh, shaking my head. "Thank you. Thank you so much." Leaning forward, I kissed his cheek.

Surprise then anger crossed his face. "I was supposed to protect you and got us captured."

"There were too many attackers. You did everything you could. You took out two, Savio." I lightly touched his bandaged wrist. "And this ... this ..." I swallowed.

"Now all the chicks will think I'm an emo kid who slashed his wrists. I guess I'll learn how good emo girls are in bed," he said and grinned.

I shoved his shoulder lightly.

"How is Alessio?"

I looked down at my son. He had fallen asleep again. That was the beauty of newborns, they didn't see the world as we did yet. He wouldn't remember this day. "Good."

"And the bun in the oven?"

I smiled softly. "Safe."

He motioned behind me. "You should go to him."

I glanced over my shoulder and found Nino staring at me. Nodding, I rose to my feet and went over to him. He pushed to his feet, shaking the doctor off who was trying to fasten the bandage on his second wrist.

“We’re all safe, and she’s finally dead. This is over,” I told him.

Nino touched my cheek. “Not quite. We’ll question the survivors now and find out if there are others holing up somewhere. We need to find every last traitor, now more than ever.”

I stroked his beard. “Don’t take too long. We need you.”

NINO

I hesitated, torn between the need to destroy these men who’d dared to threaten my family, who’d broken into my home. They needed to die, and they needed to suffer before they did, but I wanted to be there for Kiara.

She smiled, stroking Alessio’s back absent-mindedly. “It’s okay. You need to do this so we’re all safe. Just hurry.”

I bent low and kissed her slowly. “Rest.”

She shook her head. “I’ll cook something. We’re all in need of some comfort food today.” She drew back and her fresh clothes were smeared with my blood again, and so were her cheeks and hands.

Serafina came over and wrapped an arm around Kiara. “I’ll stay with her and Alessio. Help Remo end them.”

I turned and went down into the basement where the traitors had been taken. My body wasn’t as strong as usual. Blood loss had left its mark, but not enough to stop me from doing this. Remo waited in the corridor of the basement.

“You’re joining me?”

“Of course.”

Remo searched my face but I wasn’t sure what he was looking for. “Fabiano’s picking up Leona from campus in case there are others out there waiting for their chance to hit us

again and Savio needs to lie down because of his concussion, so it's only us."

"No," a raspy voice sounded from the stairs. Both Remo and I looked to see Adamo coming down the steps, still covered in blood like we were.

Slowly he walked toward us, his eyes blood-shot and full of guilt. "I want to help you. I want to make up for what I did ... somehow ... I ..." He swallowed. "I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry."

Remo's mouth pulled into a tight line and he nodded.

"Can you ever forgive me?"

I regarded my little brother and grabbed his arm, shoving up his shirt, revealing punctures. "Are you drugged?"

Adamo looked away. "Not really, I had the last shot yesterday."

Remo let out a low growl. "Fuck it, Adamo. Fuck it all. I should kill you now."

Adamo nodded then met my gaze. "If anything had happened to Kiara or Alessio, I ... I would have never forgiven myself. I probably won't either way."

"Regret is wasted time, so is guilt, so stop wasting your time. Spend it on something useful, like getting clean and deciding who you want to be instead of wallowing in self-pity and wishing to be someone you're obviously not," I said sharply. Today I didn't have any patience to spare for him, not after what I almost had to witness.

"I'm trying," Adamo said.

"Let's get this started. I want to tear the fuckers apart," Remo snarled.

We stepped into the sound-proof room where the four surviving men had been locked in. One of them stared wide-eyed up at the ceiling, the other three huddled against the walls, legs and hands bound.

I went over to the unmoving asshole and nudged him with my toe. “He got lucky,” I said. “His end was moderately painless.”

“Must have kicked his throat too hard,” Remo said with a twisted smile, then he faced the traitors. “Now who wants to go first? Any takers?” He grasped Carmine by the collar and dragged him to the center of the room. “How about you, Carmine? We want to tend to you when we’re still pumped with adrenaline and anger, right?”

“Please,” Carmine said.

I chuckled, shaking my head as I drew my knife. “You don’t get to say please today. If you try again, I’ll cut your tongue out.”

“Ready?” Remo asked.

I edged the tip of my knife under Carmine’s thumb nail. “Always.”

“Ready,” Adamo said.



Two hours later, we knew that the men in this room didn’t know of any other surviving traitors and that they’d indeed found a home on Outfit territory in exchange for information. Most of it was outdated by now because we’d changed our delivery routes and most of the labs after we’d taken over but not all of them.

Remo, Adamo and I leaned against the wall of the corridor for a moment after we were done, trying to get back down. Adamo had mostly watched but I had seen the occasional excited flicker in his eyes.

“You can’t take drugs. Not just because it looks bad in front of our soldiers, but also because the shit messes with your head. It’ll turn you into a danger for yourself and others. I won’t allow that to happen,” Remo said.

Adamo nodded. "I know. And I know what has to happen so I can beat this. I need to be away from you, somewhere nobody will protect me. Here I always know that you'll come to save me, that I'm safe no matter what I do."

"And where would that be? You're safe everywhere in our territory unless I declare you otherwise, and even then, nobody would touch you from fear of my wrath," Remo growled.

"I know. That's why I think you should send me to New York for a year, to work under Luca's rule."

Remo shoved away from the wall and pushed Adamo against it. "Are you insane?"

Adamo caught my eyes, hoping to reason with me if not Remo. "Just for a year. If I have to work under Luca, I know I can't hope for mercy. He won't go lenient on me, if you tell him not to be. He's as cruel as you, but he doesn't give a damn about me."

"But he cares about peace, Adamo," I said. "And he knows Remo will avenge you, even if he was the one who sent you to New York."

"If he killed me, but he won't. But he'll punish me and force me into line. There I'm just a soldier. There I need to follow rules. Here I'll always be your younger brother."

"If Luca catches you taking drugs, he'll torture you," Remo said with a harsh smile. "And this time Serafina won't be there to interfere. You'll be subject to his rule and Luca doesn't tolerate objections."

"I know. But here I won't change, because I don't have to."

"I'm thinking that maybe I should just stop being so lenient to you." Remo grasped Adamo's throat and brought his face very close to our brother's.

"You could but you won't. And you have your kids, and so does Nino. I'm sixteen. I'm old enough to decide. Send me to New York."

“Adamo’s right,” I said firmly. “We can’t punish him. We won’t. Luca will. He’ll treat him like any soldier. He’ll be one Made Man among many. For one year at least. Maybe it’s enough.”

Remo stepped back slowly. “You don’t know what you’re agreeing to, being under Luca’s rule, not to mention that I doubt he’ll agree.”

“Why not? There’s peace between us, and I’ve been tortured by Dante. Luca hates Dante. Maybe he hopes for more info on him.”

“If war breaks out, you’ll be the first he’ll kill.”

“I’ll be the first to know if war breaks out, and you said it yourself, Luca’s got too much to lose, right?”

“He does,” I said quietly. “Like we do.” I needed to go to Kiara. This had taken too long already. “Ask Luca, Remo.”

Remo stared at me for a long time then grimaced. “Fuck. This is fucking bat shit crazy, and I should know.” He shoved a finger into Adamo’s shoulder. “But I’ll ask Luca and let’s hope you get your shit together while he’s your Capo.”

“You’ll always be my Capo. I’ll only work under him for a year.”

Remo laughed harshly. “Yeah, better not tell him that to his face either. Luca’s going to beat the shit out of you.”

I turned around and left them to it. Adamo was right. He needed to be away from our protection, from Las Vegas. The name Falcone protected him here, and maybe that was the root of the problem.

CHAPTER 28



NINO

Alessio was asleep in his crib when I entered the bedroom, his arms stretched out to both sides, little fingers curled into a loose fist. I bent over him, marveling at how peaceful he appeared, untouched by the events of the day. I stroked his cheek then quickly pulled back seeing the blood coating my fingers, hands, everything.

I went into the bathroom where I found Kiara, soaking in the bathtub, looking exhausted and pale. Yet, she smiled seeing me. I started to get out of my bloody clothes and dropped them on the floor.

“You have to be careful with your bandages,” Kiara said.

I searched the drawer for plastic wrap I kept handy for that occasion and wrapped it around my wrists. It wouldn't hold long but it was better than nothing. The stitches would hold even if wet.

A myriad of things to say crossed my mind seeing my wife watching me in concern, but it seemed impossible to put them into words. “Can I join you?”

Kiara shook her head with a laugh. “Please.”

I glanced down my blood-covered body, then stepped into the tub and sank into the warm water. It turned pink at once, but Kiara didn't seem bothered by it. She moved toward me with a sponge and started cleaning my face gently, then my throat and my shoulders. I regarded this woman, so full of kindness and love, cleaning me after my past almost killed her, after I came to her covered in the blood of men I'd tortured and killed to lay the past to rest.

“What is it?” she whispered, as she ran the sponge along my abs.

“I love you more than my life.”

Kiara touched my chest and kissed me. “The past is the past. We don’t linger, right?”

“Kiara,” I murmured. “What happened today, you must tell me if you have trouble dealing with it. I’m used to the darkness, I can deal, but if you need additional help, let me know. Don’t let this be your burden.”

Kiara smiled sadly. “It won’t be. I know you can deal with darkness, but so can I. I’ve lived through darkness. I’ve lived through it without anyone there to save me. I was alone with my fear, with everything. But today, I wasn’t, because I have you, and you’ll always save me. And because I have this family, who protects each other till death. I can deal, Nino, because the good outweighs the dark. Today even more than yesterday.”

I released a breath. Kiara leaned close, her lips almost touching mine. “I want to focus on the future, not the past. That’s what you taught me, and we have so many reasons to look forward to the future. I’m pregnant. I found out today before it happened.”

I froze, staring at Kiara, at the joy in her eyes. “You know for sure?”

“I was at the doctor’s today. I’m six weeks along. Alessio will be a big brother soon.”

I pulled her against me, not caring about my bandages, not caring about the burn in my arm where the bullet had graced me. I kissed her fiercely and pressed my palm against her belly.

“Are you happy?” she whispered.

My heart sped up, trying to put a finger on the sensations in my body but falling short. “I’m so many things right now, but seeing the joy in your eyes, yes, I’m happy.”

Kiara leaned her forehead against mine and we stayed like that until our skin wrinkled. After we'd dried each other, we headed into the bedroom and laid down, wrapped in each other's arm.

"Do you have a name?" I asked after a while.

Kiara shook her head. "We don't know if it's a boy or a girl. But I'd like you to choose the name this time. I got to choose Alessio's name."

"I'll find a beautiful name for our baby." I listened to Kiara's breathing then gripped her wrist, needing to feel her pulse.

"Are you okay with her being gone?" Kiara asked softly after a few minutes of silence. "You and Remo had hesitated so long to kill her, and now she's dead."

"I don't regret that she's dead, only that Remo and I didn't do it sooner. As long as she was alive, she always remained that nagging ache at the back of our heads. Now she's gone once and for all. The past can finally rest."



When I entered the gaming room around seven the next morning, any trace of yesterday's attack was gone. I took in the clean floors and sofas. The smell of leather cleaner and disinfectant hung in the air, gone the blood and gasoline.

The French windows were open. Adamo was sitting on the terrace, arms wrapped around his knees. I went over to him and sank down on the ground. Shadows spread out under his eyes and his hands were red. "Did you clean everything?"

He nodded, not looking my way. "I had to. It was the least I could do."

"You should have slept. Yesterday was hard for all of us."

He finally turned to me. I searched his eyes for a sign of drugs but they were clear. "I didn't need rest. I wasn't the one who had to cut his wrists." He looked at my bandages then at

the wound on my bicep where a bullet had grazed me. “Or got shot.”

“It’ll heal,” I said. These wounds were nothing I couldn’t deal with. The memories would stay with me and haunt me, but they too would fade with time.

“I’m so fucking sorry. For everything,” Adamo whispered.

I touched his shoulder. “Learn from your mistakes, Adamo. That’s all I ask.”

“I can’t even look at Fina and Kiara. Because of me, they almost lost everything.”

“It’s the past.”

Adamo sighed.

“Will you be okay with what you did? Stabbing our mother?” I asked.

“I would have killed her. Right then, I wanted to. I didn’t because I knew you and Remo needed to do it.” He paused. “Right?”

Killing our mother had always hung like a Sword of Damocles over Remo’s and my head. Now that she was dead, I realized the deed itself had been easier than I thought. Maybe because of what our mother had almost done to Kiara and Alessio. It was the last straw.

“We needed to do it, and now she’s gone.”

Remo stepped outside and sat down beside us. “*Finally*, gone.”

Adamo watched him. “I’m—”

“I know,” Remo said. “I don’t give a fuck how often you apologize, it doesn’t change a goddamn thing. Prove yourself. Show us that you learned from your mistakes.”

“That’s what Nino said.”

“He’s a fucking genius, so listen to him.” Remo smelled Adamo’s clothes. “Now grab a shower.”

After a moment of hesitation, Adamo stood and left.

Remo watched me. “You look calm.”

“So do you,” I said. *That* was the surprising part.

“I am, and then I’m not,” he said. He flexed his bandaged wrists. “One moment I feel so much rage, I can hardly stop myself from going on a rampage. And then I feel relief. She’s gone once and for all.”

“She is. We killed her. Now we can move on.”

Remo smiled sardonically and nodded towards his wrist. “She left her mark. After all these years, she almost got what she wanted.”

It wasn’t the only mark she’d left. “She didn’t and she won’t. We prevailed.”

“It’s what we do,” Remo said. He searched my face. “How’s Kiara?”

“Good. Better than I thought she’d be.”

“Because she’s got a future she’s looking forward to.”

I nodded. “So do we.”

KIARA

I hugged Adamo tightly. “I’ll miss you. Behave in New York all right? Luca’s strict.”

Adamo nodded then pulled back. “I’ll come to visit in summer for Fabiano’s wedding, and when you give birth to him.”

“Him?” I said curiously.

“You’re a boy mom. I can’t see you with a daughter. You whipped us into shape.”

I laughed at his assessment. “Okay. We’ll see. It’s still too early to tell. Will you come home for Christmas?”

“I don’t know. That’s only three months from now. I feel like I should really try to make myself useful in New York to thank Luca for taking me in.”

Remo snorted. “He isn’t doing it out of the goodness of his heart, trust me. He’ll want something in return and soon, and

it's not like you're living in his house."

"You'll probably share a tiny apartment with millions of cockroaches," Savio said with a grin. Adamo gave him the finger which Savio returned.

Adamo got into a car with Remo who would take him to the airport, but not accompany him to New York. Adamo didn't want to arrive with a Capo and I got it. He wanted to prove himself.

Nino wrapped his arm around my shoulders as we watched them drive off and then we returned inside. "It'll be strange without him," I said.

Nino sighed. "Remo still doesn't like it. It's hard for him to let go like this, but I think it's the best for Adamo." We stopped at Alessio's crib. "Luca doesn't punish unjustly. We have to trust in that."

"I think Adamo will learn to handle himself," I said. Alessio opened his eyes and I leaned down and took him out, pressing him to my chest. "Maybe it's good for peace as well. It could tighten our bond with the Famiglia."

Nino nodded thoughtfully. I really hoped the truce would hold, not just because it allowed me to talk to Giulia and occasionally visit her. It meant we were safer.

"I'm starving," Savio said as he sauntered over to the sofa and plopped down. "How about an afternoon pizza?"

I scoffed. "Is there something like that?"

"There used to be," Savio said, cocking an eyebrow. Like Remo and Nino he'd stopped wearing bandages over his wrists a couple of days ago. The slashes glared an angry red on his wrists. Nino would cover them with tattoos once the wounds were healed. Savio's eyes caught mine and he gave me a sardonic smile.

"Then order pizza. I'm sure Remo will be starving once he's back," Serafina said as she walked in carrying Greta. Nevio staggered toward Savio who got up from the sofa and picked up the pizza menu. Nevio followed after him like a shadow.

Savio glanced over his shoulder. “He’s a bit like those creepy little killer dolls from horror movies the way he stalks me and grins his little maniac Remo grin.”

Serafina looked indignant. “Don’t say that.”

Watching Nevio who clung to his leg, Savio took out his phone and ordered pizzas. When he hung up, he shook his head at Nevio, then picked him up anyway. “You peed on me. I haven’t forgotten and I won’t forgive.”

I went over to him. “And have you had any luck with emo girls yet?”

Savio tried to stop Nevio from touching the scars. “Nah. Haven’t tried yet. I need a few more days to recuperate to give it my all. I don’t like to disappoint the ladies.”

I wondered if what happened got to him more than he let on. He cast his eyes up and shook his head with a smirk.

“Don’t give me that look, Kiara. Take care of Nino, Alessio and the bun in your oven. I’m more resilient than bad weeds. I’ll fuck the memories straight out of my brain. That always works.”

“Fuck,” Nevio said in delight.

Savio’s eyes grew wide then he started laughing. Serafina came over and pinched his arm.

“I can’t believe one of his first words is fuck.”

“It’s not only Savio’s fault,” Nino reasoned with a smile. “Remo has a penchant for the word too.”

Serafina nodded reluctantly then released an exasperated sigh.

Savio held Nevio out to Serafina. “Here, take your little killer doll.”

“Fuck!” Nevio screamed, causing Greta to grin where she sat on the floor. She opened her mouth. Savio went over to her and squatted down. “Oh no, dollface. That word isn’t for you.”

I huffed and began rocking Alessio once more then handed him to Nino.

Fabiano and Leona joined us like they'd done almost every evening in the last two weeks since the attack. We'd grown closer than before, if that was possible, and I relished in the realization that a horrible day had brought something good for us.

Alessio slept in his crib while the rest of us settled on the sofas in the gaming room. Despite what had happened in these walls, the good of many other evenings still outweighed everything. Nino wrapped his arm around me as we ate our pizza, listening to Fabiano and Leona as they deliberated if they wanted a big feast or a small affair in the garden.

I smiled to myself, surrounded by family. I pressed my palm against my belly and after a moment Nino covered my hand with his. This was worth fighting for. Every day, every hour, every minute.

EPILOGUE



NINO

Greta and Nevio ran through the garden hand in hand. Nevio was in the lead as usual, tugging his sister along. Their laughter carried over to the pool where Kiara, Alessio and I were enjoying a warm April afternoon.

Kiara smiled and said to Alessio, “Soon you can run with them.”

Alessio was sitting in his shark floaty that looked as if the thing was going to swallow him whole. He gave Kiara a toothless grin. I pushed him through the water because two weeks from her due date Kiara wasn’t as mobile. She leaned against the edge and watched everything with a happy expression.

Remo and Serafina lounged on the sunchairs, keeping an eye on their children.

Sometimes I wondered how things would have been, if my brothers and I were alone. Would we have moved on just as easily?

With the children and Kiara’s pregnancy, the future beckoned stronger than the past ever could. We still worked our asses off to guarantee the Camorra’s success but we tried to spend as much time as possible with our family. Savio had taken over more responsibilities, which allowed Remo and me additional free time.

Kiara released a sharp breath and cradled her belly under the water surface.

“What is it?”

She shook her head. “False labor.”

I pushed the floaty towards her and touched her shoulder. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she said with a small laugh. “The pain hasn’t changed. It’s still that strange pressure.”

“Waterbirth might be less painful, but you’ll have to clean the pool when you’re done,” Remo said.

Serafina slapped his shoulder. “You’re impossible.”

Remo gave her a twisted smile.

“Cleaning the pool will be my top priority after giving birth, trust me,” Kiara said, rolling her eyes.

“Come on. Let’s get you out of the water,” I said, lifting Alessio out of his floaty and pressing him to my chest. Holding Kiara’s hand, I led her out of the pool.

She pressed a palm to her belly as she took one step after the other. “I’m being so slow. I love being pregnant but now I’m counting the days until he’s here.”

Fabiano and Leona came over from their house, already in swimwear. Their wedding was scheduled for the end of May.

“Aria called me,” Fabiano said, settling on a sunchair. “Adamo’s doing well. He works hard and has finally learned to keep his mouth shut.”

Remo shook his head. “If people start to think that Adamo’s more scared of Luca than of me, I’ll have to make a fucking bloody statement to set things straight.”

“You are his brother. It would be horrible if he feared you,” Kiara said, lowering herself slowly on a chair. Leona went to her and touched her belly.

“You’re still feared like a crazy madman in the Famiglia, don’t worry,” Fabiano said.

Serafina got up. “I’ll go check on the kids. Nevio’s been too quiet. I bet he’s up to something.”

“The most important thing is that Adamo’s clean,” Kiara said. “I can’t wait for him to come home.”

Remo and I exchanged a look. While we were glad that Adamo had found the structure he needed, we weren't sure if once back in Vegas he wouldn't revert to old habits.

Leona came over to me and stroked Alessio's cheek. "Hi, little man." She looked over to Kiara. "I love his chubby cheeks."

Kiara smiled proudly. It was mostly thanks to her patient care that our son had gained so much weight. She kept every member of this family fed. "Why don't you hold him?" I asked Leona and handed her Alessio. She cradled him against her chest, looking worried.

"What if I drop him?"

"Why would you drop him? He's not that heavy," Remo muttered.

Leona's cheeks turned red and Fabiano threw one of the empty Coke cans littering the table at Remo's head.

Remo raised his leg, blocking it with his foot.

"Damn your quick reflexes," Fabiano said, shaking his head.

"Quicker than yours."

"*Right.*"

Serafina returned, carrying the twins. Her face was flushed. After she set them down, she held up a permanent marker. "That's what I found in Nevio's hand. He was painting Greta's nails with it."

Remo sat up and turned to Nevio. "You did?"

Nevio gave a sharp nod, trying to hold back a grin and failing.

Greta stretched out her hands, showing off her black nails. Her fingers too were covered in marker.

Serafina gave Remo a meaningful look.

He lifted Nevio on his lap. "Don't paint your sister."

Nevio pouted and pointed at Remo's Camorra tattoo then at my inked skin. "Greta got dattoo."

Kiara choked on a laugh and covered it with a cough. I went over to her and wrapped my arms around her from behind, my fingers splayed out on her bump.

"Greta is too young for a tattoo and so are you," Serafina said sternly.

Nevio looked at Remo.

"Your mother's right. I don't want you to touch that marker again."

Nevio gave a small nod, mischief in his eyes.

Cradling Alessio against her chest, Leona sat beside Fabiano on the sunchair. They were both talking to Alessio.

"If Alessio and Massimo turn out like Nevio, I'll fear for our sanity," I murmured against Kiara's head. She looked like she couldn't imagine anything better.

"As long as they're happy, I'm happy," she said.

Our eyes met, and I had to agree. As long as Kiara and our sons were happy, I would be too.

KIARA

Alessio rolled over on his stomach and pushed onto his knees then braced himself on his hands, shoving his butt into the air. At only ten months, he was already hellbent on starting to walk. With his bum in the air, he peered up, unsure how to straighten.

He grinned when he saw me watching and my heart exploded with love.

"Nino!" I called. Two days past my due date, I had trouble rising from the sofa without help, much less bend down to pick up Alessio.

Nino hurried into the gaming room, alarm on his face. "Contractions?"

I shook my head, stroking my belly. “Massimo seems pretty content in there. I really hope he comes soon. I feel like I’m bursting any day now.”

Nino slowly came over and spotted Alessio still in his awkward position. He picked him up and raised him up over his head, much to Alessio’s delight. He wasn’t a very vocal baby, definitely not as loud or boisterous as Nevio.

“He was trying to stand,” I said. Nino came toward the sofa, sank down beside me and set Alessio down on his butt between his legs. He held out his fingers and Alessio latched onto them with his small hands. Nino pulled slightly and eventually Alessio stood on shaky legs then took a couple of unsteady steps. Holding onto Nino’s legs, he gave another toothless smile.

“That’s good,” I said. Nino stroked Alessio’s hair and our boy beamed up at him with those ocean-blue eyes.

“Have you changed your mind about the home birth?” Nino asked quietly.

I leaned over and kissed his cheek. “No, and I won’t. I want a natural birth.”

“I just don’t see why we shouldn’t use the options modern medicine can offer us. We’ve evolved from the middle ages.”

I laughed. “I know you don’t like it, but I don’t want to give birth in a hospital. I want to be at home, surrounded by people I trust. This is the safest place for me and the baby.”

Nino gave me a look that made it clear how unhappy he was about my decision. “The safety aspect is really the only perk.”

Since the incident with their mother, Remo had forced the owners of the other neighboring house to sell as well. That mansion was now the new Camorra gym and the security center in Las Vegas, meaning we always had a high number of Camorrista close by.

“The doctor said it’s okay. I’ve had a healthy pregnancy, we have a healthy baby. Everything will be fine. I know I can handle it.”

“I know,” Nino murmured, then leaned over and kissed my temple before touching my belly.

Nevio rushed into the gaming room, brandishing a permanent marker in his small fist, laughing like a little madman. I grinned. His dark hair was all over the place and he was dressed only in underpants. His entire upper body was covered with scribbles, probably in permanent marker. He stumbled to a stop in front of us, beaming first at Alessio then Nino. Then he jabbed his finger against his own chest before pointing at Nino’s tattooed arm with the permanent marker.

“Dattoo,” he exclaimed.

I covered my mouth with my hand. “Oh, Savio’s in so much trouble.”

Nino reached for the marker and gently pried it out of Nevio’s hand, who glared and said, “No!”

“Nevio, behave,” Nino said firmly, putting the marker down on the table.

Nevio made a move toward it. Nino shook his head and the little boy dropped his arm with a pout.

Savio staggered in, breathing hard, carrying Greta, who was holding her white stuffed rabbit. “Where’s the little devil?”

One of Greta’s arm was covered in permanent marker as well.

Nino shook his head. “I told you to stop staring at your phone.”

Savio’s eyes took in Nevio’s upper body. “Fuck.” He glanced at Greta who was regarding her painted arm curiously. “You should have snitched on him.”

Greta looked at her uncle with those big eyes.

“Serafina is going to kick your ass,” I whispered, stifling laughter.

“Maybe next time she won’t ask me to play babysitter so she and Remo can get it on.”

Savio stalked toward us and Nevio's smile turned mischievous. "Don't you dare run again."

Savio set Greta on her feet and she tiptoed toward us and climbed on the sofa. Nevio backed away slowly then whirled around, giggling. Savio jumped over the other sofa and caught up with Nevio in two large steps, wedging the kid under his arm like a potato sack.

With a groan, he turned back to us. "Will you watch Greta while I try to scrub this PIA clean?"

"No!" Nevio exclaimed, struggling.

Savio grinned down at him. "Yeah, you heard me right. Bath time. I know how much you love a good scrub."

Nevio began screaming.

Savio looked at me. "How about you say it was your fault?"

I raised my eyebrows. "I won't have you blame me for this."

"Come on, Kiara, nobody will be mad at the pregnant lady."

"If I were you, I'd start scrubbing soon. Remo and Serafina will be back from their date in approximately two hours. I have a feeling this will take time," Nino drawled, inspecting Greta's painted arm.

Savio disappeared with Nevio under his arm.

Nino lifted Alessio up and set him down between Greta and himself. She held out her stuffed toy to Alessio who grabbed it and clutched it to his chest then lifted it to his mouth and gnawed on the bunny's ear. Nino caressed Greta's head.

"I can't believe there'll be four children in this house soon, that we'll have two boys. A year ago I didn't think we'd have a baby any time soon."

Nino's eyes met mine. "You deserve happiness, and that's what you'll get."

“So, do you.”



Three days later, I gave birth to Massimo in a guest room of our mansion with Serafina’s and Nino’s help, the homebirth I’d always dreamed of.

All pain was forgotten as I marveled at the little boy on my chest, at his crumpled face. He was a big baby with brown eyes and dark brown hair.

Serafina kissed my cheek. “He’s beautiful, Kiara.” She was covered in sweat and blood, but was smiling. Nino stood beside the bed, watching the doula who’d supported us, only ever so often glancing my and Massimo’s way.

“Why don’t you try if he latches on?” Serafina asked.

Massimo was already squirming toward my breast and making small sucking motions. Serafina helped me and after a few tries, he finally latched on.

The doula left fifteen minutes later and shortly after Serafina did too. Nino bent over me, kissing my forehead. “You are so strong, Kiara.”

I raised my gaze from Massimo and smiled at Nino. He gently covered Massimo’s back with his palm.

“I’d always condemned people who accepted their fear, who didn’t fight it. I’d never understood the concept of fear, not its full potential. It had been an abstract concept for me for most of my life, and in the beginning when I started to feel things because of you, I hoped fear wouldn’t be among them. But then last year and today again, I felt it, fear of losing you.”

“You didn’t and you won’t,” I said. “Alessio, Massimo and I, we’ll never leave you.”

Nino stroked my hair away from my sweaty forehead. “I know. I’ve come to appreciate the fear because it showed me what’s at stake, what I won’t lose, won’t allow anyone to destroy.” His eyes were full of cold determination and the

promise of violence. “Remo and I have more to lose now than in the past, and nothing worth having comes without a price, without a fight. And we’re willing to fight, to give our blood and spill that of our enemies. For a while we became content in what we’ve accomplished, and came to think we’re invincible, but we’re not. Not yet, but we will be. You and our sons will always be safe no matter the price.”

“Kiss me,” I whispered, and he did, softly but full of intention.

“I’ll get Alessio so he can meet his brother,” Nino murmured after a moment.

He straightened and with a last lingering look at Massimo and me, he left. I caressed my son’s back as he tried to drink. Nino returned with Alessio propped up in the crook of one arm and perched on the edge of the bed.

“This is your brother, Alessio,” Nino said, pointing at Massimo as he lowered Alessio to the bed.

Alessio watched with big curious eyes.

I lifted my arm and ran a finger over his cheek. “You’re a big brother now.”

My eyes caught the rose tattoo on my wrist. “You’ll have to add their names.” I touched Nino’s forearm where our sons’ names were already inked into his skin. “Your faith gave me strength.”

When I’d tried to talk him out of getting a tattoo of Massimo’s name before I gave birth, he’d insisted that nothing would happen to either of us, that he wouldn’t allow it, and I believed him.

Nino shook his head as he wrapped an arm around my shoulder. “Not faith, brutal determination. I won’t ever put your or their lives’ in fate’s hands. I will bent fate to my will, like Remo and I have always done.”

“I love you.”

“And I love you.”

Alessio reached for Massimo and Nino showed him how to carefully pat his brother's back. I shook my head, still unable to believe this was reality.

“Considering that our marriage was only meant to bring temporary peace, this is ... incredible.”

Nino cupped my cheek and pointed at his heart. “It brought peace here, and one that will outlast any truce between the Camorra and the Famiglia.”

“You gave me peace too,” I whispered, then rested my head against his shoulder. “Me and my boys.”

Please consider leaving a review. Readers like you help other readers discover new books!

If you want to be among the first to get updates on books, please join my Facebook group: Cora's Flamingo Squad.

BOOKS BY CORA REILLY

CAMORRA CHRONICLES

Twisted Loyalties

Twisted Emotions

Twisted Pride

Twisted Bonds

COMING NEXT:

Twisted Hearts

Born in Blood Mafia Chronicles

Bound by Honor

Bound by Duty

Bound by Hatred

Bound By Temptation

Bound By Vengeance

Bound By Love

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cora Reilly is the author of the Born in Blood Mafia Series, the Camorra Chronicles and many other books, most of them featuring dangerously sexy bad boys. Before she found her passion in romance books, she was a traditionally published author of young adult literature.

Cora lives in Germany with a cute but crazy Bearded Collie, as well as the cute but crazy man at her side. When she doesn't spend her days dreaming up sexy books, she plans her next travel adventure or cooks too spicy dishes from all over the world.

Despite her law degree, Cora prefers to talk books to laws any day.