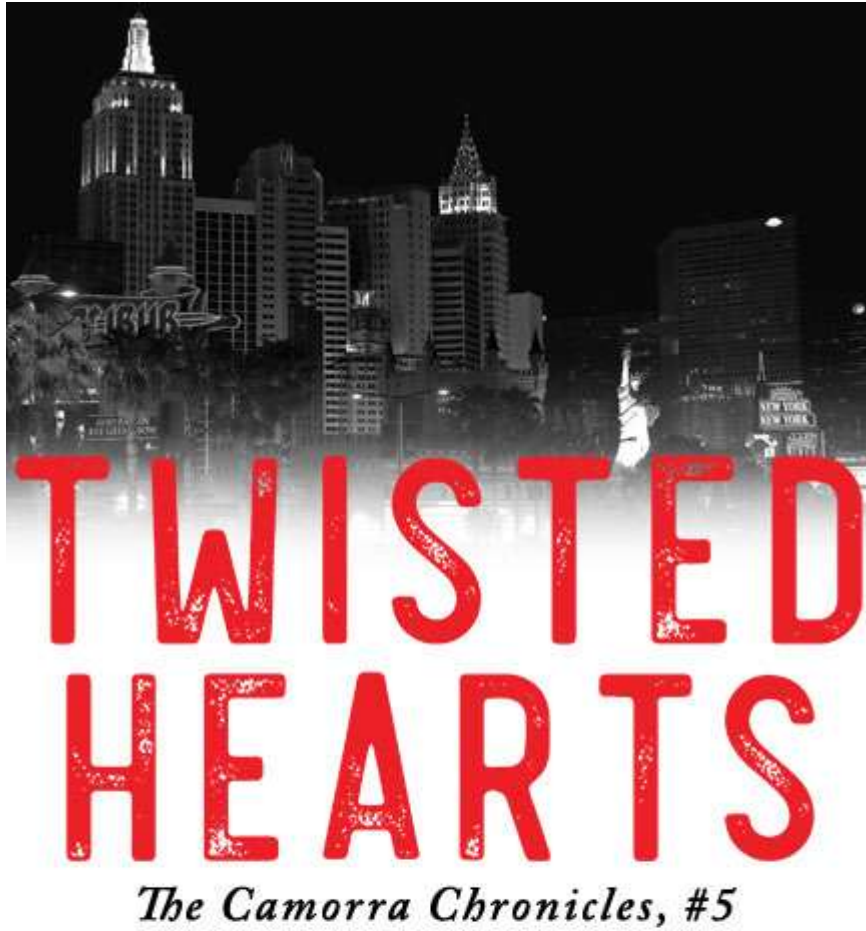


TWISTED HEARTS

*The hottest girl in Vegas comes with a price
Savio isn't willing to pay...*

Cora Reilly



Cora Reilly

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Cover design by Romantic Book Affairs Designs

Interior Design/formatting by Champagne Book Design

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ONE



Gemma 10, Savio 14

Some people don't believe in love at first sight.

They say it's only lust.

The first time I saw Savio Falcone, I fell for him, literally and figuratively, and not in lust either because I didn't know what lust was. I fell in love with a boy I couldn't have, not in a way my family would approve.

Stretched out on my belly on the sofa, the Jonas Brothers blared from my earbuds, gearing up for the chorus. Moving my legs in rhythm to the music, I sang the first line of the chorus at the top of my lungs. A shadow fell over my magazine. Annoyance burst through me. I hated it when Diego spied on me. My head shot up and a little scream shot out of me. A boy leaned over me, his elbows braced on the backrest of the sofa and a smirk on his face.

Trying to jerk upright, I tumbled right off the sofa and landed in an undignified heap on the floor.

The boy walked around and stood over me, the grin becoming wider.

His lips moved, but Nick Jonas was screaming into my ears. The boy bent down and tugged the buds out of my ears, dousing my surroundings in quiet.

“So, you’re Gemma. Nice singing,” he said.

I flushed, still unmoving and silent. I had a nice voice, but I hadn’t been trying to sing well. I had screamed the song, trying to let off steam. He wasn’t complimenting me. The mocking twinkle in his eyes made that very clear.

Despite his rudeness, I couldn’t deliver a sharp comeback. Because this boy was so beautiful it hurt looking at him. He was tall and muscled, with eyes the color of dark chocolate and perfectly styled, charcoal black hair. All sharp cheekbones, strong jaw, and arrogant smiles. Even his clothes looked out of this world. Black leather jacket, low cut dark blue jeans, tight white shirt showing off the outlines of a six-pack, and white sneakers. I’d only seen guys like him in the girls’ magazines I read in secret.

The same magazine he was picking up from the sofa and reading.

Mortification filled me.

One of his eyebrows—and *even that was perfect*—rose. “If you want to find out in a few years, let me know.”

The smirk.

My lips fell open as a flock of butterflies fluttered wildly in my belly. I clenched involuntarily at the unfamiliar sensation. Diego sauntered over to us, looking from me on the floor to the boy and the magazine in his hands.

Diego’s olive eyes, the same color as mine, flashed with annoyance as he snatched the magazine from the boy. “Gemma, you aren’t supposed to read this shit! Nonna is going to wash your mouth with soap if she finds out.”

“She only threatens to wash my mouth with soap if I say bad words, not if I read them.”

“It’s worse. You’ll be grounded for weeks,” Diego muttered. He scanned the article I’d been reading, and his face turned red. Then he ripped the magazine apart. If Mom hadn’t confiscated my phone only a few days ago, I would have taken photos of the pages like I’d done in the past. “Did Antonia give this shit to you again?”

Of course, Toni had given it to me. She was allowed to read girls' magazines. Her dad was cool. I jutted my chin out. I wasn't a snitch. Noticing the boy's eyes on me, I glanced toward him, feeling my cheeks throb with embarrassment.

"What's the problem?" he asked curiously.

Diego looked embarrassed. Why was he acting strangely? With Mick, he was never that awkward. Who was this boy? "My sister isn't supposed to read rags."

"Nonna doesn't want you to read them either."

The boy frowned. "Why not?"

Diego actually blushed. Now I really wanted to know who the pretty boy was. "Because Gemma isn't supposed to know about these things."

"These things," the boy repeated.

Diego lowered his voice. "Kissing and *stuff*."

The boy burst out laughing. "Don't tell me you don't know about *the birds and the bees*?"

Despite his mocking, I wanted to smile. How could anyone be this pretty?

He looked me in the eye before he grinned at Diego. "Do I need to have the talk with you?"

Diego looked like he wanted the ground to swallow him. I rarely managed to embarrass him. This boy needed to teach me how he did it. "I know how it works, but my sister isn't supposed to."

"You aren't supposed to either."

Diego glowered. "I'm a boy. Dad talked to me."

"Oh man," the boy said, chuckling.

Suddenly, Diego's expression darkened. "We honor our traditions. You should too, even if you don't believe in them."

"Was that what you were doing when you were thrusting your tongue down Dakota's throat? *Honoring your traditions*?"

"You kissed a girl?" I blurted.

Diego sent me a look demanding I shut up.

“Nonna wants us to wait until marriage!”

That seemed to be the last straw. The boy keeled over, bracing his hands on his thighs and roared with laughter. “Don’t tell me you’ve never gone further than kissing, Diego?”

Diego glanced at me, mortified, then gripped the boy’s arm. “Let’s go up to my room. Gemma will keep bugging us if we stay down here.”

The boy shook his head in disbelief. “Whatever.” He followed Diego to the stairs.

“Our house is nowhere near as splendid as your mansion,” Diego said. Was he embarrassed of our home?

“So what?” the boy said. “Before we came to Vegas, my brothers and I shared one room.”

He was perfect. The butterflies in my stomach kept doing their little dance and I liked the sensation—a lot.

“What’s your name?” I blurted before they went up.

“Savio Falcone,” he said, giving me a grin.

Flutter. Flutter. A riot of butterflies.

“And I meant what I said. If you want to find out in a few years, come to me.”

It took me a moment to understand what he was talking about: the article.

Diego looked between his friend and me, frowning. “Come on, man.” They disappeared upstairs.

Savio Falcone.

Diego had told me that he was friends with a Falcone but I thought he was pulling my leg. Not in a million years would I have considered this pretty boy a Falcone. The way people whispered in fear about them, I’d expected someone scary and monstrous in appearance.

I had really talked to a Falcone... and embarrassed myself.

My cheeks were still burning thinking of my undignified fall and the article Savio had caught me reading.

How to tell if your boyfriend is a good kisser?

I'd never kissed a boy and I wouldn't. Not until my wedding day and no one but my husband.

Right then, I promised myself that Savio Falcone would be the one.

TWO



Gemma 13, Savio 17

Rubbing my eyes, I trudged into the kitchen and straight toward the fridge. I didn't remember the last time I'd spent a Sunday morning in bed. Nonna always chased us out of bed at sunrise so we could make ourselves presentable for church. I'd faked period cramps this morning because I'd spent half the night texting with Toni and had been too tired to go to church, and worse the potluck afterward. Last time I'd argued for more than an hour with Nonna before she'd let me leave early so I could meet Toni. Mom and Nonna always thought I needed every moment at church functions to cancel out the fact that I was a girl who loved martial arts.

"Meow," a deep voice said right behind me.

I jumped in the air with a screech, then whirled around and threw the milk carton at the intruder.

Savio ducked and the carton hit the wall, only to burst with a splash. Milk flew everywhere and the soggy carton dropped to the ground.

"You'll have to work on that aim, *Kitty*." Dark chocolate eyes shone with amusement and that infamous arrogant smile twisted his lips.

My cheeks flamed as I followed his gaze to my pajamas. A tank top and shorts with Hello Kitty all over them and that wasn't

even the worst. I wasn't wearing a bra and unlike many of my friends, I already had breasts and needed a bra. I jerked my arms up and crossed them over my chest. Was this the punishment for lying to get out of church? Nonna would certainly say so. It was too harsh of a punishment. I'd light up two more candles next time.

Savio smirked, but he looked away from my chest. He didn't look anywhere near my body. Instead, he sauntered over to the burst milk carton. "I always thought it was an urban legend that kitties loved milk. You prove me wrong."

I wanted to die on the spot. Of course, while I was in embarrassing pajamas, Savio wore his usual Instagram model-worthy outfit. Ripped black jeans and tight white shirt accentuating his perfect body. "What are you doing here?" My attempt to sound flippant turned into a nervous mutter. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't keep my composure around him. I wasn't the only one, though. Almost every girl I knew had a crush on Savio. He was tall, muscled, and a beast in the cage, and if rumors were to be believed, in other areas as well. Embarrassment washed through me. That wasn't something I was supposed to know anything about. If it was up to my family, I'd still believe storks dropped off babies on the porch. Toni was a life saver.

"Diego and I are watching my last fight."

"Oh, really? I hear you beat up your opponent pretty badly," I said, feeling more at ease talking about this and glad to finally get the chance to do so. I only wished I was allowed to actually watch one of his fights.

The door swung open and Diego stepped inside, his dark hair styled in that annoying out-of-bed look he'd adopted recently to appear cool. He glanced from Savio to the spilled milk, then to me. Disapproval tightened his mouth. He used to be much cooler when I was younger. Now he was always annoyed with me. "What happened here?"

I stalked closer to him. "What are you doing home?"

Diego frowned. "Dad asked me to stay with you. Why are your arms wrapped around your chest as if you're cold? You can drop the act. I know you're not sick."

I glowered and dropped my arms. “Sorry if it bothers you.” Despite my embarrassment, I allowed Diego to come to his own conclusion.

His eyes filled with realization and he quickly stepped in front of me, trying to cover me from Savio’s view. Savio rolled his eyes, turned and headed for the door. “I’ll be waiting in the living room until you figure out your shit.”

The moment he was gone, Diego glared down at me. “Why are you running around half naked in front of Savio?”

I cuffed him. “Because this is my home, and I didn’t know I wasn’t alone.” I pinched him, but he wasn’t as sensitive to pain as he used to be before he started training with Savio. “Because of you, I made a fool out of myself. What will Savio think of me now?”

Diego’s mouth tightened. “He doesn’t think of you, Gemma. You are an annoying little brat. He couldn’t care less if you run around in your PJs around him.” He stalked toward the door, then before he left, he pointed at the mess on the floor. “Clean that up.”

Rage boiled up in me and I aimed a kick at his butt, but he quickly grabbed my heel and shoved me back. I landed on my tailbone, letting out a pained gasp as tears shot into my eyes. Concern flickered across Diego’s face. To pay him back, I covered my face with my palms and started sniffing.

He knelt beside me and touched my shoulder. “Gemma, are you hurt?”

I quickly dropped my hands and punched his stomach.

“Fuck, you little brat.”

I grinned. “See, this is why I need to start training with Savio. You always hold back because you don’t want to hurt me. How am I supposed to improve like that?”

Diego glowered.

“And you’re not supposed to say the F-word around me. If Nonna or Mom were home, you’d be in trouble.”

He got to his feet and shook his head. “You’re lucky you’re allowed to fight at all, stop bothering Savio. He won’t fight with

you. It's a waste of his time. Why would he want to hang out with a little girl?"

"He hangs out with girls all the time."

Diego chuckled darkly. "Yeah, he does. You are a kid, Gemma. Just drop it."

He disappeared through the door. I pushed to my feet and rubbed my tailbone. I'd have a bruise tomorrow, but I've had bruises before.

I rushed up to my room and changed into jeans and a cute T-shirt that Toni had given me. I usually changed into those clothes at school because Nonna didn't approve of jeans. Modest dresses were the only clothes Nonna and Mom allowed me to wear. After I'd brushed my hair and put on my secret stash of makeup, I hurried back downstairs.

The sound of cheering and yowling rang from the speakers of the TV when I stepped into the living room. Diego and Savio lounged on the sofa, their feet propped up on the coffee table. I walked into their line of vision. It was the first time I wore normal clothes and makeup around Savio so I was nervous about his reaction. Neither Savio nor Diego gave me a fleeting glance though.

"Get us something to drink, Gemma. A Coke for me."

"And one for me," Savio said, not even looking away from the TV.

Flushing, I turned around and headed for the kitchen.

I was invisible to Savio.



The door to the gym opened as I finished another round of double-unders before I dropped the skipping rope on the ground. “It’s okay,” I called to my older brothers who were sparring in the cage. Neither Nino nor Remo looked my way, too busy fighting.

Diego turned the corner with Gemma hot on his heels. Her eyes became huge as she took in the old casino that we’d turned into our gym. Especially the chandeliers that always got looks from visitors.

I raised my eyebrows at Diego. Hadn’t he told me only recently that he wouldn’t give in to Gemma’s begging? He rolled his eyes in response before he gave me an apologetic look. Diego motioned for his sister to stop and she did, but not without pulling a face. She quickly smiled when she noticed my attention. She was in gym clothes, which looked like they might have been Diego’s a long time ago: too big sweatpants and a baggy T-shirt.

Diego strode toward me. We clapped hands. “Babysitting duties?”

He groaned. “Worse. Gemma has been whining to Dad for weeks now how much she wants to fight with you that he asked me to take her with me.”

Gemma had been begging me to fight with her for months. “Your dad’s okay with me fighting your sister?”

Diego huffed. “Of course not. She’s his precious little princess. The idea that you could hurt a single hair on her angelic little head would drive him insane. He couldn’t bear her begging anymore and wanted me to take her with me so she can watch. As if she’ll be happy with just watching.”

I glanced behind Diego.

Gemma was bobbing on her heels, her hands entwined. She was wearing some strange updo with braids. She was lucky she knew how to fight because with that hairdo, she’d otherwise get beaten up in school for sure.

Gemma was a scrawny kid, but she’d been working out with Diego for a while now. She knew how to throw a punch. “Maybe we can get her off our backs once and for all.”

Diego frowned. “Gemma is stubborn. Once she’s set her mind on something, it’s close to impossible to dissuade her.”

I grinned. “Maybe. But I might know of a way.” I glanced toward Remo, who did a high kick toward Nino’s head. He was sweaty, scarred, and the crazy as fuck look in his eyes made grown men shit themselves. I knew how my brothers appeared to strangers, and most people had every reason to be scared as shit of them.

I motioned for Gemma to come over. She beamed and practically rushed toward us, her face flushed.

Diego rolled his eyes again.

“Hi Savio!”

“Hey Kitty.”

Her blush deepened and she squirmed. “That’s not my name.”

“But it’s so very fitting.”

Diego scoffed. “You should see some of her other pajamas—”

Gemma punched his arm. “Shut up!” She smiled at me, tilting her head to the side and peering up at me through her lashes. Then she tried batting them.

I almost choked on laughter. Kitty was flirting with me.

“If you got something in your eyes, wash your face, Gemma,” Diego growled.

She tore her gaze away from me. She swallowed. “So, will you fight with me today?”

“Is that why you’re here?” I asked.

She nodded, expression brightening. “Diego’s always holding back. How can I improve with that training?”

Diego gave me an exasperated look over her head, and I smirked. “If you want someone who won’t hold back, you’ll have to fight my brother, Remo. He won’t hold back, trust me. After that, I’ll fight with you.”

Nino and Remo stopped their fighting in the cage, their eyes on me.

Gemma's eyes grew wide as her gaze slid past me toward my brothers. Remo was a scary fucker. Most men wouldn't dare face him in the cage, or anywhere else. He had left a bloody trail in his claim for power, but he was the best Capo the Camorra had ever seen.

Diego pointed toward a few chairs next to the boxing ring. "Come on, Gemma, sit down and let me train with Savio."

Gemma tore her wide-eyed gaze from Remo and looked up at me. "If I fight him, you'll train with me twice a week for the next year."

Oh, now we were bartering?

"Three months," I said with a shake of my head. Even that would mean a seriously deep cut in my free time—meaning less time with girls who actually had something to offer.

"Six months," she said firmly, lifting her chin. She held my gaze.

I gave her a smirk. "All right." She'd run away screaming the moment she was in a cage with my brother anyway.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Diego said quickly. He looked worried for his sister. Remo had been on edge lately with his trip approaching to Outfit territory to kidnap a bride, but my brother wouldn't hurt a girl.

"Hey Remo, can you come over for a sec?"

Remo rubbed his face and chest dry, then dropped the towel and climbed out of the fighting cage. Nino followed after him and both stopped beside me.

"Gemma wants to play with the big boys," I told Remo. "She wants to fight you."

"You're Daniele's youngest," Remo said, more statement than question. People were always surprised when Remo knew them, but my brothers and I knew all our soldiers in Las Vegas and the high-ranking Camorrista in our entire territory. You couldn't establish power without knowing the people you'd have to control.

Gemma flushed. "Yes..." She trailed off, obviously unsure what to call him. I had to stifle laughter. I'd have loved to see her

call him Sir or Mr. Falcone.

“Gemma’s only thirteen,” Diego added. A hint of protectiveness rang in his voice.

Remo nodded, but he was looking at Gemma, then at me. I cocked one eyebrow at him.

“Maybe,” Nino drawled. “Gemma should fight me instead.”

Gemma’s eyes darted to Nino. She didn’t look happier about that. His reputation wasn’t much better than Remo’s. Most people were creeped out by the fact that Nino didn’t have emotions.

Remo’s mouth twitched. Of course, he found it funny when Nino tried to prevent a misfortune from happening.

“That wasn’t the deal,” I said.

Remo tilted his head with the fucking twisted smile that made grown men piss their pants. “You want to fight me?”

Gemma swallowed, but she straightened her shoulders. Her eyes darted to the scar marring Remo’s eyebrow and temple. “I do. That was the deal, like Savio said.”

Diego stared from his sister to me, giving me a meaningful look. He wanted me to interfere because he couldn’t with Remo. But I found the whole thing way too entertaining to stop it.

“Then go ahead,” Remo said.

“The cage,” I reminded Gemma.

A hint of anxiety flitted in her eyes and Diego gripped my arm and whispered harshly, “What’s the matter with you? Are you fucking crazy? This is my little sister. She’s not some fucking toy you can play with!”

“Calm down,” I said.

Diego swallowed, turning to Remo. “Can I ask you to wear a shirt when fighting my sister?”

Remo’s dark brows pulled together.

I snorted. “Don’t tell me this is because of your traditional bullshit?”

Diego glared at me and Gemma turned even redder and stared down at her feet.

Remo nodded, surprising me. Nino walked over to the gym bag and took out a black shirt, which he handed Remo, who pulled it over his head. Remo didn't play by the rules. He made them. But showing respect to his men no matter how ridiculous their traditions was something he paid attention to.

With a last glance at me, Gemma climbed into the cage, followed by Remo who closed the door with a clang, causing Gemma to jump.

I moved closer, so did Nino and a seething Diego. "What's Remo going to do?" he asked.

Nino replied before I could, "He won't hurt your sister. At least not more than she can take."

Diego's face turned red and he sent me a scowl. "I swear," he whispered. "If Gemma gets hurt, you can do your shit alone. Then we're done."

He was fucking scared for her. I always forgot that only my brothers and I knew Remo. He was a brutal fucker, merciless and psychotic as fuck, but he wasn't into humiliating or torturing innocents, especially not underage girls. "Just calm the fuck down. He'll scare her a bit, that's all."

I turned my attention back to the cage where Remo and Gemma were facing each other. It was a ridiculous sight. Gemma was scrawny and barely reached Remo's chest, but she managed to keep her expression surprisingly fearless. Only her eyes reflected the respect and fear Remo invoked in her. My brother assessed her closely like he always did with his opponents, to find their weakness and determine how to crush them hard and fast, or how to obliterate them as painfully and slowly as he enjoyed. But I had a feeling with Gemma, he was trying to figure out a way to fight her without doing too much damage.

That Gemma had even dared to enter a cage with him came unexpected. Maybe Kitty would surprise me.

THREE



Gemma

I knew Savio thought I'd back out of our deal, but I wouldn't let him off the hook that easily. I wanted to train with him, wanted to show him that I wasn't a little girl anymore, not a kid whose hair he could tousle.

And yet looking at Remo Falcone made me want to take flight. All those scars and muscles, and his reputation made my pulse pick up. Him covering them with a shirt didn't make him any less imposing. I had seen a few fights on Toni's laptop, and all of the Falcones were scary in the cage, but the Capo, he was out of this world brutal. Diego always talked about him like he wasn't even human.

"How long have you been fighting?" he asked, making me jump. He noticed, mouth twitching, and so had Savio who looked like he was about to start laughing.

I flushed. "Three years." My gaze lingered around his nose because his eyes scared me too much.

"Not meeting your opponent's gaze suggests you're submitting. Are you submitting before the fight has even started, Gemma?" he asked in a low voice.

My eyes snapped up to his. "No."

It was a struggle holding his gaze. I got why Dad, Diego, and the other men always spoke with so much respect about their Capo.

"Good," he said. He beckoned me forward. "Attack."

I took a few steps forward, raising my fists to shield my face. He was too tall. Hitting Diego had already been difficult, but the Capo was even taller. He mirrored my moves, raising his fists up to his face. My stomach was in knots as I tried to gather the courage to hit him.

“Come on, Kitty, show claws,” Savio called.

Remo’s mouth twitched, and I lunged, trying to land a punch in his lower belly. His hand blocked me and that move already hurt like crazy. His other hand went past my defenses and pushed against my stomach. Not a punch, a shove that made me stumble backward and almost lose my balance.

A shove? That wasn’t a move in a cage fight. I glared, angry, and barreled toward him again. I had to use my speed and small body if I wanted any chance. Remo’s smile widened. He tried to grab me, but I dropped to my knees and did a forward roll. I’d planned to use his wide stance to move through his legs, but he grasped one of my ankles and tugged. I landed flat on my back with a gasp, and then he straddled my legs and pressed my wrists together over my head. “Surrender,” he said.

I struggled, trying to get out of his hold.

“Surrender,” he ordered.

I didn’t want to. I was angry at Savio for making me fight his brother, knowing I’d humiliate myself, but I was even angrier at myself for wanting Savio’s attention so badly that I’d agreed to this deal. Remo hadn’t even fought me. He’d toyed with me, just like Savio. This was over so quick it couldn’t be considered a fight. I tried to arch off the ground or free my arms, but his hold was like steel. His fingers tightened, becoming uncomfortable. “You need to know when to surrender.”

“Surrender, Gemma,” Diego called.

I could feel tears of anger rising in my eyes. “No! Neither of you would!”

Remo’s grip on my wrists became painful. “That’s true, but we live with the consequences. You can refuse surrender because you know you’re safe from pain. You’re playing the girl-card.”

“I’m not! You all decide to coddle me because I’m a girl. I don’t mind pain! I want to be taken seriously!” I bit out,

struggling harder, tired of being regarded like a cute little kitty.

“Remo,” Nino Falcone said in warning.

I winced under the force of Remo’s grip. “If I tighten my hold further, I’ll snap your thin wrists clean in half. Pride is an honorable thing, but don’t let it get in the way of a wise choice. Your fights will never be ours, so you can’t fight them the same way we do.”

I looked away. “I surrender.”

He released me and got to his feet. Savio and Diego joined us in the cage. Diego gave me a reprimanding look, but Savio nodded as if he was impressed.

“I lost. You don’t have to pretend I did good.” Tears of embarrassment and anger threatened to burst forth, but so far, I’d managed not to cry in front of Savio and I had no intention of changing that. Some girls only cried when they were heartbroken or sad, I wasn’t that lucky. I also bawled when I was angry or exceedingly happy, which led to many embarrassing scenes. Emotionality ran like a curse in our family—at least on the female side. Diego had the emotional range of a brick.

Savio chuckled and exchanged a look with his older brother. Diego rolled his eyes. This was too much. I jumped to my feet and shoved past them, then hoisted myself out of the cage and rushed toward one of the doors, hoping it would lead to a restroom. I needed to splash some water in my face before I lost it... and the remains of my dignity.

I’d wanted to impress Savio with my skills so he’d finally take notice of me, but now they all laughed at me like many did in school because of my clothes and beliefs.

“Gemma, get a grip!” Diego called.

I ignored him. Half the time, he was the reason why I cried anyway. I pushed through the door and into a locker room where I made a beeline for the sink. I splashed water onto my face, sucking in a sharp breath from the cold. It helped with the crying sensation though.

I sank down on one of the benches and stared down at my shabby white sneakers. Diego had worn them when he was eleven. Now it was my turn. The door creaked and steps rang out.

“Leave me alone. I’m not speaking to you anymore. You keep embarrassing me in front of Savio.”

Brand-new stylish black and gold Nike came into view—a limited edition that cost more than Diego’s and my wardrobe together. I wished the ground would swallow me. “That’s what siblings are for, Kitty.”

I wanted him to go away, to spare me the mortification, but even now I craved his closeness. I looked up and his lips twitched. “Why are you here?” The snappiness I was aiming for turned into a hopeful whisper.

Savio’s mouth twitched again, making me self-conscious. “You fought against Remo. Geez, Kitty, most guys would have shit their pants in a cage with Remo, and you showed sass.”

I blinked, trying to figure out if he was pulling my leg. He held out his hand, which I took, and he pulled me to my feet.

“Diego is throwing a hissy-fit. Come on, let’s go back so I can kick his ass.”

“When will you fight me?”

“How about tomorrow?”

Tomorrow was Sunday, which meant church and family dinner, but maybe I could squeeze a session in. But Diego had to help Dad repair our stove in the restaurant. “Diego can’t take me. He’s got to help Dad in the Capri.”

Savio shrugged. “I can pick you up from church and take you back home. I need to work out tomorrow anyway.”

I grinned. “Great.”

His mouth twitched once more. “Maybe you should risk a look into the mirror before you come back out.” With that, he turned and walked through the door.

My stomach tightened in apprehension as I faced the mirror over the sink. I’d put on a hint of mascara and now it was smeared all around my eyes. I looked like a raccoon.



Diego was angry, but I didn't care. "Dad won't agree, just so you know."

"What's the big deal?"

He tossed me a glare as he pulled his rusty Ford Ranger up in front of our house. The scent of the cigarillos Grandpa had smoked still clung to the leather and ceiling, which was why Nonna refused to use the car—too much grief.

"Really?" he muttered. "The big deal is that you agreed that Savio would pick you up and train with you."

"So what? He's your friend."

"Yeah, he is. I *know* him."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You wouldn't understand."

I scowled. Before Diego had turned the ignition off, I jumped out of the car, grabbing the house keys, and tore toward the front door then locked it. I needed to talk to Dad first if I wanted any chance of getting his approval. Diego would only ruin everything. I ran past Mom who was vacuuming the living room, and into the kitchen from where the scent of Nonna's famous rabbit stew wafted over to me. I stumbled inside.

Dad sat at the table, bent over bills, judging by the deep frown on his forehead. Nonna stirred the stew with a wooden spoon and sang one of the old Italian love songs that made Mom teary-eyed.

I hurried toward Dad, earning a disapproving cluck from Nonna because I usually greeted her first, but this couldn't wait.

Dad looked up and I gave him my sweetest smile then wrapped my arms around his neck from the side. The doorbell rang.

He leaned back with a deep laugh. "I know that smile, *angelo mio*."

"Dad," I said softly. "You know how much fight training means to me. And Savio finally agreed to help me. He's going to practice with me after church tomorrow. Please, let me go."

The bell rang again, then the vacuum was turned off.

“I need Diego in the Capri tomorrow...”

“I know, but Savio was kind enough to agree to pick me up at church and bring me back home after training.”

Dad shook his head. I hugged him tighter and kissed his cheek. “Please, Dad. You know Savio. I’ll do anything. Pleeeaaassee.”

Diego’s voice rang out.

I turned to Nonna, which was a sign of how desperate I was. “Nonna, please.”

She pursed her lips. “Alone with a boy.” She clucked her tongue.

“I’ll even go back to the church choir like you want me to.”

Nonna tilted her head then gave a small satisfied nod before she turned back to the stew.

The door swung open and Diego stepped in, seething. “Don’t say yes, Dad.”

Dad lifted a finger. “Not in that tone.”

I poked my tongue out at my brother.

Diego gritted his teeth. “You can’t allow her to be alone with Savio.”

“Diego always spends time with Savio. You know how responsible Diego is. He wouldn’t be friends with Savio, if he wasn’t trustworthy.”

Diego gave me a look that promised retaliation, but he could hardly argue with my reasoning or he’d have to say exactly why Savio was a bad influence and that would mean, he wasn’t allowed to spend time with his best friend either.

“He’s your friend,” Dad said to Diego before he grabbed my chin. “And you, angelo mio, won’t behave in a way that would disappoint your mom or me, right?”

“I just want to become a good fighter.” That, and I wanted Savio to notice me only once.

Diego shook his head and walked over to Nonna to kiss her cheek. “What do you say, Nonna?”

“Gemma wants to return to the church choir.”

I grinned at him and he narrowed his eyes at me. We both knew that Nonna was desperate for me to sing again. Her old-lady friends always asked when the angel-voice would return to the choir.

“Why are you so against Gemma spending time with that Falcone boy?” Nonna asked.

The tips of Diego’s ears turned red. I really wanted to know how he’d managed to stop his face from turning red as well. It was a trick I desperately needed to learn.

“He just doesn’t want to share his friend,” I said.

Dad gently untangled himself from my hold and got up. “I’ll have a talk with Savio before he picks you up.”

“Dad—”

“No,” Dad said firmly, and I snapped my mouth shut, knowing when to retreat. I decided to switch the topic quickly so Dad didn’t reconsider his decision.

“Can Toni come over tonight? I miss her so much.”

“She’s back home?” Mom asked as she stepped into the kitchen.

I nodded. “Came home yesterday.”

Nonna clucked her tongue. “Growing up the way she does, no good will come of that.”

Dad chuckled. “Antonia is a good girl. She can’t help her upbringing.”

Heat washed over me. “Toni’s dad tries to raise her as well as he can.”

“He lets her spend too much time in the Arena. Nothing a girl should see.”

“So, can she come over?”

“Of course,” Dad said.

Nonna frowned, but she wouldn’t argue with Dad, at least not in front of us kids. He was the master of the house. Mom went

over to Diego and righted his shirt. He pulled away with a grimace. “Mom, I’m old enough to dress myself.”

“Stop coddling him. He’s a soldier of the Camorra, Claudia.”

Mom sighed. “They grow up too fast.”

Dad walked up to her and kissed her temple then whispered something in her ear that had her swat his chest.

Diego groaned and walked out of the kitchen. I quickly left as well and ran up to my room. I took my secret mobile out of my desk and sent Toni a message.

“You aren’t supposed to have a cell,” Diego said.

I rolled over on my bed. He leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest. “Don’t tell on me.”

Diego had enough secrets of his own, and while I didn’t know all of them, I did some. Not that I would ever tell on him, no matter how infuriating he could be, and infuriating me was his favorite sport. He came in and closed the door before walking over to me. He perched on my bed. “I won’t. Give it to me.”

“Why?”

He held out his hand. “Give. It. To. Me.”

I clutched the cell against my chest. Sometimes he forgot that I wasn’t his soldier who had to obey his commands. “No.”

Diego grabbed my arms and wrangled the cell out of my hand then unlocked the screen. I shouldn’t have used Savio’s birthday as my password.

I tried to snatch it out of his hand again. If he saw Toni’s last message, she’d die from embarrassment. Unfortunately, Diego was far too strong for me. His eyes scanned the screen and Toni’s message. His eyes widened then his lips curled.

I pinched his arm. “That’s my cell. I deserve some privacy.”

He checked my contacts, only girls from the choir and school then handed my phone back to me.

“You’re an idiot.”

“Toni doesn’t think so,” he said with a self-righteous smile.

My eyes widened. “Don’t say anything to her!”

“About her wanting to see me without a shirt or about her visit from Aunt Flo.”

“Diego! Shut up,” I hissed. “Don’t embarrass her.”

Diego got up. He rolled his eyes. “Don’t worry. It’s bad enough seeing you simper over Savio.”

He walked out with an annoying saunter. Snatching up a pillow, I threw it at him, but it missed and landed on the floor in the hallway. “You dropped something.”



The doorbell rang. I dropped everything and stormed out of the kitchen. Diego was already on his way down the stairs to get the door, but I beat him to it. A grin split my face when I spotted Toni in front of the door. She was dressed in Converse, jeans and a T-shirt. Her long brown hair was completely tousled from riding her bike here. It leaned against the tree in our front yard.

She was tanned from spending the last couple of weeks in Corse with her aunt. I threw my arms around her and hugged her tightly. “I missed you.”

“Missed you too.”

“Don’t tell me you came here on the bike alone,” Diego said, scanning our front yard.

Toni shrugged. “Dad’s got to work. There’s a lot to prepare for the next fight.”

“A girl shouldn’t drive around alone in this city,” Mom said, coming up from behind. She embraced Toni briefly.

We all headed into the kitchen where the table was already set. Dad carried the huge pot of stew over to the table and gave Toni a smile. Only Nonna’s reaction was rather reserved. Not only did she disapprove of Toni’s dad raising her alone, Nonna also disapproved of the fact that Toni wasn’t a full-fledged Italian. Her Grandma had been from Corse, and that came close to a crime in Nonna’s eyes.

“Good evening, Mrs. Bazzoli,” Toni greeted my nonna with a bright smile as usual as she sat down beside me. Toni was good at ignoring other people’s rejection, which was probably why we

got along so well. We weren't really part of the IT-crowd in school.

After dinner, Toni and I headed up to my room and flung us on my bed with the girls' magazines she'd smuggled into the house in her overnight bag.

"Did you bring the clothes?"

She nodded with a conspiratorial smile. "But you know that I don't do sports outside of school, so I didn't have many to choose from."

"Everything is better than the old baggy clothes from my brother."

"What was with him? He acted strange around me today."

I distracted myself with one of the magazines and shrugged, not having the guts to tell Toni that Diego found out about her crush and her period because he was a nosy idiot. "Oh, he's just angry because I get to train with Savio tomorrow. You know how he is. If he could, he'd put me on a leash."

Toni nodded. "He's a bit overbearing, but it means he cares."

A hint of sadness rang in her voice.

"Your dad loves you, Toni. He's just very busy trying to make the Arena a success. It's not easy to earn the respect of the Camorrista considering..."

"Considering we're not fully Italian."

"Yeah," I said, then nudged her and pointed toward the article I'd opened. "How to tell if a boy is into you."

Toni grinned. "Are you going to use this on Savio tomorrow?"

I giggled. "Maybe."

"You have to tell me everything in detail."

"You know there won't be anything that interesting to tell."

She rolled her eyes. "You really sure you don't want to give kissing a chance before marriage?"

I pushed her. "No!"

She giggled. "I would kiss Diego if he made a move."

“Eewww! Toni, please, I just ate. I don’t want to imagine you kissing my brother.”

She feigned a dreamy expression. “I’m sure he is a marvelous kisser.”

I tried shoving her off my bed, but she snatched the covers and with a screech, we both landed on the floor.

A knock sounded. “What’s going on here? Some people are trying to sleep,” Diego muttered, dressed in sweatpants and T-Shirt, but his hair was freshly styled and a hint of black jeans peeked out of his pant leg.

“I doubt you’ll get much sleep tonight,” I said, nodding toward his ankle. He followed my gaze then grimaced and quickly hid the black fabric. “You keep your nose out of my business.”

“Why? You have your nose in my business all the time.”

“Which is why I should tell on you,” he said with a nod toward the magazines.

“Goodnight, Diego and tell Savio hi.”

Toni and I exchanged a look and burst into a new wave of giggles. He shook his head slowly then left but didn’t close the door.

I almost rolled my eyes. Overbearing brother as usual. He would probably spend the night partying again. Did he really think I hadn’t noticed? Our rooms were right beside each other and the walls paper-thin.



It was midday when I pulled up in front of the church. I hadn't been inside one of these buildings in years, and didn't really feel any urge to change that. I'd probably go up in flames the second I passed the threshold. With a name like Falcone, my brothers and I had VIP tickets for the antlered bastard's fiery show anyway.

A crowd had gathered in front of the church and tables with bowls were set up.

The roar of my engine drew many looks and when I got out, most of the men nodded in greeting. This commune consisted mostly of Camorra families, so I knew all the men, and none of the women, which was unusual enough. No matter where I showed up, the risk of meeting a former fuck buddy was always high, not here, however. Remo had made his point perfectly clear regarding me making a move on girls from traditional families and so I stayed away. I preferred my balls attached to my body.

Diego headed over to me at once, looking like a fucking mother-in-law's delight with a polo-shirt and dress pants. The rest of his family was still immersed in conversation with the priest.

Dark shadows spread under Diego's eyes. "You look like shit. Long night?" I flashed him a grin. We'd partied until six in the morning, so he couldn't have gotten more than one hour of sleep before he had to get up for church.

"I need to talk to you."

I leaned against my Bugatti and cocked one eyebrow. "Am I in trouble?" I asked mockingly.

"I'm not in the mood for jokes. I need to have a word with you before I allow you to spend time with my sister."

I straightened, narrowing my eyes. "Allow me?" In this city, I didn't need anyone's permission to do anything—except for Remo's.

"I expect you to honor our values and not act inappropriately toward Gemma in any way."

Was he fucking serious? "All right, Diego, why don't you go fuck yourself? You really think I'd hit on your thirteen-year-old sister?"

I was going to punch his fucking jaw. He sighed. "No. But it's my job to protect her and make sure she's safe. You make fun of

our values all the time.”

“Mainly because you are very selective when choosing to live up to your values, or do I have to remind you of last night’s encounter with Dakota? Was she reciting her fucking Hail Mary or why was she kneeling in front of you with your dick in her mouth?”

Diego glanced around with a worried look. “Shhh. I don’t want Nonna or my mother to find out.”

“That you enjoy a nice BJ now and then?” Diego looked around again. I scoffed. “Whatever. Rest assured, I’ll keep my hands to myself around Gemma. Fuck, she’s like a kid sister for me.”

Diego shoved his hands into his pockets and nodded. His hypocrisy sometimes drove me up the walls. His father strode over to me, followed by Gemma, who was mostly hidden behind his bulky and tall frame—one Diego had inherited.

Daniele held out his hand and I shook it. He definitely squeezed my hand harder than usual. “I hear you’re going to take Gemma fighting today.”

“I’ll show her a few moves as promised,” I said, trying to keep my sarcasm to a minimum.

Diego tossed me a warning look.

Daniele gave me a tight smile. It was the first time he was anything but friendly to me. Gemma still hovered behind him in her knee-length polka-dotted dress with a fucking bow around the waist and a white collar. There was even a bow in her ponytail.

Fuck, just the thought of hitting on her made my balls shrivel to the size of raisins.

“I trust you keep her safe as Diego would. We appreciate that you and your brothers show respect for our traditions,” Daniele said. The hint of warning rang in his voice, raising my hackles. It took all my meager self-control not to give him a piece of my mind. Nobody threatened my brothers or me.

“Don’t worry, Daniele. Gemma will be the safest girl in Vegas when she’s with me. I’ll protect her like a little sister.”

Gemma’s lips pinched.

Daniele nodded, satisfied. Then he led Gemma toward my car with a protective hand on her back. Her eyes grew wide when she spotted my copper Bugatti. It was a favorite with the ladies. I took her gym bag from Daniele, dropped it in my small trunk, and walked toward the driver's side.

Daniele sent me another meaningful look before he closed the door. I resisted the urge to floor the gas and take off with spinning tires. Instead I pulled away from the curb slowly. Gemma waved at her family, beaming like the kid that she was.

Diego was a fucking idiot.

Gemma folded her hands in her lap, then darted her eyes to me. Slowly she turned red. She squirmed in her seat, looking like she was about to have a difficult math test.

“You okay?”

She jumped. “Oh yes, sorry. It's just...”

“Just?” I twisted toward her when we stopped at a red light.

“This is the first time I'm alone with a boy who isn't family.”

The light turned green and I hit the gas, making Gemma's eyes widen. “You've known me for years. I'm practically family.”

She didn't look happy about that. “I'm not your sister, you know?”

I chuckled. “I'm aware of that, yes.”

Silence descended on us. I turned the music on, my favorite playlist. The pounding bass of “Candy Shop” by 50 Cent filled the car. I drummed my fingers in rhythm to the sound.

Gemma frowned. “This song doesn't make sense. Why does a rapper sing about lollipops and rodeos?”

“That's a euphemism for a BJ.” I closed my mouth. Fuck, that's probably not something I should have said.

Gemma stared at me with wide curious eyes. “What's a BJ?”

I focused on the street, trying to come up with a semi-appropriate reply, but chastity wasn't really my forte. “Forget it.”

If she asked Diego about it, he'd kick my ass. Maybe I should send her Dakota's way. She had explained a BJ to Diego after all.



The rest of the drive passed in silence because my playlist wasn't made for choir girl ears, but I could see Gemma still mulling over the song.

I led her into our gym and nodded toward the door of the locker room. "Why don't you go change?"

Gemma nodded eagerly and dashed off.

I shook my head at her enthusiasm. I was already in gym clothes, so I had time to prepare my boxing gloves. Usually I preferred to fight with taped hands, because punches were harder that way. Yet, with a girl, I needed to make sure not to hurt her. I bandaged my fists anyway for our training at the boxing sack when Gemma emerged from the locker room.

I paused. Gemma wasn't wearing the gym clothes she usually had—no washed out, too big sweatpants and baggy T-shirt. This time she wore one of those Gymshark workout outfits all the fitness tubers went crazy about. Tight purple tank top and tight leggings in the same color. Only the fitspo girls filled out those clothes. Gemma only managed to emphasize her non-existent curves.

Fuck. I knew why she had chosen that outfit, and I knew that neither Diego nor her father would approve of it.

She stopped right in front of me, her cheeks already bright red. It was obvious why. Of course, I'd seen her watching me before, but it always seemed funny. Now alone with her and knowing how crazy Diego was regarding his sister, the thing felt like a catastrophe in the making.

Crushing girls' hearts was practically my special skill set, but knowing I had to break Kitty's innocent little heart actually caused me a flicker of qualms.

She peered up at me like a lovesick puppy. I wondered how she imagined this day to go in her choir girl fantasies. From what Diego had mentioned, Gemma hadn't even had the talk yet and her questions in the car had confirmed that. She probably thought all girls and boys did when they were alone was take a stroll over daffodil meadows.

Thank fuck, I'd at least chosen to wear a shirt today.

"Let's start with our warm-up," I said. She dropped her pink boxing gloves, waiting expectantly. "Double-unders. Ever done them?"

"I can't do more than one or two," she admitted.

"We'll change that." I handed her a jump rope then took one for myself. "Watch how I do it." I walked a few steps back and began jumping. Simple rope jumps at first until I sped up and switched to double-unders. Just for fun, I did a couple triple-unders, but they were difficult to maintain, so I switched back to double-unders again. Gemma watched me slack-jawed.

I stopped. "Your turn."

She looked ready to pass out from nervousness, so it really didn't come as a surprise that she got tangled in the rope after only two jumps. Flushing, she quickly tried again, but her legs got entangled once again. "I'm sorry!"

"You don't have to be sorry." She was about to try again, but with the way her hands were shaking that would end the same way. I lightly touched her arm, stopping her. Her eyes flew up to mine, stunned. I could see goose-bumps spreading on her skin.

I pulled my hand away. "Don't look at the ground while you're jumping. Stare straight ahead, and only use your feet to push off the ground not your calves, that takes too much energy."

"O-okay," she stammered.

Gemma had never been this nervous around me. Being alone with me really threw her off. It almost made me feel sorry for her, but mostly I had to stop myself from laughing. "Give it a try and focus."

She nodded, determination crossing her face. This time she managed to establish a good rhythm.

"Now, try to do a double-under."

She did but didn't jump high enough nor spin the rope fast enough. I explained what she had to change and eventually she managed to do three double-unders in a row. "This is something you need to practice over and over again. It's not something that comes easy."

She nodded obediently. “Can we fight now?”

I chuckled. “Sure.” I motioned toward the boxing ring and led her toward it. Grabbing her boxing gloves, she climbed through the ropes I parted for her. I swung myself over them and landed with a low thud inside the ring.

Again the admiration. I really needed to tone it down around Kitty.

I helped her put on her gloves, ignoring the way she blushed at our closeness. Then I put on my own gloves and faced her. I let her do high kicks against my palms for a while before I began sparring, but it became obvious pretty quickly that Gemma wasn't focused on fighting, too distracted by my closeness. I stepped back with a shake of my head. “This isn't working.”

She froze.

Here we go. I needed to establish ground rules if this was supposed to work the next few months. I'd given Diego and his father my word to protect Gemma, even if that required crushing her heart. “Listen, Gemma, I agreed to train with you but right now you aren't fighting, you're daydreaming.”

“I'm... I'm not,” she whispered lamely.

“You are,” I said firmly. “I know you've got a crush on me, but if you want to keep training with me, you'll have to stop it. Either you focus on fighting or we won't work out together again.”

Her face was bright red and fuck it, her eyes were glistening with unshed tears. If I brought her back to the Bazzoli house with red eyes, that would go over fucking well. Still, I needed to drill the message into her head.

“But you promised...”

“I promised to fight with you, yes. Right now, this doesn't feel like training. You need to get a grip. You are a little kid, not to mention Diego's sister. I like grown women, not little girls.” The last might have been a tad cruel, but maybe that would finally make her stop the fawning.

She whirled around and climbed out of the boxing ring, then tried to rush toward the locker room. Unfortunately, she stumbled in her haste and fell to her knees, then she didn't move.

Fuck. I jumped out of the ring and stalked toward her, then squatted in front of her.

“Did you hurt yourself?”

She gave a jerky shake of her head, her face lowered and tiny shoulders shaking.

Crying girls usually made me take off as quickly as I could, but this was Diego’s little sister. “Don’t cry.”

“I feel stupid,” she said thickly. “I know you have all these pretty girls...”

“You are pretty too, but you are way too young, Gemma. Your dad and brother would kill me, as they should. How about we forget today, and I promise to keep training with you if you swear to forget about your crush on me until you’re older.”

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, looking up hopefully.

“Do we have a deal?”

She nodded. “Deal.” Then she tilted her head in contemplation. “How much older?”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “Much older.”

“Like fourteen?”

I shook my head again. “Older.”

“Fifteen?”

“Definitely older.”

She pursed her lips. “Sixteen?”

I straightened and held out my hand. She took it so I could pull her to her feet. “Older.”

“But by then, you’ll already be married to another girl!”

I burst out laughing. Oh, Kitty was too hilarious. “Don’t worry, I’m never going to marry.”

“Never?” she whispered.

“Never.”

“Oh.”



Nino shook his head again. “Are you sure about this?” His hand with the tattoo needle hovered about an inch over my pelvis.

I rolled my eyes at my brother. “If you ask one more time, I’ll go into one of the tattoo studios on the Strip and get it there.”

Nino’s expression flashed with disapproval—of the studios that didn’t do a good enough job in his opinion, which was the reason why he’d done most of his tattoos himself, and of my choice of tattoo.

A bull’s head, or rather a Minotaur’s head right above my dick. It was as much a joke as provocation. My man-slut reputation was already indisputable, might as well have fun with it.

The needle pierced my skin and Nino finally started his work. “I hope you don’t come to regret this image.”

“From all the things we’re doing on a daily basis—torture, killing, prostitution, death fights—you really think I’m going to regret a bull tattoo?” I flashed him a grin and earned an uncomprehending look.

Out of my brothers, I really was the sanest, which didn’t say much.

“I can’t see what one has to do with the other,” Nino drawled as he kept outlining the Minotaur. “And you can choose to stop any of the mentioned activities. That tattoo is permanent unless you have it removed, but that’s going to be difficult, given the depth of the ink to assure the deep black color, and the size of the tattoo.”

“If I stop doing those things, how am I going to be of use for the Camorra? Adamo’s already pretty useless. You and Remo can’t have another one of us suffer from exaggerated scruples.”

Nino glanced up briefly. “Would you prefer not to be involved in the unsavory parts of our business? So far you never gave any indication that torturing or killing bothered you.”

It had bothered me in the beginning. Unlike Remo and Nino, I was capable of empathy and pity to begin with and had to learn toning both down. It hadn’t taken long. Our fight for power in

Las Vegas had wiped away most of my innocence quickly. I enjoyed many of our activities, but I'd never be as good as torture as Nino and Remo.

"It doesn't," I said simply.

Nino regarded me a moment longer, but I'd learned to hide my emotions and thoughts over time, even if I rarely bothered to do it.

Nino was almost done with the tattoo when the door opened, and Remo walked in.

"Unless you want to see Savio's cock, you should stay in the hallway," he said.

"How much longer will it take? Dinner's almost done," Kiara shouted from a distance away.

I smirked. "Your husband enjoys the sight of my crown jewels. He's taking his time."

Nino let out a sigh, but Remo showed the hint of a smile as he inspected my tattoo. None of us were bothered by each other's nakedness. We'd fucked around each other for years before Kiara's presence led to a sex ban in the common areas of the house.

"All right. I'm heading back down to the kitchen," Kiara called.

"Don't show your dick to my wife," Nino warned.

I chuckled. "Only if she asks to see it."

"You really think that's going to impress women," Remo said, with a sharp nod toward my tattoo.

"It's not meant to impress. It's a warning," I said. The reactions of my brothers made this tattoo already a good choice. "And since when do you know how to impress women?"

"It's a waste of time."

I shrugged. "I don't waste my time on women. Either a girl's an easy lay or I don't bother."

FOUR



Gemma 15, Savio 19

My head was throbbing and my vision kept turning black, but I fought against unconsciousness. I needed to be ready to fight. Fabiano slanted me a searching look. I gave a small nod even though it sent a stab through my brain. I could tell Fabiano was trying to loosen the cord binding his arms to his back.

I glanced toward the door when Remo and Nino walked in, led into the room by the traitors my mother had hired to do her dirty work.

Mother stepped up to Kiara and Alessio, Nino's wife and adopted baby boy, threatening them with a lighter. I hadn't been able to stop her from dousing them with gasoline earlier when several assholes had attacked me at once. "You are going to put down all of your weapons, or they'll both burn."

"We took their weapons," Carmine said. If I got the chance, I'd shove my knife into his traitorous throat.

"No, no, you didn't. I know Benedetto's sons," Mother said with a smile that raised the little hairs at the back of my head. It was difficult to believe that his madwoman was our own flesh and blood, except for the horrid reminder of her having the same gray eyes as Nino.

"We are your sons too," I said, because she seemed to forget that little fact. Maybe we were fucked up, but a huge part of why

was because of her. Reaching up, I lightly touched the side of my head. My fingers came away red. Fuck. Those assholes had hit me good.

Mother didn't even look at me. She had only eyes for Remo and Nino. "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?"

Carmine took the guns from my brothers, and for the first time, a flicker of worry filled me. I'd trusted in Remo and Nino finding a solution to this mess. They always did. They had ripped Las Vegas from the hands of unworthy men. They had fought for our birthright, for our territory, for our legacy when nobody had believed in the name Falcone. For a while I'd been sure they were invincible. Many Camorrista still did. But there was one thing that had the power to destroy them and she stood in the middle of the room like a martyr.

"What did you promise them to do your bidding?" Nino 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.

"Help him to his feet," Mother said, nodding at me but still not meeting my eyes. This was about her and Remo mainly. We all knew it. Remo was our father's son more than each of us. Mother had been too weak to kill our father, the man who'd tormented her, and so she tried to kill the next best thing: his sons.

One of the traitors grabbed my arm and tried to drag me to my feet. I headbutted him despite the following agony and was rewarded by the satisfying sound of his breaking nose. "Go fuck yourself, motherfucker." I grinned when the bloody asshole pointed his gun at me.

Our mother waved the lighter. "I told you. They'll burn."

I stood. I didn't want to be responsible for Kiara's and Alessio's death. Pain shot through my ankle when I put my weight on it. I must have twisted it at some point.

"Where's Adamo?" Mother asked, flicking the lighter open, causing Kiara to flinch. Mother smiled manically.

"He disappeared after you tricked him into helping you," Nino said.

Adamo could be such a fucking fool. I'd told him several times that he should stay away from our mother, but he wouldn't listen. He had to believe in the good in people. Maybe now he'd finally understand that most people were assholes. Remo and Nino always justified his stupidity because he was young, but when I'd been sixteen, I hadn't been this fucking naïve.

"Poor boy," Mother said as if she actually cared, as if she was capable of empathy. "He's weak, lost. He isn't like you or Benedetto." She looked at Remo. "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."

Everyone knew about Nevio. He was the spitting image of Remo and that wasn't where their resemblance ended. Mother didn't know it, but the boy who was most likely to continue our father's legacy was Nevio. If she wanted our tainted blood to end, she would have to kill him.

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 didn't know any of us. She only lived for herself. We lived for each other. Each of us would die for the other. Remo would cut himself into tiny pieces before he'd hurt Serafina or his twins.

“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,” Nino suggested.

Mother’s answering laugh raised goosebumps on my skin. I didn’t even remember the last time that had happened. “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?”

“We need to hurry up here,” Carmine said, looking at Remo. “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.”

“Okay, this is how it goes, boys. I want you to cut your wrists, all right?” Mother said, sounding as if she was talking about our plans for the fucking Christmas holidays.

I scoffed. Did she really think we’d go down without a fucking fight?

“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,” Remo snarled.

Mother looked at Remo with a sorrowful smile. “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 roared, causing her to flinch.

“This could have been over many years ago. It must end this way, don’t you see?” Mother whispered. She opened the flap of the lighter. “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.”

“You’ll burn them anyway. The moment we’ve passed out, you’ll kill them,” Nino said, and for once, his emotionless mask was gone. It was still strange to see fear on my brother’s face when he hadn’t been capable of any emotions for as long as I could remember—until his wife, Kiara.

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?”

She really thought she was doing the world a favor. She thought this was her task in life, when it was only her sick version of revenge on our father. “Fuck, if I’d known how batshit crazy you are, I would have killed you myself,” I said. I could have visited her in the mental institution Remo had kept her in these last few years and put a bullet in her head. For some reason, I’d preferred pretending she didn’t exist.

“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 handed Nino a knife. “Either you’ll cut your wrists now, or I’ll burn them. I’ll count to three.”

Kiara began crying softly, rocking Alessio. She didn’t deserve any of this, nor did the kid. They both had gone through hell in their past, had been brutalized by the people meant to protect them.

Nino cut his wrists, not taking his eyes off his wife and son.

“No!” Kiara cried out, looking as if the knife had cut her flesh, not his.

“Two,” Mother counted. “Savio, Remo.”

Remo grasped the knife with a growl and cut his wrists. Of course, he did. Remo had burnt for us before. He’d die a thousand deaths if it meant protecting his family. Nino’s gaze met mine and I knew what was coming. Now it was my turn. Diego and I had planned to visit a house party this weekend. I’d looked at new cars. Nothing of that mattered today.

“Fuck.” I closed my eyes briefly. Remo and Nino didn’t fear death. It was their fucking disposition to have made peace with the inevitable end a long time ago. I’d preferred to ignore the possibility of dying. It had been a distant concept that didn’t concern me, even if I’d killed many men myself.

“One,” Mother warned. For some reason, Kitty’s laughter the last time we’d fought in the cage flitted through my mind.

I opened my eyes, tore the knife from Remo’s grip and slashed my wrists before I could lose my nerve and hate myself forever. Nino’s expression filled with relief.

I looked down at my wrists, at the red rivulets dripping down my palms and fingers. The sight of blood had never bothered me,

not its smell or sticky feel either, and it didn't today. Maybe I should have been scared of the unknown darkness ahead, but I felt a strange sense of calm. It could have been my head wound and the resulting dizziness, whatever it was: death didn't bother me as much as I'd thought it would. And then everything went very fast. Suddenly Adamo barreled in, jabbing a knife into our mother's back. We all sprang into action, overpowering the traitors.

When our mother took her last breath, killed by our knife, I could see peace descend on Remo's and Nino's face.



Shoulders hunched, I perched on the edge of the sofa, staring at the angry red marks on my forearms from cutting my wrists. The Camorra doc had stitched me up and soon bandages would cover up the wounds, not the memories though.

A tight sensation took hold of my chest, a mix of burning fury and numbing gloom. The former I could deal with, the latter annoyed the shit out of me. I glanced toward the corpse of our mother in the center of our living room. She'd invaded our home, our fucking lives, to kill us. Some people had mommy issues. That term didn't even begin to describe the kind of fuckery we had to deal with. This was the second time she'd tried to kill my brothers and me. Our own fucking mother. Looking at her dead body now, I didn't feel anything but rage. When other people got that warm feeling when thinking about the woman who gave birth to them, for me, there was only darkness and pain. The last time she'd tried to end our lives, I'd been too young to understand or remember, but Remo and Nino had carried the baggage of that day with them. My brothers were everything for me, but even I knew both of them teetered on the edge of insanity. No fucking wonder when your mother slit your wrists and tried to burn you alive. That had been many years ago, and today she'd tried again, and almost succeeded.

My brothers sought the closeness of their wives and children. Fabiano had left to pick up his girlfriend, Leona. Only Adamo and I were in our own bubble. Our eyes met, guilt and shame flashing across his face. Maybe he hoped for absolution, for me to walk over to him and tell him all was forgiven.

After the doc had bandaged me, I staggered to my feet, ignoring the stars dancing before my eyes, and headed toward the stairs.

I dragged myself into my room and fell into bed. Reaching for my cell, I considered sending Diego a text, but then I wasn't sure what to write. I didn't want him to think what happened bothered me, didn't want to appear weak in front of anyone, even my best friend.

Dropping the cell, I stared at the ceiling. The silence bothered me today, when it never had before. Usually, I would have gone out and found a girl to fuck, but I wasn't even in the mood for that. With slashed wrists and a head wound, I wouldn't be able to deliver a satisfying performance. I'd probably pass out mid-fuck and bury the girl under my unconscious body.

For the first time in my life, I wanted someone at my side, if only for a few hours.



When I came down to breakfast, I heard Mom's sniffing. "These poor boys," she said thickly.

"These boys are the men who rule over the West Coast with relentless brutality, Claudia," Dad said. "They survived Benedetto, they'll survive this and probably get out of it stronger than before."

"What's going on?" I asked when I entered.

Nonna sat at the table, praying the Holy Rosary, her eyes squeezed shut.

Diego paced the room with a deep frown. Dad had his arm wrapped around Mom's shoulder who was crying, which didn't necessarily mean something horrible had happened.

Dad and Diego exchanged a look, deciding if this was something I was allowed to know about. Toni would give me the dirty details later anyway, but recently it annoyed me that my family still treated me like I couldn't handle anything.

"The Camorra is under red alert because of an incident in the Falcone mansion," Dad said.

"What incident?"

Diego took out his phone, checking his messages before he shoved it back into his pants. "Nera Falcone tried to kill her sons."

"Again?" I gasped. "What happened? Did someone get hurt?" The stories of Mother Falcone's craziness still made the rounds. When Benedetto had still been in power, people hadn't dared discuss the events, but since Remo had taken over, that had changed.

"She had the support of a few traitors," Dad said carefully. "We don't know details yet, but Remo called for a meeting of every Camorrista in Vegas. Diego and I'll have to leave soon."

Diego nodded. "I'll grab a jacket."

I quickly followed after him when he left the kitchen. "How's Savio?"

"I don't know. He hasn't written yet."

I grabbed his arm. "Diego, are you stupid? You should ask him if he's all right. He's your friend."

Diego shook me off. "If I do, that sounds as if I think he's weak. Gemma, he's my friend, but he's also a Falcone. He and his brothers rule over the Camorra. He won't tell me even if he isn't all right. And I'm going to see them at the meeting in Roger's Arena anyway."

I didn't get it. If Savio's mother had tried to kill him and his brothers, that must have shaken him up, Falcone or not.

"Stay out of Savio's business, Gemma. I warn you."

The moment Dad and Diego had left for their meeting, I rushed to my room and grabbed my phone from my sock drawer. Even though Savio and I didn't train together anymore, unless I accompanied Diego for his work out—which still happened occasionally—I still had Savio's number. Maybe Diego couldn't text his friend for some stupid testosterone codex, but I was a girl.

Before doubts could overcome me, I quickly typed in a message and send it off.

Hey Savio,

I hope you are all right. I'm so sorry about what happened. If you need anything at all or want someone to talk to, I am here.

Kitty

In the beginning his nickname had bothered me, but it had grown on me, because Savio was the only one who called me by that name. When I didn't get a reply after a few minutes, worry filled me. Maybe I'd crossed a line? Savio and I weren't really friends. We were... I wasn't even sure.

My phone beeped, almost giving me a heart attack. Stomach tightening, I checked Savio's reply.

Thanks, Kitty. The only thing I need is that delicious almond cake your Nonna bakes. ;-)

I knew he was joking, but giddy about his reply, I headed downstairs. Mom had left to go grocery shopping. Whenever something horrible happened, she cooked up a storm as if delicious food could cancel out all the darkness in the world. Nonna was asleep on the sofa, the rosary still clutched in her hand. I went over to her and covered her with a blanket. She must have taken the news the hardest, after all, Dad's brother was killed by traitors shortly after Remo came into power.

I slipped inside the kitchen and grabbed everything for the cake. I'd baked it countless times with Nonna, so I knew what to do by heart. Toni sent me a message while I waited for the cake to bake.

Please be at your phone! Did you hear what went on with the Falcones?

I called her. She probably knew the details nobody bothered to tell me. “Spill.”

“Adamo helped his mother escape the mental hospital she was in and then she ran away, and forced Savio, Nino, and Remo to cut their wrists!”

I swallowed. “What?”

“I couldn’t believe it either. But Dad told me. They’re all wearing bandages over their wrists to cover the cut. Can you believe it? If I ever complain about my mother again, remind me of Nera Falcone.” The official version was that Toni’s mom had died in a car accident when in truth she’d run off with a Frenchman.

I tried to imagine how Savio must be feeling now. His own mother had forced him to cut his wrist. That was barbaric and cruel. “Are you at the Arena?”

“You know about the meeting?”

“Hmm.”

“Dad didn’t allow me to come. He said Remo Falcone is going to make an example out of one of the traitors in front of the other men. Dad said knowing the Capo, there would be blood, vomit and piss to clean later.”

I shuddered. I’d heard about the brutality of the Falcones but never witnessed it. “I’m baking a cake for Savio so he’ll feel better. I wanted to take it to the Arena.”

Toni was silent for a moment. “Don’t go inside. Just put it on his car, okay?”

“Okay. Since when are you the sensible one?”

“When Savio is concerned I have to be. You lose your head around him.”

The oven beeped. “I’m not losing my head. I have to go now. The cake is done.”

“I mean it, Gemma, be careful today, okay? You think Savio is a cute guy because that’s the side of him you know, but he’s a Falcone and Dad’s been dealing with him for a while now. After what happened yesterday, Savio’s probably still on edge and looking for an outlet. Don’t be that outlet.”

Toni sounded worried, but she really had no reason to. “It’ll be fine. I’ll message you when I get the chance.” I hung up and saved the cake from the oven before it turned too dark.

Once the cake had cooled slightly, I put the slices into the biggest Tupperware container we had and went into the backyard. I grabbed Diego’s old bike and headed out for the Arena. With a little luck, nobody from my family would notice my trip.

The parking lot in front of Roger’s Fight Arena was crowded with cars. There were a few luxury models around, but I didn’t see the copper Bugatti. Savio probably had a new car by now. I parked my bike in front of the entrance then hesitated. I couldn’t leave the container in front of the bar.

I took out my phone and sent Savio another message, telling him that I was in the parking lot.

A scream rang out inside, causing me to back off a few steps and shiver.

“This isn’t a place for you, Kitty.”

I jumped and whirled around. “You almost gave me a heart attack,” I said, pressing a palm to my chest. He must have used the backdoor. Facing Savio, my chest constricted. A bruise bloomed at the top of his head, and his forearms were bandaged, but these obvious injuries didn’t worry me. It was the look in his eyes that was off, a lurking darkness I’d never seen in them before. He wasn’t smiling or smirking, only regarding me with mild curiosity.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

Tugging a strand behind my ear, I held out the Tupperware container.

Savio’s eyebrows rose.

“Almond cake,” I said.

He opened the lid and took a deep breath, then he smiled slightly. “Don’t tell me you forced your poor Nonna to bake for me.”

I flushed. “I baked it myself.”

Savio grabbed a piece and took a big bite, then he nodded. “They’re very good. Baking and fighting, you’ll make a man very

happy one day.”

“I only want you.”

I hadn't really just said that, had I? Judging from the brief flash of surprise on Savio's face, I had. Heat shot into my head. Toni was right. I lost my head when I was around Savio. My heart had been his for years anyway.

Savio closed the container, regarding me in a way I didn't understand. He leaned down and I held my breath. “No, you don't, trust me. You're too young to understand what kind of man I am.”

“I'm not that young,” I said grimly. “I'm fifteen and a half.”

“Fifteen and a half,” he repeated with a strange smile. He straightened and lifted the container. “Thanks for this.” My eyes were drawn to the bandages around his wrists. Blood tinged them red.

“You're bleeding.”

Savio glanced down at his arm, and his expression darkened. “It's nothing.” His voice held an edge despite the familiar smirk he gave me. “Now go back home.”

I nodded, backing away. It was obvious that he was suffering, and how could he not, but he wouldn't talk to me. I'd done what I could. Maybe Diego could get through to him, but given my brother's lack of empathy, that was unlikely.

FIVE



Gemma

Gemma 16, Savio 20

“You’re a life saver,” Toni said, wiping sweat off her brow. “With a fight like that, Dad needs all the support he can get but with the flu making the rounds things have been crazy.”

“Diego had it last week, don’t get me started on how much he whined because of a sore throat and dripping nose. He’s suffered bullet wounds, but he expects me to become his house nurse only because he’s got the flu.”

Toni rolled her eyes. “He’s used to being treated like a pasha because your nonna and mom always do everything for him.”

“It’s how things are handled in our family,” I said with a shrug as I carried a beer crate up the stairs and set it down behind the bar. “They would freak if they knew I was here helping you.”

“I know. But your dad hardly ever sets foot inside the bar. The last time was during that bloody meeting.”

I didn’t want to remember that day when I’d made a fool out of myself. Toni had freaked when I’d told her about the words I’d said to Savio. *I only want you.*

Maybe it had been a good thing though. I hadn’t seen him since that day six months ago and had time to cool down. Toni had gotten over her crush on my brother, so maybe there was hope for me as well.

I bent down to shove the beer crate farther under the bar.

“But you’d make a lot of tip money with your curves, let me tell you.”

I snorted, peering over my shoulder and finding Toni assessing my butt. “I’m fifteen.”

“Only one more day. And do you really think anyone in the Arena would care? And if we use the right amount of makeup, we could make you look older.”

“Antonia, I’m not going to serve drinks here tonight. You said you only needed me to help you prepare everything.”

She gave me a sheepish smile. “Yeah, well, we’re out of waitresses for tonight. It’s only Cheryl and me. I could really use your help.”

I straightened. “Toni! You know how my family is. If one guy as much as touches my back, they’re going to cut him into pieces. I’m not allowed to be around men, much less in a place like this.” I closed my mouth, worried I’d offended Toni. “Sorry.”

“No,” she said with a small shrug. “I know what the traditional families think of my family and this place. A good girl like yourself shouldn’t be seen around here.”

Now I felt like the worst friend on this planet. I sighed. “All right. But let me work the bar. That’s probably the place where butt-touching is the most difficult, even if that means I won’t get any tips.”

Toni squealed and jumped toward me, drawing me into a tight embrace. She drew back with a grin. “Oh, and you’ll get tips, trust me. Just wear those uber-tight white jeans and that red crop top.”

“I’ve never worn them.”

Toni shook her head. “I know! Which is why you should wear them tonight. You’ve had those clothes for two months, Gemma. With your body, it’s your duty to wear something like that.”

“Explain that to my family,” I muttered with a laugh.

“Come on, you’ve snuck out clothes before. You don’t have the guts to wear those jeans, that’s why you haven’t worn them yet.”

She was right. My upbringing made me uncomfortable in revealing clothes, even if I found them pretty. Nonna's and Mom's words had left an impact no matter how often I tried to deny it.

“Okay, okay,” I said. “I just have to figure out a way to sneak out after dinner tonight. I think I could make seven o'clock, is that all right?”

Toni nodded. “Sure, it usually gets really crowded around eight until around one. If you could be there then, that would be amazing.”

“One? Oh, man. If I get caught, Dad's going to have my head.”



I yawned several times during dinner until Dad took pity on me and allowed me to go to my room so I could go to bed early.

I didn't have a lock on my door so I had to hope that nobody checked on me. I rebuild the shape of a body with clothes on my bed then covered it with a blanket. My stomach burst with nerves when I checked my reflection. I wore the clothes Toni had suggested, and they showed off all my curves, even my stomach. I'd never shown this much skin and wasn't sure if I'd feel comfortable wearing them in public.

Putting a denim jacket on, I opened my window then used the tree in front of it to climb down. Diego had been doing this for years, but for me, it was a first. I'd never had reason to sneak out at night because unlike Diego, I didn't go to parties. Toni's bike waited in the yard. I grabbed it and rode toward the Arena, trying not to look left and right as I crossed less appealing streets.

I let out a relieved breath when I finally arrived at Roger's Arena. A few guys smoking outside let out whistles when they spotted me. Ignoring them, I quickly went in through the back entrance like Toni had shown me.

It was almost eight and she sagged with relief when I stepped into the bar area. Her cheeks were flushed. “There you are!”

She, too, was dressed in tight pants and a tight shirt. “Can you take over the bar then I can serve those tables.” She nodded

toward two tables where the customers were waving at her with impatient looks.

“Of course,” I said, and then she was already gone. Toni had given me a short introduction to the workings of a bar and tap this afternoon, but I had a feeling I’d mess up anyway. Soon the bar was buzzing, and I didn’t have time for hesitation as I tried to hand out beer after beer.

My first respite happened during the third fight, the first with known fighters. Most guests were focused on the bloody spectacle in the cage. Leaning against the bar, I watched the fight. I’d watched so many of them on screen but had never been allowed to experience one live. It was a different atmosphere. The room buzzed with excitement and blood-thirst. The most brutal fights always drew the biggest crowd, which was why Toni’s dad earned a heap of dollars whenever Remo Falcone had a fight, especially a death fight. It was unheard of that a Capo would risk his life so readily when he didn’t have reason to do so. All the Falcone brothers had a penchant for risking their lives on a frequent basis in the cage. I wondered how I’d feel if I’d ever get the chance to see Savio in the cage.

Toni’s frantic waving caught my attention. She served a table at the other end of the room but obviously needed to get my attention. I straightened and raised my eyebrows. I didn’t understand her crazy sign language. She pointed toward the door. I glanced that way and almost had a heart attack. Savio, Diego, and Mick had entered the Arena. None of them looked toward the bar—yet. And Diego probably wouldn’t anytime soon because he was busy pawing Dakota of all people. Her younger sister Noemi went to my school and we hated each other with the fiery passion of a thousand suns.

I dropped into a crouch, sucking in a deep breath, my heart beating in my throat. What were they doing here? One of the men at the bar gave me a look as if he thought I’d gone crazy. I gave him an embarrassed smile.

“I’d like another beer, young lady.”

I nodded quickly and headed toward the fridge, still ducking my head. I needed to get out of here really quickly. I bent over the fridge as if I needed to get a closer look, hoping that Toni

would figure out a way to save the day. Maybe she could throw them out for breaking some house rule.

“I must have gone to Heaven, because this ass isn’t from Earth,” drawled a very familiar voice.

I was so dead, so very, very dead. If Diego was with Savio, I’d be grounded for eternity. I could already hear Nonna’s disapproving cluck and see Dad’s *I’m very disappointed in you* look. Mom would probably even shed a few very heart-broken tears.

Maybe I could just stay bent over like this until he lost interest and left? Then another thought hit me like a punch. *Savio was hitting on me*. Well, on my butt, but that was more than I had hoped for by now. Since our embarrassing first fight training, I’d toned down my crush, and in the last six months, I hadn’t seen him. Giddiness spread in me like a wildfire.

From the corner of my eyes, I could see him coming around the bar. “Just thinking of all the dirty things I could do with that ass makes my—”

I straightened and whirled on him. “Don’t finish that sentence!”

Savio’s expression flashed with shock. Slowly his eyes dragged down my body, lingering on my hips, my stomach, my breasts until he finally looked at my face again—my undoubtedly bright red face. It felt impossibly hot and that wasn’t because of the sticky warm air in the bar.

His expression transformed into anger, which stunned me. I’d expected a joke and teasing like so often in the past. “What the hell are you doing here? Dressed like that?”

I frowned at his demanding tone. He sounded like Diego, as if what I did was his business. Luckily, my brother wasn’t with him, nor was Mick, even though the latter usually defended me when Diego treated me like a stupid kid. A quick scan of the bar didn’t give me any clues about their whereabouts either.

“How does one get a beer around here?” an older man muttered.

“I could shove a bottle down your fucking throat, how about that?” Savio snarled. One look at Savio’s face and the man

scurried away.

“I’m supposed to serve beer—”

Savio grabbed my forearm and dragged me away from the bar. Taken by surprise, I stumbled after him. “Savio, what are you doing?”

His grip was like steel, impossible to escape from. He didn’t stop until we were in one of the backrooms and he’d thrown the door shut. Then he got in my face. “Explain.”

I blinked up at him, completely taken aback by his dominant demeanor. I’d never seen him like this: his eyes dark with anger and something else I couldn’t decipher, his jaw clenched so tightly I was surprised it didn’t break and his body brimming with barely restrained violence. Without thinking, I took a step back only to bump into the wall.

I turned my face away, flushing. “Please don’t tell my parents.”



“Why should I do that, Kitty?” I asked in a low voice, anger still pulsing in my body. I wasn’t even sure where it had come from. Diego was the protective hypocrite when it came to his sister. I was the one making fun of him for protecting her virtue like a fucking knight in shining armor.

“Because we’re friends?” she asked hopefully, those dark green eyes meeting mine. Plump lips parted, high cheekbones flushed. When had Kitty become this awfully pretty?

My feelings definitely weren't friendly. Fuck, I had hit on Gemma. If Diego knew, he'd have a coronary. I narrowed my eyes and leaned down until we were at eye level. "First I want you to answer my question. What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be a good little choir girl and get a good night of sleep before church tomorrow morning? Or do you always spend your nights like this?"

Her cheeks turned even redder. "It was the first time I sneaked out, the first time I'm wearing something like this. And it wasn't even my idea. I hate exposing myself like that because it makes me feel impure, but I wanted to help Toni." She tugged a strand behind her ear and just like that, she looked the choir girl again. A choir girl wrapped in the body of a goddamn sex bomb. How the fuck hadn't I noticed those curves before? But it was easy to explain. Gemma usually wore very modest clothes and I hadn't exactly seen her often in the last year. The Camorra took up too much of my time with Adamo being gone in New York, and my brothers busy with their wives and kids.

Then her words registered on me. "Impure?"

She nodded. "I'm not supposed to show this much skin to anyone but my husband."

I could only stare. "You mean your stomach?"

"Yeah."

"Fuck, Kitty, don't be ridiculous. If you enjoy showing off your curves, why not do it? It's your body, so it's your decision how much skin you show."

God, these curves would haunt me for a while.

She frowned. "But you were angry..."

"I'm fucking livid, because dressed like this, you better make sure Diego or I are at your side, got it?"

She searched my face. "You?"

Me, yes, why me? I wasn't Gemma's protector, that was Diego's task in life.

"Is Diego with you?"

I nodded, still having a hard time not checking Gemma out. Kitty had abs. Not as defined as mine, but the proof of her hard

work was still unmistakable. And that narrow waist and those swung hips. Goddamn it.

“But he’s busy with Dakota in his car.”

“Dakota?”

“It doesn’t matter. She’s probably opening her backdoor for him as we speak. Don’t try to distract me.”

Gemma tilted her head with that fucking curious expression. “Toni locked the backdoor after I arrived. Nobody’s supposed to use it, except for staff.”

I chuckled darkly. Curling my fingers around her wrist and trying to ignore the small shiver that passed through her body, I pulled her arm away from her stomach, revealing those curves again. “Looking like this,” I growled, motioning at her body. “You have no business being so goddamn naïve, Kitty. Some men might use that to their advantage.”

Her eyes held mine and I knew I was screwed because I wanted my best friend’s little sister. I wanted to do very naughty, very grown-up things to her. Things she had no clue about judging from her puzzled expression. I stared at the ceiling. Maybe there was a God after all, and this was his way to test me. It was a given that I would fail his test, the question was only when.

After her admittance six months ago, I’d kept my distance. I’d been on edge anyway and didn’t want to risk my friendship with Diego over the silly crush of a little girl. But, damn it, Gemma didn’t look like a little girl anymore.

Gemma walked over to the bed in the corner of the room as if she had every intention of sitting down.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

She froze. “Why?”

Heaven have mercy. “Didn’t Toni mention what happens in these backrooms and why there is a bed in here?”

Gemma’s face scrunched up and she took a step back from the bed, but she kept scanning the blankets as if she worried she might find evidence of the previous activities. It gave me time to admire her. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. I’d known her for

years, had been best friends with Diego for just as many. He'd always been wary of me around his sister and I had always told him that he was a stupid asshole for thinking I'd hit on his sister. Today I knew Diego had every right to distrust me around Gemma because seeing her like that, all I could think about was to have her in my bed one day.

Shaking myself out of my horniness, I sent Diego a text, telling him that I had found a girl and was taking her somewhere to fuck. He didn't reply, which meant he was too immersed in Dakota, literally.

"I'll take you home now. Come," I said.

Gemma's gaze jerked back to me. She lifted her chin in that stubborn way of hers. "What? No. I promised Toni I'd help her until one at least. They're low on staff."

"Do I look like I care if Roger's got enough waitresses who shake their asses in front of customers? All I know is that your pretty little ass won't shake in front of anyone..."

...but me.

Gemma stared at me as if I'd grown a second head. She didn't even blush at me using the word ass. Kitty had grown, and I really wished I would stop noticing. Diego would test one of those Bunsen burners they used in their restaurants to fry my balls if he found out. That would be a disturbing twist on Arancini for sure.

Gemma squared her shoulders and walked toward me, trying to appear tough and self-assured. "You aren't my brother or my father, Savio." Thank the fucking Lord for that. "You can't tell me what to do. I gave Toni my promise and I'll keep it."

She tried to leave the room, but I pressed my palm against the door, smiling darkly. "I just told you what's going to happen. I'll bring you home. If you come on your own two legs or if I have to carry you, that's up to you, Kitty."

Her mouth fell open, then she shrugged. "You're not going to do that. You are here to have fun, not play babysitter." I lowered my arm, allowing her to open the door and step out.

She gave me a triumphant smile. I remembered the puppy dog eyes from the past and decidedly liked this Gemma better.

“Don’t tell Diego, all right? I owe you something.”

I nodded. Did she really think she’d won? She turned as if to walk back into the bar. I stalked after her, grabbed her, spun her around and hoisted her over my shoulder. It wasn’t the first time I’d done it. During our fight training, I’d sometimes teased her that way but back then, she’d been a girl with the body of a girl. Now her perfectly rounded butt taunted me from the corner of my eye and my palm resting on her lean legs wanted nothing more than to discover every inch of her shaped body.

“What are you doing?” Gemma gasped, her body becoming as tight as a bowstring. “Let me down!”

She squirmed in my hold. “Savio, put me down right this second. I need to help Toni!”

I tightened my hold on her. “It’s easy, really. I can take you home, Kitty, or I’m going to take you to Diego now.”

She became slack. “Don’t tell him. He’ll be angry.” After a moment, she added. “You can set me down. I’m not going to try to run.”

“One wrong move, and I’ll call Diego,” I warned. I had no intention of calling him. I could deal with Gemma myself.

“Okay.”

I lowered her slowly and realized I was reluctant to let her go. I led her to my car. Diego would be pissed if he found out I didn’t tell him about this. “I should tell Toni where I’m going. She’ll be worried,” Gemma whispered with a fleeting glance toward the Arena. “I promised her to help out. What kind of friend breaks her promise?”

I braced my forearm on the door and peered down at Kitty’s face. “The friend who doesn’t want to be grounded for the rest of her life.”

“Since when are you a stickler for rules? You never once took Diego home when he snuck out to party with you.”

I chuckled. “Come on, Kitty. You know the rules, you’ve lived by them until now. Don’t tell me your dad would react the same way if he found out Diego was out partying all night or if it was you, especially dressed like this.” I motioned at her outfit, causing her to bite her lip and look away.

Now I got why it was called sweet sixteen. Fuck me. I wished I wasn't so fucking addicted to sweets, because Gemma, without a doubt, would be the sweetest thing I'd ever tasted. And I wanted that taste.

I straightened, bringing more distance between us. "Get in the car and send Toni a text."

She sank down on the passenger seat. "I still have my jean jacket and my purse inside."

"I'll get them, and you'll stay here." I threw the door shut then locked the car. Gemma gave me an exasperated look.

I turned on my heel and stalked back inside. I'd get her fucking things, but first I'd have a word with Roger and Toni. Mick crossed my way on my way to the bar where Toni was running around like a headless chicken. "Hey, where's everyone gone? Diego disappears with Dakota, then you're gone as well."

"I can't stay. I found someone to fuck, but I might be back later."

Mick rolled his eyes. "Really? Going out with you two is a joke."

"Go find a girl for yourself and stop bitching."

"What about the madman from L.A., aren't you supposed to keep an eye on him?"

Fuck. "There's still another fight before his. I'll be back before then." Next time my brothers could play babysitter for their crazy-ass Underboss.

I left Mick and headed for Toni, who grimaced when she spotted me.

"What can I get you?" she asked when I arrived at the bar.

"Your father," I said, walking around the bar.

"This area is restricted to staff."

I glared down at her. "Take me to your father now, Antonia."

She turned and led me through the door into the back area. "Where's Gemma?"

"In my car."

Toni threw a curious glance over her shoulder. “You know she isn’t supposed to be alone with guys.”

“She isn’t supposed to work in a fucking bar with dozens of leering fucks either, or is she?”

Toni flushed and turned back around. She knocked at her father’s office door. My patience was running thin, so I reached past her and shoved the door open. Inside, Roger was talking animatedly to Nestore Romano, the man I was supposed to keep an eye on. Nestore looked my way, then he just left Roger standing there and walked past me with an almost non-existent tilt of his head.

“Antonia, I was in an important conversation,” he said, the hint of disapproval in his voice.

“Didn’t look like that to me,” I drawled. “Nestore seemed to bore himself terribly.” Not that it was an unusual occurrence with the Madman from L.A.

Roger gave me a small-lipped smile. “Savio, what can I do for you?”

“You can pay attention to who’s working your fucking bar for one.”

Roger frowned. “Antonia handled the staff today.”

I got in his face. “It’s none of my business if you let your teenage daughter prance around all the kinky fucks, but you better pay attention to other people’s daughters.”

“What are you talking about?” Roger glanced at his daughter who seemed busy trying to stare at the floor as if it was the most interesting thing in the goddamn world.

“I’m talking about Gemma Bazzoli. You know Daniele and Diego. They both won’t be happy if they find out she tended to the bar because you don’t pay enough waitresses.”

Roger’s face was turning increasingly red. He still had trouble letting me tell him what to do. He’d known me when I was still a little shit. But now I handled our business alongside my brothers, so he’d better get his shit together.

“I don’t want to see Gemma in this place again unless she’s with me or her family, got it?”

Roger narrowed his eyes in contemplation. “What’s the girl to you anyway? I thought you’d be the first to appreciate a new piece of ass in the bar.”

I grabbed his collar and got in his face. “Careful, Roger.” If Toni hadn’t watched with wide, terrified eyes, I might have gone a bit harder on him. “That piece of ass you’re talking about is off limits, and remember she’s your daughter’s age.”

Roger nodded. “All right, all right. I didn’t know she was even here. I’ll make sure she stays away.”

I released him then turned on my heel and left. On my way out, I grabbed Gemma’s stuff from behind the bar. She was slumped in the seat but straightened the moment I got into the car. “Did you talk to Toni?”

“I did.” I started the engine, trying to focus on the street and not the way too tantalizing girl beside me.

“But you didn’t tell Diego, right?”

I chuckled. “If I’d told him, he’d be the one driving you home, not me.”

“Yeah,” Gemma agreed with a mirthless laugh. “He’d be chewing my ear off. What the fudge’s going on in your head? How dare you have a fudging life? Yadda yadda.”

I shook my head. “I seriously doubt Diego would use a sweet treat to voice his displeasure.” I slanted her a look. She was smiling in a very Gemma way. Unguarded, honest, not in a way that was meant to make her look pretty, even though she did.

“He tries not to swear in front of me, but that’s my version of events.”

“Fudge, really?” I said. “What’s wrong with a healthy fuck?”

Gemma flushed, and I realized my wording could be taken a different way as well. “I don’t like the word.”

“You’ve never tried it, so how can you know?” Apparently, I was the king of double entendres today.

Gemma looked down at her lap, frowning, and I was starting to worry that I’d upset her when she darted her eyes up once more. “Were you hitting on me in the bar?”

I considered my options. Lying and not get kicked in the balls by Diego, or the truth and seeing Gemma's delicious blush deepen.

"Yes."

As expected, she turned a darker shade of pink. "Why?"

I gave her a look. Did she have to ask?

"So," she said curiously. "You wanted to get me into bed?"

I chuckled. "I wanted to get the girl with that body into bed, not you."

Indignation flashed in her eyes. "I'm that girl. That's my body."

Sadly, it was, which meant I'd never get to have it. "It is, but I'd never consider getting you into bed, Kitty. For one, Diego would have a coronary, second, you are too young and third, your family would force me to marry you if I as much as kiss you, so... no, thank you."

She turned away, glaring at the side window.

She was pissed, and I wondered which of my words exactly had disgruntled her.

When I pulled into her street, her eyes widened. "Stop here! They'll hear your engine if you get closer."

"Oh, really?" I asked and drove straight up to her family's house, then cut off the engine. The lights came on in one of the windows. This was a middle-class area. No Ferrari engines.

Gemma made herself small in her seat, but her nonna's face peeked through the illuminated window then disappeared. The lights in another room came on.

Gemma frowned at me. "Why did you do that?"

"Because I think your dad should keep a closer eye on you."

"Why?"

That was the one-million-dollar question.

Daniele appeared in the entrance door, dressed in a bathrobe and looking livid.

“Happy birthday, Kitty,” I said before she slipped out of the car. She sent me a scathing look then ducked her head when her mother appeared in front of her. Daniele towered in front of my window. I rolled it down and gave him a smile.

“What’s going on here?” he growled.

I narrowed my eyes. “I only brought Gemma home. I thought you’d appreciate her not hanging out with Toni in Roger’s Arena. Maybe you should keep a closer eye on her.”

His gaze zeroed in on Gemma in her sexy clothes and he stalked after her.

It wasn’t even that I was trying to keep Gemma away from other guys. Not *only* that. Mostly I needed to make sure Daniele kept her away from me because otherwise my friendship to Diego was a thing of the past.



My phone rang on my way back to the Arena.

“What’s the matter, Remo?”

“Where the fuck are you? Roger just called. Nestore’s gone all Mad Man again.”

It was ironic that Remo was the one complaining about someone else acting like a Mad Man. His death fight against two opponents still held the record of the most people throwing up in the Arena. I doubted that would change.

“Almost there.” I hung up, parked the car and jumped out. Then I hurried inside the bar. The stench of vomit lay in the air. One look toward the cage explained why.

Nestore Romano had torn his opponent apart.

Mick and Diego stood off to the side, both looking disgusted.

Roger was in front of the cage, shouting at Nestore. None of those pussies had dared to go inside the cage and actually stop the Mad Man. I pushed past Roger and climbed up on the platform of the cage then opened the door.

Nestore was kneeling on the floor, half bent over the corpse of his opponent. Everything was covered in blood. From the

looks of it, Nestore had ripped his opponent's throat out with his teeth. Remo had to stop allowing this psycho to fight in Vegas, even if he had an unexplainable soft spot for the guy. Or at least he'd have to deal with him and not send me out so he could spend the evening with his twins and wife.

I approached Nestore carefully. My white sneakers were ruined after only a few steps. Annoyed, I grasped his shoulder. He jerked up to his feet and tried to punch me. I blocked the assault then got in his face. "Snap out of it, asshole. Or you'll be the one with the gaping hole in your throat."

Nestore's eyes focused on me, finally. That creepy out of sorts expression freaked even me out. He stepped back and walked past me then climbed out of the cage as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

I followed after him. We needed to have a talk, only not in front of hundreds of spectators.

"Who's going to clean up the mess?" Roger called after me.

"Don't pretend you didn't make a fortune tonight. Pay someone to wipe away the shit."

I stepped into the locker room after Nestore. He was already peeling out of his fighting shorts, still ignoring me. If I didn't know the guy, I'd have thought it was a show of disrespect.

"This wasn't a death fight, Nestore. Just like your last fight wasn't a death fight. You need to get a grip."

He looked up. "He got into a cage with me. He wanted to die."

"I don't give a fuck what he wanted. We didn't declare it a death fight. That means you won't kill. We make the rules, Nestore. If you want to rip out people's throats, fight your battles in L.A., not here. For now, you're banned from fighting in the Arena."

"If that's what my Capo wants," Nestore said indifferently.

I wasn't sure if that was what Remo wanted, but someone needed to be the voice of reason here, and as usual, that wasn't going to be my brother. No one would have allowed a man like Nestore to become Underboss.

I turned on my heel and left Nestore so he could clean up. Outside, Diego was already waiting for me. Judging from the pissed expression, his father had called him.

He barred my way. “Why didn’t you get me when you found Gemma here?”

“Because you were busy disregarding your traditions with Dakota.” Fury flickered across his face. It pissed him off when I reminded him of his hypocrisy, but someone had to.

“My father blames me for it!”

“He’ll get over it. He’s turned a blind eye on all of your nightly activities so far.”

“I can do what I want, but this is about Gemma. I hope you kept your fucking hands to yourself when you took her home.”

I didn’t bother with a reply. Not only because Diego’s interrogation rubbed me the wrong way, but also because I wasn’t sure if he wouldn’t realize that my intentions toward Gemma had shifted.

Mick followed me toward the bar. I slanted him a look.

“You didn’t touch her, right?” His voice held a strange note. I couldn’t tell if it was anxiety or curiosity.

“Why do you care?”

He gave a shrug.

I scoffed. “Don’t tell me you’ve got the hots for her?”

He flushed. “She’s the hottest girl in Vegas.”

That was true. “She’s off limits.”

“So, you’re not going to ask for her hand?”

I choked on my drink, chuckling. “Hell, no. I won’t marry anyone.”

SIX



Gemma

“Dad, please,” I said when it was only him and I at the breakfast table. “I’ve been grounded for two weeks. I only wanted to help Toni.”

Of course, Dad had ground me indefinitely after Savio had dropped me off. Mom hadn’t cried, but her eyes had glistened and that was almost as bad. Nonna was still sending me disappointed looks whenever she thought I was being too perky.

Why had Savio shoved his nose into my business? I’d always dreamed about him showing interest for me, but not in this way. I didn’t need another crazy protector. Diego was bad enough.

I was angry, not just because of Savio ratting me out but also because of his words. He’d made it sound as if the thought of marrying me was too horrid to even consider.

Dad narrowed his eyes. “You worked in Roger’s Arena, Gemma. That’s not a small thing. We don’t need those kinds of rumors about you, especially because I’ve started looking for a husband for you.”

I almost choked on my tea. “You promised to wait until I found someone.”

Dad shook his head. “It’s been one year, *angelo mio*, and the only one you’re interested in is Savio.”

“He’s a good catch.”

Dad sighed. "He's a Falcone. He doesn't share our values. Other men have already inquired about you. He hasn't."

"Can't you mention it to him? Casually, I mean. Maybe he doesn't realize that he can ask for me." That was stupid of course. Savio knew about the rules in our world, even if he preferred to ignore them.

"All right. I'll mention it next time I see him, and I'll tell Diego to do the same, but that's all we can do. The man has to ask for your hand. You are too precious to throw yourself at someone."

"I know, Dad." Problem was the alternative was spending my life with a man I didn't want, and that seemed an even less desirable option.

Diego walked in, shrugging his jacket over. "Hurry up, or you'll be late."

I gave Dad a kiss on the cheek then followed Diego out toward his Ford. He brought me to school and picked me up from there every single day. Since the Arena incident, he was even more vigilant than usual. I wasn't even allowed to ride in Toni's car anymore. Inmates had more freedom than I did.

"Dad won't reduce your time."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not a prisoner."

Diego shook his head. "If you don't stop changing into other clothes in school, then we'll have to start locking you in."

I made an innocent face.

"Bag it. Sierra told me you're wearing jeans in school."

I couldn't believe her! She was such a snitch. My cousin loved to shove her nose in my business. "It's just jeans and a sweater. These clothes make me feel out of place." I motioned at my dress. It wasn't a bad dress, no frills, bows or strange colors, but most girls didn't wear modest dresses in school. I wanted to wear jeans and shirts like everyone else did. Diego didn't say anything. I'd have a serious talk to Sierra today. Checking out my reflection in the side window, I took out my hairband and fluffed up my hair, then applied a touch of lipgloss.

“Will you stop the shit? You’re so fucking blind and naïve, Gemma,” Diego growled.

“What’s gotten into you? I didn’t do anything.”

“Fluffing up your hair and applying lipstick isn’t nothing.”

Had he lost his mind now? My bewilderment must have shown because he shook his head. “You really don’t get it. I suppose I should be glad.”

“Can you just tell me what I did?”

“You’re driving guys crazy, Gemma. You don’t even realize how many threats I have to hand out every day to keep guys from undressing you with their eyes.”

I laughed, thinking he was pulling my leg but his face was dead serious. “Really?” I asked, thrilled and embarrassed at once. Savio had hit on me that day, but I’d thought it was a fluke. “Guys never hit on me.”

“Because they know what’ll happen if they do,” Diego said in a voice that sent a little shiver down my back.

“Was that why you were in that fight?” A couple of days ago, he’d come home with a split lip from a meeting with several other Camorrista in his age. He hadn’t been very forthcoming with information.

“Yeah, a few guys voted you hottest piece of ass and aspiring sex bomb.”

“Oh.”

“And no, Savio wasn’t one of them!” Diego hit the steering wheel.

“I didn’t ask if he was.”

Diego parked the car in the school parking lot. “You were about to.”

I didn’t deny it. I could see that Diego wanted to say more, but then he just shook his head. “You’ll be late.”

I got out. Toni was already waiting for me. I rushed toward her, eager to get away from Diego’s brand of crazy. We hugged, then she scanned my face. “What’s the matter?”

“My brother’s been intolerable all morning.”

“Isn’t he always?” She looked pointedly toward the Ford, which was still parked at the curb despite other cars honking behind it.

“We should go inside. He won’t leave until we do.”

Toni and I linked arms before we headed into the building.

“If you’re looking for the Amish commune, this is the wrong way,” Noemi said, her little posse of friends surrounding her. The idea that Diego was making out with her older sister made me want to gag.

I ignored her. If I didn’t, I’d punch her, and I’d promised Dad that wouldn’t happen again. If I wanted to be on time for class, I didn’t have time to change.

Later in recess, Toni and I sat at our usual table in the corner, and I was finally out of my dress and wearing jeans and a sweater. “Dad has started looking for a husband for me.”

Toni choked on her iced tea. “What?”

“I’m sixteen. Usually girls are already promised at that age.”

“What about Savio?” She’d lowered her voice another notch. Nobody knew of my crush on him and I preferred it to stay that way. I didn’t need more rumors about me.

I pushed my vegetables around on the plate. “He hasn’t asked yet.”

“You need to up your game, Gemma. Flirt with him. Savio’s brain is wired differently. He’s used to girls throwing themselves at him.”

“I don’t want to throw myself at him. The guy has to make the first move.”

Toni sighed. “Maybe he needs a tiny nudge to make the first move. Do you want to risk being promised to someone else?”

“Of course not,” I gasped. “But it’ll probably take many months for Dad to find a viable suitor. It’s not like I have a long list of admirers.”

Toni rolled her eyes. “Too many hits against your head during training, eh?” She pointed her fork at something behind me. I turned, finding a group of jocks staring at me. Flushing, I jerked

back around. “Some of them aren’t Italian. And the others are too young. They need to be a couple of years older.”

“I didn’t say you were supposed to marry any of them. I was just making a point.”

I didn’t quite get her point. Even if these guys were checking me out, that didn’t help me with Savio.



I poured myself some orange juice when I heard male voices coming from the living room. One of them was Savio. Following them, I returned to my previous homework spot only to find Savio and Diego lounging on the sofa, bag of chips in their hand, and zapping through the TV programs. My books and notebook lay discarded on the floor as if someone had shoved them off without care.

If Diego had been alone, I would have thrown myself at him and tried to choke him with a throw pillow, but with Savio being present, I had to opt for a more ladylike option.

I stalked into the room, but both boys ignored me pointedly.

“Why did you throw my stuff down?”

Diego and Savio briefly glanced up before they returned their focus to a video on the screen of some shitty rapper who was surrounded by half-dressed girls. Nonna would lose it if she saw.

“They were in the way,” Diego said as if in an afterthought.

“I was doing homework.”

“Then do it somewhere else. Go into the kitchen, that’s a place where you have more business being anyway.”

I couldn’t believe him. He was trying to impress Savio by being an asshole. Savio’s mouth turned into that arrogant smile that always made my stupid heart speed up.

“I was here first,” I said, crossing my arms in front of my chest as I barred their view of the TV. Savio wasn’t as much as glancing my way. I might as well have been air. My outfit wasn’t really good for impressing anyone: sweatpants and a hoodie, but I hadn’t expected Savio to come visit. Diego mostly met somewhere else with him and Mick nowadays.

“Gemma, stop being a bitch, and move your ass away.”

Savio briefly looked up, and our eyes met. Butterflies danced in my stomach like they always did. His expression was unreadable. Not the familiar smirk or arrogant smile. Then he returned his attention to the TV.

“If you don’t go, then you’ll have to live with my presence,” I said. Before I had time to think about it, I sank down on Savio’s lap. Diego’s sharp intake of breath made me smile, but it died when Savio’s arm came around my waist. Shock shot through me. I hadn’t expected him to react that way. Shove me away? Yes. Shock? Yes. Pulling me closer as if I belonged on top of him? No.

My gaze darted over to him and he leaned back against the headrest, pulling me with him. His eyes met mine and there was something in them that had me swallow thickly.

He didn’t seem fazed by me sitting on his lap in the slightest. Of course not, Savio was used to girls being on his lap, but usually with less clothing and more hip rotation. His eyes held mine, the sexy infuriating smile on his face. Butterflies filled my belly at our proximity. This was the first time I sat on a guy’s lap, on Savio’s lap, and it felt good. I could feel his muscles through our clothing, the strength in his body, and his warmth. God, he felt so good. I wanted to lean into him, bury my face in his neck.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Gemma? Get up!” Diego growled, grabbing my wrist in a bruising grip before he scowled at Savio. “And you take your fucking fingers off her waist or I’ll break them.”

Oh no. Tension shot through Savio’s body and his hold on my waist tightened further as he slowly sat up with me still on his lap. “Try it.”

The threat in Savio’s voice stunned me. I touched his forearm, fingertips brushing the scars there, and his expression, still fixed on my brother, became even harsher.

My eyes darted between my brother and Savio, realizing this had just turned dead serious for them. This was going to turn into a testosterone-fueled shitfest. And no offense to Diego, who was a nasty piece of shit in the fighting ring, but I had seen Savio in

the cage. He was a Falcone, and fighting was in his blood, and so was a talent to destroy his opponents with words and fists.

If those two ever killed each other, it wouldn't be because of me. I jammed my heel down on Savio's foot. He grunted and loosened his hold on my waist, giving me the chance to jump to my feet and ram my fist into Diego's stomach, causing him to groan and jerk back.

"You are idiots."

I whirled around and stomped upstairs. I needed to get away from Savio before I did something even stupider.



Diego was breathing hard beside me as he stared after Gemma who rushed up the stairs. My eyes, too, followed her ascent, unable to tear myself away from the outline of her ass in those sweatpants. Gemma made even those look sexy.

She was a goddamn enigma.

In all the time I'd known her, she never said 'fuck'. With everyone else, I'd have rolled my fucking eyes hearing the word 'fudge' as a curse, but she made it work. That girl loved to fight and could throw a mean punch, and yet at the same time, she loved to watch those vomit-inducing chic-flicks featuring those pussies claiming to be men and the color pink. I didn't even know there were boxing gloves in pink.

Gemma was the hottest girl in the city and didn't even realize it. She was the girl I wanted most and couldn't have.

Diego narrowed his eyes at me, still standing over me.

I leaned back again, cocking a brow.

“Don’t ever touch her again.”

I rose slowly, stepping up to him. “Or what?”

Diego looked like he was considering murdering me. “If you don’t honor our values, if you don’t respect that our women are off limits unless they are *your* woman, then you can’t come over anymore. I’ll have to protect Gemma at all costs. If you pose a risk to her, our friendship has to end.”

“Pose a risk to her?” I scoffed. “She sat on my lap. I didn’t pull her down, and I didn’t touch her inappropriately, Diego. I wrapped an arm around her waist.”

“That’s already too much,” he muttered. “Gemma doesn’t know what she’s doing. She doesn’t realize how you’ll take it if she sits on your lap.”

“How do I take it?”

“You’ll think she might be up for more or that she’s hitting on you.”

“She is hitting on me. We both know it.”

Diego tensed.

“Calm the fuck down, asshole. I know Gemma *isn’t up for more*. But you know as well as I do that she’s got a crush on me.”

“It doesn’t matter. You can’t have her—unless you marry her.”

I laughed and sank back down on the couch. Lifting my shirt, I clapped my hand on my bull tattoo peeking out. “This bull won’t ever be chained to one woman.”

Diego rolled his eyes but finally sat down as well. “Believe me, I *know*. Now only Gemma has to get it in her stubborn head. Maybe it’ll sink in once Dad’s found a husband for her.”

“He’s looking?” I asked, trying to determine why I felt the urge to crush something.

“Yeah.” Diego regarded me.

I relaxed against the headrest with a shrug. “He’d better know how to throw a punch or she’s going to bulldoze him.”

I couldn't imagine Gemma with a guy, with another guy. Having her on my lap had felt fucking good, and her reaction had been cute, the way she'd tensed in shock when I'd wrapped my arm around her and then softened after a moment.

“Gemma won't be allowed to keep fighting once she's promised. Most men don't allow their women something like that, especially Traditionalists.”

Diego shrugged, but he was looking at me in a way I didn't like one bit.

SEVEN



Gemma

Diego was already parked at the curb when Toni and I walked out of school on the last day before the summer holidays. I hugged her before she headed for her bike and I got into the car.

Diego drove off at once, honking when a few kids didn't cross the street fast enough.

"Bad mood?" I asked.

"Not yet. But that'll probably change today."

He was referring to his training with Savio. Diego wanted me to stay away from him and in the last four months, he'd succeeded.

"Mick told me to say hi to you."

My brows snapped together. "Okay. Tell him hi back, I guess?"

Diego shook his head, muttering something under his breath. I decided to ignore him.

The moment we stepped into the restaurant and I saw Dad's face, I knew I wouldn't like what he'd have to say.

I sank down beside him and he pressed a kiss to my temple. Diego slid into the booth next to me. The door to the kitchen swung open and Nonna walked out, carrying a casserole.

Dad cleared his throat. "Gemma, I can't wait any longer. We need to find a good man for you. Someone who'll take care of

you. We can't focus on only one possible suitor. You're not getting younger."

Dad made it sound as if I was an old spinster and not only sixteen.

Nonna set down the casserole and gave me a knowing smile.

"But, Dad, you know I want..."

"You want Savio Falcone, we all know it," Diego muttered. "As if he was the second coming of Christ."

Nonna hit him over the head and muttered a quick prayer under her breath.

Diego rubbed the spot, ducking his head in case Nonna decided he needed a second round. "It's the truth, and it's a disgrace how she acts around him."

Dad's expression hardened and he leveled his disapproving eyes on me. "How are you acting?"

"I'm not doing anything," I said, ducking my head too so I could send Diego a scowl. What was his problem? He usually didn't rat me out.

"I hope you aren't doing anything that'll disgrace our family, angelo mio."

I flushed, realizing what he was thinking.

"That's not what I meant, Dad," Diego said at once. "Gemma would never do that. But she's been telling him about your search for suitors every time she saw him and giving him those embarrassing puppy dog eyes as if that would make him ask for her hand."

Nonna touched my shoulder. "Young love is so precious."

"It's one-sided. Savio doesn't do love. He only—"

Dad cleared his throat and Diego shrugged. "You know what I'm talking about."

"I do," Dad agreed. He stroked my head as if I was still a little girl. "Men like him, Gemma, don't marry, and you are far too precious to settle for what he wants."

I cast my eyes down. "I know."

“Good.”

We ate in silence until Diego and I left for our training with Savio. Dad sent me another meaningful look. He and Diego wanted to protect me, but I needed to give it another try. I wanted Savio and no one else.



I wasn't allowed to fight Savio, only watch him and Diego spar with each other. But considering that I hadn't even been allowed to do that the last few months, I was more than happy to work out at the boxing sack.

Diego always hovered close by, not giving me a second alone with Savio. After their fight training, he finally headed for the bathroom. I quickly knotted my baggy shirt so my abs showed while Savio wiped his face with a towel. My eyes were drawn to the sliver of skin that peeked out where his shirt rode up. The hint of black peeked out of his waistband. A tattoo? I hadn't seen him without a shirt for years.

“You got a new tattoo?” I asked curiously, unable to stop myself. I walked closer like a moth is drawn to the light.

Savio lowered the towel, his dark eyes taking in my exposed stomach, and something in his expression filled my insides with butterflies. “Got it a few years ago.” The way his mouth twitched increased my curiosity. The tattoos on his forearms were always on display—the Camorra knife and eye on one wrist, and a mechanical watch speared by a knife surrounded by glass shards covering the scars on his other, but I wondered where exactly this third tattoo was.

“How big is it?” I asked without thinking. Mortification heated up my face when I realized how that sounded.

Savio chuckled. “Big.”

I had to bite my tongue not to ask what he was talking about and I knew that had been his intention in the first place. “What is it?”

“Telling you would ruin the effect. You have to see it,” he said, his voice lower than usual. Was he flirting? Or was I imagining things driven by despair?

Diego sauntered out of the bathroom, his eyes zooming in on my exposed stomach.

“Looks like you’re in trouble,” Savio said.

“I don’t care. He’s being unreasonable.”

“What’s going on here?”

“We’re talking about my tattoo,” Savio said, pointing toward his crotch.

“You—”

Savio raised a palm. “Calm down. I didn’t reveal anything.”

Diego didn’t look convinced. He searched my face, but I didn’t give anything away. “I should grab my things. We need to get home for dinner.”

“Don’t forget the meeting at eight,” Savio said.

“Meeting?” I echoed.

“Camorra business,” Diego said.

“The Bratva has been giving us trouble,” Savio added, despite my brother’s disapproving expression. Dad and Diego never told me anything.

I gave Savio a smile and he winked at me while Diego was busy stuffing his towel into his bag.

“My parents talk about nothing else but finding a good match for me,” I muttered, trying to sound casual. As far as smooth topic changes went, this was a bad one.

Savio was removing his bandages and didn’t look up. Behind him, I caught Diego rolling his eyes at me.

“The next few weeks will be tight for me. I have to prepare for my upcoming fight, so I can’t work out with you Diego. Remo needs to beat me into shape.”

Had he listened to a word I was saying? I opened my mouth to repeat myself, but Diego gripped my arm and dragged me away. I stumbled after him. “What are you doing?”

“Saving your dignity,” he hissed.

“What—”

“Be silent.”

He pushed me into the locker room then closed the door. “Grab your things. We’re leaving.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Stop ordering me around. You’ve been an asshole to me lately.”

“Because you’re acting like a goddamn idiot.”

My eyes grew wide.

“*Savio*, Gemma, I’m talking about Savio. Just give it up. You’re embarrassing yourself. The only thing missing is you asking Savio for his hand in marriage. Get it into your stubborn head that Savio’d rather chew on glass than chain himself to a woman.”

I looked away and snatched my gym bag. “People can change. Sometimes it just takes finding the right person.”

“You don’t really believe that’s going to be you, right? You’ve been in front of him for years now, not to mention that you’ve been talking about Dad looking for possible suitors for months on end. Savio doesn’t give a shit. He won’t ask for your hand.”

“But I know how he watches me. He wants me.” The words turned my cheeks hot. It was the first time I admitted it to Diego, or anyone but Toni.

Diego grimaced. “Of course, he does. But he wants you for free and without any ties. That’s not going to happen, so he lost interest. You’re too much work for his taste.” Diego regarded my face then shook his head with a sigh. “Come on, let’s head home.”

He touched my back, but I stepped out of his reach and walked ahead, angry at him even though I knew he was telling the truth. Nothing of this was Diego’s fault. He’d warned me from the get-go. It was my fault for falling for someone like Savio Falcone. And it was Savio’s fault for being such a male slut.

Savio was still unwrapping his hands, immersed in a conversation with Mick and Nino, who must have come in while we’d been in the locker room. I was surprised to see Mick. He

rarely trained with Savio. Maybe because he was embarrassed about his lack of skill.

“Keep it together, all right?” Diego muttered. “We were raised to be prideful, so stop throwing yourself at him.”

I sent my brother a scowl, but he was right. I’d been flirting with Savio like there was no tomorrow, had dressed sexier to catch his attention and had talked about my father’s search for suitors until I was blue in the face—without results. This was as far as I’d go. Maybe Savio wanted a taste, like Toni had said, but I wouldn’t give it to him. Either he wanted me and was willing to show it, or he wasn’t. My stomach tightened at the implication of that statement. The chances of me marrying the guy I was in love with were close to zero.

But I had some pride and even Savio couldn’t make me give it up. If he was looking for easy lays, he could look the other way.

Diego and I stopped beside the three men. “We’re heading home.”

Savio nodded. His eyes briefly slanted to me but then he returned his focus to unwrapping the bandages around his wrists. Nino gave me a curt nod.

“I’ll come with you to the parking lot,” Mick said quickly as he grabbed his bag from the floor.

“Didn’t you just get here?” Savio asked with cocked eyebrows.

Mick flushed. “Uh, yes, but I forgot something in my car.”

Forcing myself not to look at Savio, I gave a wave and followed Diego toward the exit. He obviously wanted to leave as soon as possible. I’d noticed rising tension between him and Savio, and knew it was because of me.

“Do you want me to carry your bag?” Mick asked, startling me.

He was walking close behind me, smiling. “Sure.” I handed my bag to him. It wasn’t like it was too heavy for me, but if he offered to carry it, who was I to say no?

“Your fighting skills are crazy good for a girl,” Mick continued, giving me another smile. He hadn’t even seen me fight today, and the last time he’d been around when I’d trained with Diego had been more than a year ago.

“Thank you. Yours are good for a guy as well.” They weren’t really but I had to say something.

Mick frowned, obviously not getting my jab. He gave a hesitant grin.

Diego threw a glance over his shoulder and slowed, falling into step beside me. He sent Mick a look I didn’t understand.

Mick appeared flustered after that. Glancing between the two of them, I tried to determine what was going on. We stopped at our car. Mick as well, even though we’d already passed his car. Diego crossed his arms in front of his chest. I raised my eyebrows. Why was he acting like a bouncer? Did he have problems with Mick as well? Diego could be difficult, I was the first to admit that.

“So, Gemma, if you want more opportunities to improve your skills, I could train with you as well. Under Diego’s supervision, of course.”

I really didn’t understand how Mick could be a Camorrista. He was far too nice most of the time. “Thanks, that’s really kind, but with my choir rehearsals, school and church, I don’t have time.” I couldn’t tell him the truth, that his skills weren’t on par with Diego’s or Savio’s. They wouldn’t help me improve.

“Oh, sure. Anyway, if you want to mix up your routine a bit. I could take over from Diego occasionally.”

Diego opened my door and motioned for me to get in. “We have to get home. Nonna won’t appreciate us being late for dinner. *Bye, Mick.*”

I slipped in, glad for his rudeness. He threw the door shut before I could say bye to Mick as well, and grabbed my gym bag from him. Mick still stood beside my door even when Diego slipped behind the steering wheel. He finally stepped away when the engine roared to life.

“What was that about?” I asked, confused.

Diego didn't say anything, only floored the gas with gritted teeth.

I stared out of the window, frustrated with Diego for treating me like a small kid and with Savio for pretty much everything.

“Mick's head over heels for you.”

I choked on a laugh, turning to Diego. He was clutching the steering wheel in a death grip. “It's not a fucking joke. Haven't you noticed how he's been sweet-talking you for months now?”

I thought about it. Mick had been exceedingly nice around me, but I'd thought it was just who he was. “Are you sure?”

“Of course, I'm sure. Guys talk, and he keeps asking me about you.”

“What does Savio say about me?”

Diego slammed on the brakes and hit the steering wheel with his flat hand. I gasped in surprise. “Seriously? He doesn't talk about you and if he did, it would be like he talks about every girl, as if you're a piece of ass he wants to sink his cock into.”

I couldn't believe Diego had said that. He usually didn't swear or talk about sex around me. He wanted to protect me from all of that, so he must be really upset if he acted that way.

He took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't use these words around you.”

“It's okay,” I said.

He looked at me, and my stomach tightened at the worry in his face. “Promise me, you'll keep your distance from Savio from now on. You'll only get hurt. I know Savio, Gemma, and trust me, he'll never give you what you hope for.”

I nodded. I'd already made up my mind to let Savio do the next step, but Diego's worry affirmed my resolve.



I'd finished internalizing the lyrics for a new song when Mom came into my room. As usual, she didn't knock. I'd given up trying to make her honor my privacy. None of the inhabitants of

the house did. Mom walked over and kissed my temple. “Dad needs to talk to you about your future.”

That could only mean one thing. Dread settled in my bones as I looked up into her face. “Has he found... has he found someone?”

Mom brushed her palm over my hair. “Sometimes we find love in unexpected places. Now go.”

“Mom,” I whispered, but she gently led me out of my room. With a sinking heart, I headed into the kitchen, where I found Dad and Diego sitting at the table. Of course, Diego knew before me. Why would I find out first who my husband was going to be?

I stopped dead a few steps from them.

Dad smiled, but it looked tired. He’d been doing long hours in the restaurants these last few weeks. Since Diego had become a Made Man, Dad could focus on the business, but it didn’t make him work any less. I’d been helping him as much as possible in the summer break, but in two days I had to return to school.

“Angelo mio, come on over. I’ve good news.”

I trudged over to them then sank down in one of the chairs.

Diego’s expression was unreadable, but he was avoiding my eyes.

“Good news?” A flicker of hope burnt in my chest, but instead of kindling it into roaring flames, Dad smothered the last embers with his next words.

“Michelangelo asked for your hand and after talking to his father, I agreed to the bond.”

Diego met my gaze and his expression softened the slightest bit.

I couldn’t say anything. Dad had promised me to someone I didn’t want, someone who wasn’t Savio. I stood abruptly. The chair toppled over with a bang.

Both Dad and Diego looked at me in alarm. I was so mad at both of them. They’d always controlled every aspect of my life and I’d accepted it because it had seemed like a temporary restriction, but this decision would determine my whole life.

I was going to marry Mick.

Not Savio.

I rushed out, my throat constricting painfully. Just away. I needed to get away, but steps rang out behind me. I didn't have to turn around to know who it was. A hand clasped my upper arm and I lost it. Whirling around, I lashed out with my arm and smashed my fist against Diego's mouth. He didn't manage to dodge the blow fully and his lip burst, spilling blood down his chin and shirt. He shoved me against the wall, making my ears ring. Blood kept dripping out of his mouth with every harsh breath. "Fuck, what was that for? Have you lost your fucking mind?" Anger and confusion simmered in his eyes.

"*You* and Dad decided who I'm going to marry as if I'm not a person capable of making her own decision. I bet you felt mighty powerful handing me over to your friend Mick like some expensive gift. Did you barter for me? Did you and him joke about what he'd have to do to marry me?"

Diego looked disgusted as if this was so far-fetched he couldn't even begin to comprehend how I'd ever come up with the idea. "That's what you think? All my life, I've been protecting you, Gemma, and that's what I'm still trying to do, even if you make it really difficult sometimes." He wiped the blood from his chin with the back of his hand, only managing to spread it on his cheek and cuff. The sound of shuffling came from the kitchen—

probably Nonna listening in on us.

"Then why did you tell Dad to give me to Mick?"

Diego stepped back. Was that regret on his face? It almost made me want to forgive him. "He was the best option. We are small soldiers. We get by, but that's it. The Amalfi is eating up too much money."

Dad should have never rebuilt our second restaurant after it burnt down a few years ago, but he didn't want to break Nonna's heart who'd opened both restaurants with Grandpa. "You are working so hard, you'll be rising in ranks, you know it."

"Maybe, but right now our family name doesn't offer much. Men who want you can't better their position by marrying you. That means all the men who asked for your hand either want you

for your body or they have even less to offer than we do. Especially some of the designated Captains who asked for your hand aren't men you'd want to be married to, they aren't men I want you to be alone with. Mick's family is fairly well off and his father is Captain. Even if Mick's brother is going to inherit the title, he's still a good choice."

I shook my head, feeling sick and sad. "So, he was the highest bidder, hmm?"

I pushed past Diego and rushed up the stairs, not stopping until I was in my room and had flung myself on my bed. Then I allowed myself a good long cry.

For some reason, I'd never considered the option that I might not end up at Savio's side in the end. Whenever I'd imagined my future, my name had been Gemma Falcone with Savio giving me that annoying, arrogant smile. I'd never minded an arranged marriage because it had always been clear that Savio would be the one I'd be promised to. It had always felt like fate, an irrefutable truth.

Today the silly hopes of a stupid girl were crushed. Savio didn't want me, not in the way I wanted him. He wouldn't push me out of bed, that was for sure, but he wasn't willing to invest more than that. I swallowed as a new wave of sobs wracked me. It wasn't that I'd never imagined how it would be to be close to Savio, to kiss him and run my hands down his body, but it had always only been part of the reason why I wanted to be with him. He was funny, incredibly so. I'd lost count of the times his stupid comments have made me snort-laugh, often when I'd spied on him and Diego, and wasn't even supposed to listen. Even though he and his brothers weren't Traditionalists, they lived for their family.

After a while, I quieted down and just lay on my side, staring blankly at my wall. I didn't even feel like crying anymore. Hollowness crowded my chest. A knock sounded, but I didn't react. The door creaked and steps rang out before my bed dipped.

"Don't cry," Diego said quietly. It was funny how difficult it was for him to see tears on my face when he did so many horrible things in the name of the Camorra.

"I'm not. *Not anymore.*" I rolled around to face him.

He watched me for a long time. His lower lip was already swelling, but he'd gotten rid of the blood and changed into a clean T-shirt. That he wasn't angry at me for punching him showed that he did, indeed, feel guilty. "Mick's all right. He's decent, and I'll make sure he treats you right, trust me. With him I can really keep you safe. If you'd been given to some Captain or an Underboss in another city, you would have been at his mercy. I couldn't allow that. With Mick, you'll never have to fear violence. You don't have to be scared."

"I'm not. I know Mick. He's nice." Mick wouldn't hurt me, I was sure of that, even if I didn't know him that well, but given how tight Diego, Savio and Mick were, my brother probably knew every one of his dirty deeds.

Diego looked at me with pity in his eyes. I hated that look because it made me feel so stupid and naïve. Of course, that's exactly what I was, thinking I could change Savio Falcone's ways. Even if he married one day, it would probably be the daughter of some Underboss. "Savio's a player, Gemma. He had the chance to ask for your hand. Dad would have given you to him. Every family would have given their daughter to him."

I nodded. I'd known this for a long time. I'd chosen to ignore facts and stay in my bubble. I only had myself to blame. It was always easier to blame others, though. "But he didn't ask. I thought..." I couldn't say what I thought. That there was something between Savio and me, a connection. "I thought he liked me. I thought I caught him looking at me."

"He likes you all right," Diego muttered. Again, I caught the undercurrent of anger in his voice when he talked about Savio. "And, of course, he checked you out. Every guy does." Diego's mouth pulled into a grimace as if me looking halfway decent was his worst nightmare come true.

I flushed. "I don't want to marry Mick, or anyone else..."

Diego got up and threw up his hands. "You can't have Savio, Gemma. Get it out of your head. Why buy a cow if you can have milk for free? That's his credo, and the world is full of cows willing to throw their milk for free at Savio."

I wanted Savio to have my milk, but not on his terms, not for free. Of course, that meant he'd never get my milk. Diego sighed.

“Forget him. The sooner you get to terms with marrying Mick, the easier it’ll be.”

The problem was my heart belonged to Savio and even just trying to look at Mick like he could be something for me felt like I was cheating on my heart—and somehow Savio. “Easy for you to say. You don’t have to marry someone you don’t want.”

“You really think I’m going to marry for love, Gemma? Grow up. I’ll marry whoever Dad suggests, whoever helps our family improve in rank.”

“You’re such a romantic.”

“I’m being realistic. Dreaming about Prince Charming is for little girls, and you aren’t a little girl anymore. Not to mention that Savio is definitely no Prince Charming. He’s the Big Bad Wolf who wants to eat you.” He snapped his mouth shut and actually flushed. It took me a moment to realize why and then I felt my own cheeks heat.

Diego spared us both the embarrassment and stalked out of the room with a look as if he was going to be sick at any moment.

Less than ten minutes later, another knock sounded.

“Go away. I get it, I’m stupid!” I really couldn’t bear another talk with Diego.

The door opened and Mom peeked inside. Her brows crinkled and worry filled her face when she scanned my eyes. “Oh, Gemma. It’s not as bad as it seems.” She came over to me and stroked my head. “Is Michelangelo really that bad of a choice?”

“Apart from his name, you mean?” I said with a small smile, not wanting to worry Mom. She’d been feeling faint a lot since she was pregnant.

She smiled. “I’m sure his parents had a good reason for giving him this name.”

I gave her a doubtful look. Any child given the name Michelangelo had huge shoes to fill and could only fail to do so, especially given that Mick wasn’t the firstborn and wouldn’t become Captain.

“I know you probably don’t feel like it, but Mick and his father are coming over for dinner to celebrate the union.”

“Oh, no, Mom. He’ll know I’ve cried and he’ll feel horrible knowing it’s because of him. I don’t want to make Mick feel bad. It’s not his fault.” Well, technically, it was. He must have asked for my hand, but I couldn’t really blame him for having the guts to ask for my hand. It was nice knowing he liked me enough to consider marriage.

“You’re too kind-hearted, sweetheart. But we can do something about your eyes. We still have two hours. Why don’t you take a shower and I’ll look for a nice dress that you can wear?”

I nodded, not even in the mood to argue about Mom choosing my clothes. She’d opt for a modest dress, which was the message I wanted to send Mick anyway.



Two hours later, I was dressed in my knee-long, high-collared dark blue dress but other than in church, I wore my hair down because that way, it covered the red blotches still marring my throat from crying.

When the bell rang, nerves tightened my stomach. I’d known Mick even longer than Savio, but meeting someone after you found out he was going to be your husband was something else.

Dad and Diego went to get the door while Mom, Nonna, and I waited in our small dining room. Nonna touched my cheek, her crow’s feet deepening as she gave me a wistful smile. “I still remember when I met your grandpa for the first time. It was such a special day.”

I took her hand and squeezed, forcing a smile. Nonna and Grandpa had found love in their arranged marriage. Maybe I could find it, too, if I only stopped thinking about Savio. Voices rang out and then Diego walked in followed by Mick who was dressed in a white shirt and trousers and carrying red roses.

I flushed. He came toward me with a hesitant smile, but, in his eyes, I could see pride. Knowing that he was so pleased to marry me felt nice, but when I looked at him, there were no butterflies or heat waves. He was nice to look at, very tall and slightly muscled, and yet he wasn’t who I wanted.

Mick handed me the flowers and leaned forward as if he was going to kiss my cheek, but Diego cleared his throat. Rolling his eyes at my brother, Mick straightened. I gave him a quick smile to make up for Diego's obnoxiousness. Diego didn't move from my side. "Hey Mick, this is the first time you meet Gemma as your fiancée." He jerked his chin toward his friend in a sort of greeting that came off like a warning. "Just remember she won't officially be yours for the next two years."

Two years before I'd marry Mick and be his wife—forever. Before we'd share a bed. I checked out Mick discreetly, trying to imagine being intimate with him, kissing him. But every time I tried, Savio's face popped up. Heat crept up into my cheeks. Diego gave me a questioning look and I quickly tore my gaze away. I needed to stop thinking about Savio. Fidelity was the foundation of any marriage and even just thinking of another man when I was promised to Mick was wrong.

Mick's father came toward me and extended his hand. He wasn't smiling and the way he was checking his surroundings with barely hidden disdain, I knew why. He'd probably hoped his son would make a better match, someone who came from, or rather *with* money. "It's a pleasure meeting you, Gemma."

He was a good liar, I had to give it to him. Mick could obviously see past his father's mask because his expression flashed with embarrassment.

"Thank you, sir. It's a pleasure meeting you too," I said in my best choir girl voice. He released me and turned back to Dad. They settled at the table. Mom and Nonna disappeared, probably toward the kitchen and I was about to follow to help when Dad motioned for me to sit.

Mick gave me another smile as we headed for the table.

I ended up sitting between Diego and Mick. They talked about races almost all evening, which meant I had to lean back so I wasn't in the way, but Mick kept checking me out when he thought no one was paying attention.

After dinner, Mick approached my father. "Can I have a word with your daughter?"

Dad regarded him and crossed his arms in front of his chest, looking like a bouncer. Making sure no one got access before

there was a ring on my finger.

I had to hide a sarcastic laugh by coughing.

Diego cocked one eyebrow, and just the gesture reminded me so much of a certain Falcone that I had to swallow hard.

“Diego will stay in the room, but he’ll keep his distance so you’ll have some privacy,” Dad said sternly.

Mick’s face fell, but he nodded. Mom sent me an encouraging smile, her palm pressed to her still hidden bump, before everyone filed out except for Mick, Diego, and I.

Diego stood right beside us, practically breathing down my neck. He was taking his guard duties a bit too seriously. I could hold my own. Even if Mick tried to cop a grope, I’d just smash my fist into his face. Diego’s lip was nicely swollen after all. I wondered what he’d told Mick.

Mick stepped up to my brother, annoyed. “You heard your father. You are supposed to give us privacy, man.”

“You can have privacy in two years, not before then,” Diego muttered.

I touched his arm. “Come on. Give us some room. You don’t have to hover like this.”

He tried to stare me down, but from the two of us, my stubborn streak was stronger. With a frown, he walked into a corner. His death stare directed at Mick was the most ridiculous thing.

“Thank you. He’s been intolerable since he found out I was going to ask for your hand,” Mick said in a low voice. I wondered just how long Diego had known. He hadn’t mentioned anything to me.

“That’s how he is,” I said then fell silent, not sure what else to say.

Mick regarded me with adoration as if he couldn’t believe he really got me. Guilt filled me, knowing I’d never be able to look at him the same way. Or could I? Was there a way I could make myself fall for him like I had fallen for Savio? But falling for Savio had happened without intention or reason, just by *literally*

falling. I almost smiled at the memory. Could something like that even be forced?

I liked Mick, but love or attraction seemed impossible. Lust out of the question. I flushed.

Mick noticed and something shifted in his stance. “I know your family are Traditionalists. We, too, abide by very similar rules, so I won’t do anything that’ll make you feel uncomfortable, Gemma. But maybe we can go on occasional dates until then? In public places, and if your father insists on it, with Diego as a chaperone.”

“Sure,” I got out. I’d definitely insist on Diego being there, not because I couldn’t defend myself against Mick but because I could blame my brother on my awkwardness.

Mick nodded with a satisfied smile. “Now that everything’s settled, I’ll go looking for an engagement ring for you.”

My face muscles quivered from the effort to hold the smile. Engagement. Rings. Everything’s settled.

A sense of finality overcame me and with it a strange mix of sadness and anger.

EIGHT



My niece Greta tiptoed into the gaming room, dressed in her white frilly nightgown, dragging her favorite stuffed rabbit behind, and I put down my phone, knowing sexting would have to wait until dollface was back up in her bed. The girl, whose name was either Sandra or Sarah, I couldn't remember, was getting too clingy anyway, so this was just the distraction I needed.

"It's bedtime."

Greta headed for me, rubbing those big eyes before she stopped in front of me. "Can't sleep."

I leaned down. "Then you came down here? Why didn't you go to your mom or dad?"

Sometimes I still couldn't believe that Remo really had kids. Most of his life he'd spent hating women and now his daughter and wife had him wrapped around their fingers. "They sleep," she whispered, peering up at me before she opened her tiny arms. "Want cuddles."

Cuddles. I smiled wryly and picked her up. She snuggled against my chest like a cat and I wrapped my arms around her as she huddled on my lap. She was tiny for a two-year-old, and so sensitive and quiet that it brought out my protective side.

"Want to watch your favorite series?"

She gave a small nod and I picked up my laptop and searched for the series. When the video began playing, Greta leaned her

head against my chest and curled her hand around my thumb. It was something she did often, holding on to our fingers as if she needed the additional touch to feel protected. She didn't understand it yet, she couldn't, but she was the safest girl in Las Vegas, probably in the States. Remo would burn down the world to protect Greta. Of course, Nino, Adamo, Fabiano, and I would be right by his side.

I peered down at her as she was transfixed by the animated rabbit and pig on the screen.

If anyone saw me like this, that would make the rounds. Savio Falcone cuddling with his niece and watching cartoons about nosy rabbits and know-it-all pigs. Greta didn't release my finger, clutching it tightly in one hand while she held her stuffed rabbit in the other. I always found children annoying, and my nephew Nevio definitely had a talent to drive me up the wall, but fuck, they'd somehow weaseled their way into my fucking heart. And Greta, I doubted anyone who met her didn't like her.

Sometimes when I looked at her cute face, I considered having kids myself in the distant future, then Nevio usually did something that made me want to get a vasectomy.

My phone beeped with a text from Mick. **Party in my garage tomorrow. I got a hot reason to celebrate.**

I picked up my phone, typing. **Finally, gave a girl the big O?**

Mick replied: **Better.**

If you say so. We both know you wouldn't find a girl's clit even if a neon arrow pointed straight at it.

Mick: **Shut up. Just wait. Diego, you in?**

Diego: **Not sure.**

Mick: **Stop being a sore loser.**

Diego: **K**

What's up with you two fuckers?

Mick: **Tomorrow.**

Diego went offline.

I frowned. He never went offline. Greta's body had become soft in my hold. She was fast asleep, her bunny clutched against

her chest. Sighing, I stood and carried her upstairs into Remo's wing where I ran across him.

Relief flickered on his face. "There she is."

I handed his daughter over to him and he cradled her protectively in his arms. I already felt sorry for the poor idiot who'd ever want to date Greta. I'd still kill him, but I'd make it quicker than Remo. "She wanted to watch that annoying series and fell asleep."

"Why are you pulling a face?" Remo asked.

"Do you know if anything's up with Mick or Diego?"

"Nothing Camorra related," Remo said. "Why?"

"They're acting strange."

Maybe they had the hots for the same girl. Diego had only recently dumped Dakota.



Mick and Diego were already lounging on the shabby sofa in Mick's garage when I arrived. It still smelled of engine oil and exhaust, even though it hadn't been used as a garage in years. I grinned at them and threw myself into the shabby old massage chair that had been my seat for a long time now—ever since the spring poking out of the worn-out leather couch had almost fucked my ass. Diego made a face as if he was sucking on a lemon. Mick, however, was grinning ear to ear.

"What's up?"

Mick held out a can of beer, but I shook my head.

"Fight in three days. I want to stay sharp." My opponent wasn't my most difficult challenge yet, but he was a nasty piece of shit, who liked to play dirty.

Mike practically shoved the beer at me. "Come on."

"Just spill the fucking beans."

Diego glared, first at Mick, then at me. What the fuck was wrong with him? He looked as if I'd personally insulted him.

Mick beamed like a goddamn kid on Christmas morning. “I’ll get Gemma!”

I stiffened. “What do you mean?” My voice was low and threatening, which surprised me. Not as much as the burning ball of jealous rage that singed my insides. I didn’t do jealous. I didn’t care enough about any girl to give a fuck if she went off into the sunset with another guy.

Diego sneered. “It means my family and Mick’s family agreed that my sister will marry Mick once she turns eighteen. Remember how I told you that we were looking to arrange a marriage for Gemma? How she told you? How Dad told you?”

I finally took the beer from Mick, popped it open and took a large gulp. Daniele had mentioned that it was time to look for a husband for Gemma. She had mentioned it a few times as well. I’d thought it was her way to tease a reaction out of me, a little game to gauge my interest.

I *was* interested in her. Every guy with eyes in his head was interested in her if for one reason only.

Fuck. I burnt to possess her, but marriage wasn’t part of my life plan.

Mick looked between Diego and me, his grin falling. “Hey, I wanted to celebrate! What’s with you two? You should be happy for me. I got the girl of my dreams.”

“Congrats,” I gritted out even though I suddenly felt the need to stick my knife into his eyeball. I eyed the beer bottle. If I smashed it on the edge of the table and shoved the broken glass into his throat, I wouldn’t even have to pull my fucking knife.

I brought the bottle to my lips and emptied the beer in one gulp. Diego regarded me over his own bottle as if he too considered using the bottle to slice someone open, only in his case that someone was going to be me. He sneered at me again.

Maybe I’d kill him too if he didn’t stop looking at me like that.

Mick was babbling about going engagement ring shopping because the festivities were supposed to happen in a few months. At least, he was clever enough not to ask either Diego or me to join him.

“The hottest girl in Vegas is going to be my wife, can you believe it?”

Over my dead body, Michelangelo. I looked him up and down. He didn't deserve Gemma, and he sure as fuck wouldn't get her.

Diego grabbed another beer and emptied it in two large gulps before he leveled his scowl on me.

It wasn't even midnight when I left. Mick was disappointed, but if you asked me, he could count himself lucky to be alive. I'd killed him in about two dozen different ways while he went on and on about his fucking engagement party.

“Don't feel like celebrating, do you?” Diego said close behind me when I stopped at my car.

I turned, narrowing my eyes. “Neither did you.”

“I don't like the idea of anyone getting into my sister's panties.”

A new wave of insane fury raced through me. “Michel-fucking-angelo won't get into Gem's panties or anywhere near them.”

Diego's expression made it clear that he'd taunted me to get exactly that reaction. I took a step closer to him. “You know Gemma doesn't want to marry Mick. If he wasn't so infatuated, he'd realize it too.”

“He was the best option. She needs to be promised at her age. Why do you even care, Savio? It's not like you seemed to give a fuck when I told you we were looking for someone.”

“I do care now, and I tell you that Gemma won't marry Mick, got it?”

Diego shook his head. “It's too late. She needs to be promised, that's just how it is. Unless you decide to marry after all?”

I scoffed and Diego's expression darkened. “Then there's nothing you can do, Savio. Whatever you want from Gemma, you can't have it. Not unless there's a ring with your name on her finger.”

I glared. A ring with my name. Marriage. Did I really want that?

He shrugged and turned to head toward his car. “I hope you’ll enjoy seeing the bloody sheets after Mick and Gemma’s wedding night.”

What the fuck? I advanced on him, grabbed him by the arm and shoved him into the car. He didn’t even bother fighting me off, only grinned mirthlessly.

“I’m going to kill him before I’ll allow that to happen, Diego. If I have to, I’ll kill you, too.”

“Fuck you, Savio. You have to make a decision, and you better make it quick. Because once we’ve officially celebrated the engagement, there’s no going back. How much are you willing to do to get my sister?”

He shoved me away and got into his car, then drove off, giving me the finger.

How much was I willing to do for Gemma?

I’d cut a few of my goddamn fingers off to get my hands on her, but marriage? Damn. No matter the price, I’d pay it, only to be the first in Gemma’s panties.



I drove back home in record time, sending pebbles flying everywhere as I hit the brakes right in front of the entrance.

Lights came on in Nino’s wing. I stormed toward the front door, pushed it open then went in search of Remo. It was a few minutes past midnight, so I doubted he was in bed unless he fucked Serafina.

I found him in the common area, staring at his laptop. When he spotted me, his eyes narrowed, and he put the laptop aside. “I don’t like your expression.”

I stopped right in front of him, panting as if I’d run a marathon, but my racing pulse and throbbing heartbeat had nothing to do with physical exertion. “We have a problem.”

Remo leaned back, regarding me closely. “A ‘I have to kill someone problem’?”

I didn't want to kill Mick, or Diego.

That wasn't true. I wanted to kill Mick, but I shouldn't, but I would kill him if we didn't find another solution. "That's something I'd like to avoid."

I had Remo's full attention now. Killing was his favorite pastime and I too enjoyed to spill our enemies' blood. "Spill."

"Gemma was promised to Mick. She's supposed to marry him when she turns eighteen."

The keen look disappeared at once and was replaced by annoyance. "I don't see why that's my concern. My men handle their family matters. I told them when I became Capo that I didn't want to be involved in their fucking match-making. They don't need my blessing to barter their children away."

"It's your concern because I want Gemma, and I don't give a fuck what I'll have to do to get her."

Remo got up and tilted his head in contemplation. Remo managed to make you feel like an insect under the microscope when he regarded you like that. The worst thing was that he always saw more than you wanted him to see. It was his special skill, that and being a twisted, brutal fucker who loved to torture people. "Why didn't Daniele arrange a marriage with you then, if you want her?"

"I didn't say I wanted her. He mentioned he was looking for a husband for her, but..."

"But you didn't want to cage your fucking bull in," Remo said with a nod toward my groin. His twisted smile stirred the rage in my insides once more, but a fight with my brother was the last thing I needed.

"I thought I had time."

"She's sixteen, Savio. Don't play dumb. You know that girls are often promised way before then, especially in traditional families like Gemma's. That they waited this long is already unusual."

I made a non-committal noise. I knew why they'd waited this long because they'd thought I might throw my hat in the ring. "I need to have her."

“You need to have her so you can fuck her, boost your ego and then discard her. Or you need to have her—”

I interrupted him. “I want her as my wife. It’s the only way I can have her at all.”

Remo looked close to laughter, a far more unsettling sight than him covered in the bowels of his enemies. “You want to marry?”

Could he have sounded any more shocked?

“Is that so hard to believe?”

Remo walked past me and toward the liquor cabinet. “I think that requires alcohol.”

“Come on, stop being dramatic. If you can be a husband, it should be a piece of cake for me. A few years ago, you loathed the idea of marriage, now you’re making a marriage work as if it was nothing. You’re a father for fuck’s sake.”

Remo poured a generous amount of whiskey into two glasses then held one out to me. Rolling my eyes, I went over to him and accepted the drink. I could use some alcohol. Today’s news had been a shock to my system.

Nino appeared in the room, only dressed in underpants, regarding us with a suspicious expression. When it had been only my brothers and me in the mansion, most of us hadn’t even bothered with clothing. “What’s going on? You woke the boys and Kiara with your rude entry.”

Remo grabbed another glass, and filled that too. “You should have a drink.”

Nino accepted the glass. “What are we toasting?”

“That Savio wants to put his bull on a leash.”

I sent Remo a scathing look, which he answered with his twisted grin.

“What exactly does that mean?” Nino asked in mild curiosity.

“He wants to marry.”

“Gemma Bazzoli, I assume.”

I downed the rest of the whiskey, annoyed that my brothers could look through me as if I was a glass figurine. “You are a

fucking know-it-all, aren't you?"

"Did you ask for her hand?"

I grimaced. "No. Until recently, I didn't really consider marriage a valid option."

Nino regarded me as if I was a curious specimen worth studying. "And what changed?"

"She was promised to another man, Michelangelo."

"Carlucci's second son," Nino stated. "And one of your best friends."

That was true. Diego and Mick were pretty much my only friends, except for my brothers. Finding people that you could trust if your name was Falcone was close to impossible. "He won't marry Gemma. I don't care what I'll have to do to make her mine."

"The Carluccis and the Bazzolis are loyal families," Nino drawled. "Offending them would come with a price. Our soldiers respect us because we're just. If we force the Bazzoli girl into a marriage with you despite her engagement to Michelangelo, that could lead to dispute among our men."

Remo nodded. Usually, he didn't give a fuck about other people, but as cruel and twisted as he was, he took care of his men. "Nino's got a point. We have to handle this carefully, or this could snowball into something very ugly, all because you were too horny to make up your mind in time."

"Gemma wants to marry me, not Mick, that's something you should keep in mind, and let's be honest, her family will throw a fucking party if Gemma becomes a Falcone."

"Are you sure the girl really still wants you? Maybe she'll hold your man-whoring ways against you, not to mention that you didn't bother asking for her hand when she wasn't promised to another."

I glared at my brothers. They always knew how to make me feel like a stupid boy again. "Gemma still wants me, believe me."

"Be that as it may, we need to figure out a way to break her engagement to Michelangelo without causing discord."

"Mick wants her. He won't go quietly."

“Challenge him,” Remo said. “During one of the public training sessions. Challenge him in a cage fight for Gemma’s hand. In front of fellow soldiers, he’d lose face if he didn’t agree to the fight. Make the girl be there as well. If he’s got the hots for her, he’ll try to impress her.”

I considered that. There was only one problem. “Mick knows he doesn’t stand a chance against me in a cage. I’ll wipe the floor with his sorry ass. Why would he agree to a fight he can only lose? He already has Gemma in the bag after all.”

“Tell him you’ll fight him a day after your big fight. You’ll be sore and tired fighting this close together. Have Diego and Daniele be there as well. Mick would be considered a coward if he didn’t accept your challenge.”

“All right. This sounds like it could actually work,” I said, smirking.

“Nothing to be smug about,” Remo growled. “Because of your fucking dickheadedness, we’ll have to offend a loyal family. That’s nothing that should happen again, so you better go through with this wedding once you’ve won the girl’s hand, or I’ll personally castrate you.”

“Don’t worry. Gemma will be mine.”

NINE



Gemma

The next day, Dad joined Diego and me on our way to the gym. Apparently, Remo wanted to check the fitness level of his men and had invited several of them over to train with him and his brothers. It had happened before. Dad always said that Remo had made the Camorra strong by making his men strong and keeping them that way. The man despised laziness and weakness and expected his men to stay sharp and in shape.

I'd almost backed out. It wasn't like I was required to be there, even if today was my usual training day. Deep down, I was scared of facing Savio after I'd been promised to Mick. I was worried about the feelings his presence would evoke in me and absolutely terrified of realizing that he couldn't care less that I was promised to another man. Diego had mentioned that Savio knew about the upcoming engagement, but he hadn't been forthcoming about anything else. That could only mean that Savio didn't care that I was as good as engaged. Savio had so many girls at his disposal, all of them beautiful and not bound by restricting traditions, why would he waste a second thought on me?

Dad looked almost worried when we headed for the gym. "It's been a while for me. I haven't had much time to work out these last two months."

"You'll be fine, Dad," Diego said, slanting me a concerned look when we walked into the gym. It was already filled with many soldiers Diego's age but also a few men who were over

forty like Dad. Over to the right, there was Mick with his father and older brother.

Mick still looked as if he was on cloud nine. I avoided looking directly at him. I simply couldn't meet his eyes, because across the room, standing among his brothers was Savio, and he commanded my attention as usual. Tall, muscled, with his arms crossed in that casual way, and an air of absolute confidence. I tore my eyes away from him too. Seeing him hurt in a way I couldn't explain—a pressure in my chest that increased with every passing moment.

I hurried toward the locker room, already regretting that I had come along. From this day onward, I wouldn't work out with Savio. I couldn't take his presence, not anymore. Stumbling into the sweat-soaked air of the locker room, I tried to breathe, but the pressure on my chest made that difficult. As the only girl, the men waited outside while I changed, which allowed me to brave my freak-out without prying eyes.

With shaking fingers, I fumbled with the buttons of my jeans, popping open one after the other. If only it were this easy to release the pressure in my chest. A knock sounded, startling me out of my breakdown.

Before I could shout a warning, the door swung open and Savio slipped in. His eyes slid down the length of my body, lingering on my open jeans and my plain white cotton panties peeking out. Horrified, I whirled around. "Savio! What are you doing here? Get out!" My cheeks throbbed with embarrassment, and worse: excitement, because the second it had taken me before I'd turned around, my eyes had memorized every detail of Savio's body. I didn't think I'd ever grow tired of admiring the hard planes of his chest. As vain as Savio was, and he was one of the vainest guys I'd ever met, his muscles were the result of fighting, meant to make him invincible in the cage. They weren't just pretty decoration.

"Calm down, Kitty. I only saw a tiny bit of your panties, nothing to get them in a bunch over."

"I'm promised to Mick. I can't be alone with you. That's inappropriate," I said, and my voice shook the slightest bit. I straightened my spine, but my muscles didn't stop trembling. The image of the tips of horns had teased me from beneath Savio's

low sweatpants. That stupid tattoo would definitely haunt my dreams.

Silence fell between us, then warmth ghosted over my back—Savio standing so close that I could feel his presence everywhere. I swallowed. “You need to leave.”

Then why didn’t I sound like I wanted that?

“Won’t you face me?”

Bracing myself, I turned around to him, clutching my jeans.

Savio noticed and smiled in that annoying way.

Anger took hold of me at his audacity. Did he think he could pretend I wasn’t promised to another man? “Maybe you didn’t understand what I said. I’m promised to your friend Mick now. We’re going to marry. You can’t be alone with me.”

Savio tilted his head. “Tell me one thing, Kitty, and be honest, do you want to marry Mick?”

“We’re not having that discussion.” I shook my head, glaring. What did it matter? Was this some kind of game to him? “I’m promised to him, Savio. It doesn’t matter if I want to marry him or not. Once I turn eighteen, I’ll become his wife.”

“It matters to me.” He leaned down, bringing us impossibly close, his eyes piercing me with their intent. “Now answer my question, do you want to marry him?”

“I don’t know why you think you have any right to ask me this question, much less demand an answer from me. You are my brother’s friend, nothing else.”

Savio took another step closer, forcing me to back away or we would have touched. My calves hit the wooden bench, stopping me from retreating farther. I tensed and narrowed my eyes at him.

“Answer my question, Kitty, or I’ll make you, and I know you don’t want that.”

A shiver passed down my spine. That wasn’t the promise of pain or torture, that was the promise of something else that scared me even more in our current situation.

I brought my palms up against his chest and shoved hard, but Savio anticipated my move and didn't as much as twitch. He grabbed my arms and pulled me against him, so my breasts, thankfully still covered by a bra and shirt, smacked against his very naked chest. I gasped. I'd never been this close to a man, unless you counted the few times during fight training, but then the moment had never lasted long.

"Stop," I croaked. "Stop it now."

"Just answer my question," he said in a low voice that reminded me who he was. The Falcones had claimed power like an unstoppable force for a reason. You couldn't resist their brutal charisma. Least of all, I. Savio's charm was like a drug to my system.

"I don't want to marry Mick, and you know that very well!" I pressed out and ripped away from his hold. "Now leave."

Savio's expression almost brought me to my knees. "You won't marry Mick then. We both know who it is you really want to wed."

I couldn't believe him. "The guy I might have wanted didn't care enough to ask for my hand, so now I'll marry the guy who had the guts to marry me."

"You won't marry Mick. You will be mine."

I blinked, stunned by the possessiveness in his voice, and momentarily worried that my mind was making this up. He'd never as much as hinted to being interested in me—at least not more than his usual interest in anything with breasts.

"It's too late," I said, sounding strong even as my heart broke. Why couldn't he have shown this kind of desire for me before, when my father was looking for a husband? Now I was stuck with Mick.

He smirked. The smirk that made me want to hit him—and worse: kiss him. He leaned down. "Oh Kitty, I will own you, even if I have to shove my knife into his fucking heart."

Own me? Even as indignation rose up in me, those words had another effect: they sent a surprising thrill through my body.

He turned and left the room. I didn't want to get my hopes up. Backing out of an engagement was bad taste, even if there hadn't

been an official engagement and I wasn't wearing Mick's ring yet. Even Savio was bound to our rules, wasn't he?

I quickly changed into workout clothes, long sweatpants, and a T-shirt because Dad would throw a fit if I wore anything that showed too much skin, and headed out. My stomach was in knots as I found myself once more on the precipice of hope.

The moment I entered the gym, my eyes sought Savio. He gave me a smirk across the room, ignoring the way Diego was killing him with his gaze. I walked toward my brother and Dad.

Savio looked sure of himself, but I couldn't see how he could possibly make this work. He glanced toward Remo who gave a small nod.

Savio cleared his throat, drawing the attention toward himself.

Dread crowded my stomach. Oh no, what was he going to do? Maybe he didn't care about his reputation, but I did—and so did my family. What if he insinuated that I'd slept with him or stated it outright? That would force Mick to break off our bond at once, his family wouldn't tolerate me. Everyone would believe it, no matter how traditional my upbringing. I wanted to marry Savio but not at this price, especially because this was all his fault. He should be the one to pay the price for the mess. His reputation definitely wouldn't suffer if it made the rounds that he'd gotten me into bed. The list of his conquests was already embarrassingly long anyway.

“Daniele, it's come to my attention that you intend to promise your daughter Gemma to Michelangelo.”

Technically, I was already promised, it wasn't just planned, but I definitely wouldn't voice my thoughts. Dad frowned, his worried gaze sliding from Savio to me. His eyes held questions. I knew what he was dreading: that I had ruined myself, that I'd let Savio have what my husband was supposed to be gifted. How could he even entertain the thought? He knew me.

“I hope you'll reconsider your choice and give me the chance to fight for the right to your daughter's hand.”

Fight for me?

Stunned silence descended on the room like a heavy drape. Heat shot into my head at the wave of attention heading my way. Mick looked as if someone had hit him over the head with a baseball bat. His face turned red, if from anger or embarrassment, I couldn't say. His father didn't look as angry as I would have thought, but given his expression when he'd seen our modest house, he was probably glad for the chance to get rid of me.

"Fight for my daughter's hand?" Dad voiced my confusion.

Savio nodded. "The Camorra is strong because we value true strength over descent. We reward ambition and strength because our Capo, my brother, abides by a rule that's held true from beginning of time: the law of the strongest and survival of the fittest."

His voice was firm and confident, his expression fierce. No hint of doubt or insecurity reflected in any part of Savio's appearance. A Falcone through and through, and damn him, it had an effect on me—and on the rest of the people in attendance. Savio could capture an audience like his brother Remo.

Savio only looked at my father, not once at Mick, me or anyone else. He knew who he had to convince first. "I'd like to fight Michelangelo for Gemma. The winner of the cage fight will get her as his wife."

This was barbaric and old-fashioned, but it sent my stomach into a riot.

"This is ridiculous!" Mick said.

Dad met my gaze and leaned down. "Is there something I should know, angelo mio? I've put a lot of trust in you when I allowed you to learn to fight. I hope you didn't break it."

My eyes widened. "Of course not, Dad."

"I was always with her anyway," Diego added, which wasn't exactly true. There had been moments when Savio and I had been alone, never long periods of time, but probably enough to do the deed if my research was accurate.

"My first kiss is going to happen in church on my wedding day," I said firmly.

Diego lowered his voice another notch. "You should agree to Savio's suggestion, Dad."

I could have hugged him, but I tried to keep my face as neutral as possible with everyone watching.

“Haven’t we moved on from street brawls and duels?” Mick’s brother butted in, even though their father remained silent. He was the ruling Captain, so his reaction was the one we had to worry about. And he was definitely in favor of letting this play out.

“What do you say, Daniele? Gemma is your daughter, and it’s your right to decide over her future.”

Dad looked at Remo. “What do you say, Capo?”

Remo shook his head. “This is for you to decide. I don’t get involved in family matters. But it is true what my brother said, I honor strength over anything else.” His harsh gaze settled on Mick who squirmed visibly under the force of it. “This is your chance to prove yourself to your fellow Camorrista and show my brother his place.”

“I would be open to the suggestion,” Dad said.

Giddiness spread in me. There was no way Mick could ever beat Savio. I’d seen Savio in the cage. I had fought with him. He couldn’t be beaten by anyone but his brothers.

Mick’s fists were curled at his side as Savio stalked toward him. “What do you say, Michelangelo?” The challenge in Savio’s voice caused Mick’s face to turn even redder.

“I think we should ask Gemma if she’s okay with being fought over like a trophy,” Mick said, seeking my gaze.

I froze. This wasn’t about him giving me a real choice. He hadn’t really cared about my opinion when he’d asked my father for my hand without consulting with me first. This was his attempt to save his pride.

Still, guilt filled me, knowing I had to crush his heart. No matter how much Savio’s self-assured smile made me want to make him pay, I wouldn’t give up the chance to become his wife. I could still make him suffer thoroughly once we were engaged and suffer he would for this ordeal. Everyone was watching, waiting, and I tore my eyes away from Mick and Savio to look at Dad, like a good daughter would do. “If my father is open for the suggestion, then I’ll follow his judgment.”



I had to stifle a smile at Gemma's played demureness. As if this wasn't what she'd been praying for. I got it, though. She didn't want to hurt Mick's feelings. He looked butt hurt and pissed. Maybe I really should have had qualms doing this, but it was the only option, and he should be glad he got off this easy. Because I would have definitely killed him before watching him take Gemma into a room for their wedding night. If anyone popped that cherry, it was going to be me.

"Then it's settled?" Remo asked with his usual impatience, one dark eyebrow raised at Mick. He still looked like he wanted to refuse this fight. However, with everyone watching and in front of his Capo, he would have lost his face.

He nodded, then sought his father's gaze as if he was hoping the man would come to his aid, but he seemed content to let go of Gemma. That didn't really come as a surprise. The Carlucci women threw more money out of the window for clothes than some European monarchs. Mick needed to marry someone who came with a wad of cash to fund his sisters' and mother's expensive taste.



A few of the men began sparring, but Mick cornered me before I could go talk to Daniele and Diego, and most importantly, to Gemma.

His skin was still flushed, and he looked angrier than I'd ever seen him. He was usually a chilled guy. Not much for conflict or

violence unless absolutely required. “You are an asshole, Savio. Did you begrudge me getting a girl before you for once?”

“You would have never gotten her if I’d been in the play.”

“You could have asked for her hand, why didn’t you?”

“Are you telling me you aren’t man enough to face me in the cage, Michelangelo?” I asked quietly.

Mick and I had been friends for years, never as close as Diego and I, but losing his friendship wasn’t something I risked lightly. But fuck, Gemma was worth it.

“That’s not the point. I agreed, didn’t I? But you are playing dirty. As a Falcone, you know you have to win.”

“I’m not playing, Michelangelo. I’m going to beat you in a fair fight. The only reason why my name matters is because fighting runs in our blood, it’s ingrained in our nature. I don’t fear pain, or a brutal fight, never have, never will. Can you say the same?”

He scoffed.

“We both know she wants me, not you, Mick.”

He didn’t say anything, only glared. It was the truth. He knew it as well as I did. I didn’t get how any man could be excited about marrying a woman who didn’t want him. The idea of spending my life with a wife who thought of something else while I fucked her made my skin crawl. “You could have asked me to back off and give her to you without a fight.”

I raised my eyebrows. “If you’d given her up that easily, you deserve her even less than I thought.” Not to mention that it would have cast a bad light on Gemma if Mick would have broken off the engagement. This way she’d look like a sought-after bachelorette—which she was despite her family’s dismal financial situation. Money wasn’t an issue though. I’d always choose protecting Gemma over saving Mick’s hide. He was a big boy. He could deal. His father would find someone else for him to marry soon enough and then he’d forget about this.

I walked past him, done with the conversation. This discussion would end once and for all in the cage in three days, and after that, the hottest girl in Vegas would be mine.

I approached Gemma, Diego, and Daniele. None of them appeared happy about the situation. “Your interest in my daughter comes as a surprise,” Daniele said, disapproving. “I hope you’re aware of the weight of your decision. This is about marriage.”

I smiled tightly. “I know what’s at stake, don’t worry.” My eyes found Gemma whose cheeks were still pink, but her expression was perfectly controlled.

“Can I have a word with Gemma?”

“No,” Diego snapped. “Not until you’ve won that fight. You can already start practicing patience. You’re going to need it until the wedding.”

“Of course.”

Gemma had been checking me out and she was curious about my bull tattoo. I doubted she’d make me wait until our wedding night to sink myself into her pussy. Diego and Daniele didn’t need to know that though.

She avoided looking at me. I had to stifle a smile at her embarrassment. I couldn’t wait to drive the demureness out of her. In the fighting ring she showed how she could kick ass, I wanted her to be this tough outside of it as well.



“You’re in a sickeningly good mood,” Remo said with a scowl when we settled at the dining room table that evening with the entire family. Only Adamo was still working for Luca in New York, hadn’t even come back for Kiara giving birth to Massimo, nor would he return to celebrate his own birthday with us in a few days.

“How did it go?” Serafina asked before I could say anything. Of course, Remo had told his wife about my plan.

“Are you really going to fight for Gemma’s hand?” Kiara asked wide-eyed while she rocked three-month-old Massimo against her chest. Nino was trying to feed Alessio. Serafina was cutting the spaghetti for Greta while Remo tried to stop Nevio from getting up to play.

Fuck. Only a few years ago, my brothers and I would have spent the evening with pizza, booze, and a few hookers for

entertainment. Now hookers were banned from the mansion, even from my wing. Instead the little monsters started to outnumber us slowly.

“Don’t tell me you’re getting cold feet already?” Serafina taunted me with a knowing expression. She might look like an angel with her blonde hair and fair skin, but she was far from angelic.

I smirked. “Even after winning the fight, that doesn’t mean I’ll have to marry Gemma soon. It only means I’m the one who’s getting her.”

“Her parents probably want her to marry once she turns eighteen,” Nino drawled.

That was in less than two years. Eighteen months to be exact and never going to happen. I heaped spaghetti on my plate, shaking my head. “I’m going to tell Daniele that I want to wait for Gemma to finish college before I marry her. That should give me at least three more years.”

Everyone stared at me as if I’d grown a second head.

“I doubt her family will allow her to go to college, considering it’s not common in traditional families,” Nino said.

“My word’s going to be law once we’re engaged. If I want my fiancée to go to college, then she’s going to go.”

Serafina’s brows shot up. “*You* want to wait five more years to get into a girl’s pants?”

I chuckled. “Nobody said anything about that. I want to wait with marriage, not with sex.”

“Sex!” Nevio shouted, flashing his little devil smile.

Remo narrowed his eyes at me. As if the kid was learning the bad words only from me. He used the words fuck and pussy more often than I did.

“She’s only sixteen,” Kiara said worriedly.

“I realize that,” I said, getting annoyed with their interrogation. “I didn’t say anything about getting into her pants right away. I can wait.”

“Really?” Serafina asked.

“There are enough other girls around who can keep me entertained.”

“Gemma will be ecstatic to hear that, I’m sure.” Serafina’s voice dripped with sarcasm.

It was a miracle that Remo hadn’t throttled his wife by now. She was a piece of work.

“Her upbringing has been traditional. Her family is one of the most traditional in the Camorra. If you coerce the girl to sleep with you before your wedding night, that will cause trouble I’m not in the fucking mood for, get it?” Remo said.

“Nobody has to know. It’s my and Gemma’s business what we do when we’re alone.”

Nino shook his head in disapproval. “You assume she wants to break with her traditions, but that might not be the case.”

“We’ll see.” They hadn’t seen how Gemma looked at me. Maybe her upbringing had been traditional, but her body still functioned like everyone else’s.

“I’m going to say this only once,” Remo said. “Once you win this fight, you’re going to marry that girl, and if you pop her cherry before the wedding night, you better make sure nobody finds out, or I’m going to castrate your bull. Got it?”

I flashed him a grin. His expression remained stone. “Don’t worry.”

“Pop cherry?” Nevio said to Greta, who smiled in return.

Serafina sighed and sent me another scathing look.

“It wasn’t me. You can blame your husband.”

“It’s a waste of time. You two do what you want anyway,” she said.

“That’s right.” And it would stay that way. No engagement or marriage would shackle me down. Gemma was too in love with me to control my life like Serafina and Kiara did with my brothers.

TEN



Gemma

Toni came over the same night. We had too much to discuss handling it over the phone.

“This is so bad boy of him,” Toni whispered, almost beside herself from excitement. I wasn’t even sure who of us was more excited. Toni never liked to fight herself, but watching the cage fights in the Arena, that was her thing. One day she’d follow in her father’s footsteps and manage the Arena, that was clear.

“That’s because he is a bad boy.” I’d only occasionally seen glimpses of his darker side, but it was there and probably scarier than I could even begin to grasp. It didn’t make me want him less though. To be honest, it thrilled me in the most disturbing way.

I glanced toward the open door of my room. Since the Arena incident, I wasn’t allowed to close my door when Toni was over. It was ridiculous. Mom and Dad wouldn’t budge on the subject, though. “Do you know anything about his tattoo?” I asked the question I’d meant to ask forever.

Toni bit her lip, giggling. “You mean the bull?”

I blinked. “A bull?”

Two red blotches appeared on Toni’s cheeks. “I overheard a few girls discussing Savio’s bed habits and they mentioned his bull tattoo. It’s right above his penis.”

Embarrassment crawled up my neck. I’d known Toni all my life, but hearing her talk this easily about Savio’s privates was still too much. “Why a bull?” And why right there?

Toni made a face. “What do you think? Savio’s the cockiest guy on this planet. Or to quote the girls I overheard in the Arena: he’s like a freaking animal in the bed. The best ride of my life!” Toni even imitated the high-pitched voice of the girl and added a Yeehaaw for good measure.

I let out an uncertain laugh. The idea of a girl talking about riding Savio made me furious, and at the same time, had me worried. Everyone knew Savio’s track record with girls. How was I ever going to compare to them?

Toni shoved my shoulder. “Stop looking so glum. Savio Falcone agreed to fight in the cage for your hand. Isn’t that what you’ve been hoping for?”

It was. Even if I’d wished he’d made up his mind sooner to spare Mick and me the drama, I had to admit that I was excited about the fight. It was the first time I was allowed to see an actual cage fight by a Falcone. Dad could hardly refuse to let me see the fight that determined my future.

“Will you get engaged right away?”

I shrugged. I wasn’t sure how things would be handled with Savio. Mick and my engagement would have taken place in a couple of months, probably in a big feast. “I don’t know. Before yesterday, Savio never once talked about marriage with me.”

“I can’t imagine Savio as a husband. Do you really think he can be faithful? He changes girls as often as his underwear.”

“He’d better be. I won’t tolerate infidelity.”

Toni looked doubtful. “I’m sure once you’re married, he’ll behave... but I don’t think he’ll give up his man-whoring ways before he gets it from you.”

“He won’t get anything before we’re married,” I muttered.

Toni gave me a look. She’d never understood our traditions.



I tugged at my curls. Why was I so nervous? It wasn’t me who had to fight, and I wasn’t worried about the outcome of the fight either. Savio would win. Mick stood absolutely no chance against

him, even if Savio had fought in the cage against a strong opponent only yesterday.

A knock sounded and Mom poked her head in, taking in my outfit. I had insisted to choose what I wore today. I knew I'd be the center of attention, even if it wasn't a public fight in the Arena. Only other Camorrista and the involved families were allowed to attend.

I'd chosen a dress because even on a day like this, jeans wouldn't fly with Mom or Dad, but it was the least modest I owned, hugging my waist and chest, but ending in a flowing skirt that reached my knees. I'd even straightened my natural curls, only to turn them into more controlled, shiny curls with my curling iron.

"You look beautiful, love," Mom said as she walked in and hugged me. "Two men fighting over you, it's something else..."

I laughed dryly. "Yeah."

If word got out, and word would get out at some point, the stares in school would increase tenfold.

"Just promise me to keep an open mind for either outcome."

Mom didn't know anything about fighting, or Savio. There was only one realistic outcome. I nodded anyway.

"We need to go," Dad called.

Mom kissed my cheek. "Have fun."

"You're not coming?"

She touched her belly with an apologetic smile. "You know how queasy I get with blood, and the hormones only make it worse."

"Gemma! We're going to be late!" Diego shouted.

I kissed Mom's cheek, grabbed my purse and rushed downstairs where Dad, Diego, and Nonna were waiting for me. Surprise shot through me.

"Don't look so shocked, bambina," Nonna said with a rough laugh. She'd been smoking in secret ever since Grandpa's death and it was unmistakable.

"Are you sure you can handle it?" I asked.

“Your nonna is made of steel,” Dad said, touching her shoulder.

Diego and Dad sat in the front, while Nonna and I shared the backseat. She took my hand during the drive. I knew she probably favored Mick because his family was more traditional, but I was glad for her support.



Roger’s Arena was more crowded than I’d thought it’d be. Dozens of eyes followed me as my family and I headed for one of the booths close to the fighting cage.

Toni hurried our way, smiling. She pulled me into a tight embrace. “You look like you want to run,” she whispered before she released me.

Part of me wanted to run away, but the other, bigger part longed to see Savio’s fight.

“Do you have to work?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Dad hired two new waitresses, so I can watch the fight with you.” She turned to my family. “Hello, Mrs. Bazzoli, Daniele, Diego.” Her eyes halted on my brother and for once, he didn’t look like she was a fly he wanted to swat away. Toni was eye-catching with her long straight brown hair and those huge brown eyes, not to mention her tall, willowy model figure.

We all slipped into the booth.

Remo stepped out of the changing room and silence fell over the bar. “The fight begins in five minutes.” He didn’t say more, didn’t explain, only briefly nodded toward my father then toward Mick’s family who sat on the other side of the Arena.

Mick was the first who came out of the changing room. I’d never seen him in anything but street clothes. Now he wore only fighting shorts and flip-flops. Maybe he was worried about touching the floor with his bare feet. He wasn’t very tanned, his Italian heritage definitely less prominent than with me, and tall and lanky with only the hint of lean muscle. A small scar marred his left arm and the Camorra tattoo flashed on his other. His eyes found me.

I didn't look away. I owed him that much, but I couldn't bring myself to give him more than a small smile. Everyone was watching. I could feel the force of their gazes on my skin, making it itch.

Then everything faded into the background because the door to the changing room opened again.

Savio prowled out of it. He oozed confidence and lethal determination. My eyes took him in, every inch of his body. One look at him and everyone knew there could be only one winner tonight: Savio Falcone.

He was tanned, tall, but not in a lanky way. Savio was well-proportioned male-perfection. He was pure muscle. Not in the bulky way of some bodybuilders whose muscles made them immobile. Savio's muscles were of the agile, functional kind, meant to make him strong and fast, lethal and attractive.

Scars littered his chest and arms, marks of a struggle for power, and the absolute will to defend it. They adorned his body like battle trophies, which he proudly presented to the world. Only two scars were covered up by the inked artwork his brother had created: the cuts on his wrists.

My gaze lingered on the tips of horns peeking out of his waistband, marking the very edge of his delicious V. I felt the unreasonable urge to tug his shorts lower to see more of that infamous bull.

Savio climbed into the cage without deigning me with a single look, but then before he faced Mick, his dark eyes hit me.

He was sure of his victory, sure of his prize: me.

He was willing to fight for me, to bleed for me. For that fact alone, I already belonged to him.



Gemma's lips were slightly parted as she stared back at me. Her lips were pouty without ever having seen a single hyaluronic needle. For a long time, I'd tried to not look at her too closely. She'd been too young—was still too young—and she was Diego's sister, but her gorgeousness was impossible to miss now. Not to mention that this girl could kick ass. She didn't cry when she suffered a hard hit. She only wanted to improve.

She was going to be mine. She already was.

I turned to Mick who stood with his arms crossed and a grim expression, trying to appear unaffected. Tilting my head, I scanned him. Crossing arms was a good way to hide anxiety-induced shaking. Remo closed the door of the cage with a clang and the slightest flinch passed Mick's body.

He worked out with me and Diego on occasion, but he preferred the boxing bag to sparring. Problem was, the boxing bag never hit you back. You could only improve if you paid for a wrong move or lack of attention with a punch and the resulting pain.

I considered taunting him like I usually did with my opponents before a fight to rile them up, but eventually, I settled on a nod.

“Fight until surrender!” Remo announced, then. “Go!”

I raised my fists and Mick quickly did the same.

He was trying to put up a decent fight. I had to give it to him. I didn't go as hard on him as I did with my other opponents. He didn't get through my defenses and every time his punch or kick met my resistance, my own counterstrike landed painfully. Frustration flashed across his face followed by embarrassment when the crowd called for me to finish it. It being him.

“I kissed Gemma before you,” he hissed. For a moment, my blinding fury distracted me, but my forearms moved up in time to block his angry shove. What kind of fucking move was that supposed to be? Kindergarteners shoved each other. My back collided with the cage and I used the momentum to push my body off and do a high kick against his chest, done with playing nice. My foot smashed against his sternum.

The air whooshed out of him and he hit the ground like a brick, chest heaving, face turning red as he was trying to breathe.

I straddled him, gripped his throat and got into his face. “How about you tell the fucking truth now, Mick? Gemma would have never kissed you, unless you forced a kiss on her, so either you molested her, or you’re a liar. What is it?”

I loosened my hold on his throat so he could speak.

“I lied.”

“Fuck you,” I growled. “Now surrender.”

He hit the ground with his flat palm, and I released him then straightened. Standing over him, I shook my head, disgusted. He’d given up too quickly. He’d tried to play dirty, which I could have dealt with if he hadn’t dragged Gemma into it.

Mick stayed flat on his back, his eyes closed.

Applause rose in the Arena and Remo appeared beside me. He grabbed my arm, raising it above my head.

My eyes sought Gemma. She was standing just like the rest of the spectators. Her eyes were huge, her face flushed with excitement. I’d won many fights, but this was definitely the best victory yet. Everyone looking her way could see that this was the outcome she’d wished for. Our eyes met and she controlled her expression—too late.

One corner of my mouth twitched up. My girl.

Remo released my arm, bringing my attention back into the cage. Mick was sitting up slowly, obviously still struggling to breathe from my kick. I held out my hand for him to take so I could pull him up. He pushed my hand away. I took a step back, sneering. Did he really think this behavior was earning him any bonus points in front of fellow Camorrista?

Remo extended his hand and Mick took that one, then he turned back to me. His lower lip was burst. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I thought we were friends. Guess I was wrong."

"You wanted the wrong girl, Mick. That's all. Get over it and we can be friends."

"You didn't want her for so long that her family arranged a marriage with me. Gemma would be better off with me. You can't keep it in your pants, Savio."

"If you want to continue this argument, do it in the changing room," Remo ordered.

Mick nodded and climbed out of the cage then hurried toward the changing rooms. Remo clapped my shoulder, but his eyes held warning. "You got what you wanted. I hope you'll still want it in a few years because this is until death do us part."

I answered his twisted grin with my own. "I'm a grown man, Remo. Gemma is and will be mine till the bitter end."

"I'm not worried about her being yours. No one with half a brain will touch a Falcone woman. But she might want you to be hers too, remember that."

ELEVEN



Gemma

My heart pounded in my chest, watching the fight, as if I was the one in the cage. Every muscle in my body taut with anticipation, with breathless expectation and almost delirious hope.

I had to admit seeing Savio fight for me was more thrilling than I'd ever admit aloud. It was primal and brutal, and incredibly sexy. I'd seen Savio fight Diego often enough to tell that he could have sent Mick to the floor within the first ten seconds, but he didn't want to embarrass him completely.

Until suddenly fury distorted Savio's expression and he sent Mick to the floor with an amazing kick against the chest. The crowd let out a simultaneous gasp at the sound of the body's impact. I jerked to my feet like everyone around me, my pulse galloping wildly.

"Ouch," Toni groaned. "You're crushing my hand."

I released her. I hadn't even realized I was clutching her hand in a death grip. "Sorry," I whispered, never taking my eyes off the cage where Savio was straddling Mick and holding him by the throat. Come on, surrender, Mick. Do yourself the favor of ending this, and do me the favor.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Mick hammered his hand against the floor, signaling surrender. I released a harsh breath.

Toni kissed my cheek. "You get your dream boy."

Savio was mine. After all the years of fawning over him from afar, he was finally mine.

Noticing Diego's gaze, I turned to him. He wasn't smiling.

His negativity would only ruin the moment, so I turned away and was met with Savio's intense stare.

He stood in the cage, covered in sweat and Mick's blood, because I hadn't seen Mick land a single direct hit, staring at me. Without saying a word, without his ring on my finger, without an official engagement that look alone claimed me as his.

My stomach warmed and my core tightened in a way it never had, with a want that stunned and terrified me.

Finally, he looked away, setting me free.

"I need to catch some fresh air," I said in a rush. In truth, I only needed a moment to myself so I could really let the situation sink in. It still felt too surreal to be true. Too good.

"I'll come with you," Diego said at once.

I shook my head, seeking Toni's gaze. "I can go. And we're only in the backyard, so nothing's going to happen."

Diego exchanged a look with Dad. Then he stood. "I'm coming."

Dad pushed to his feet as well. "I'll have a talk with Remo and later with Savio."

I nodded, only half-listening. For some reason, I suddenly felt as if I couldn't breathe. Diego put a hand on my back and gently nudged me forward. I lightly leaned against him, not even sure why. People were watching me. I wasn't sure where Savio was and I was almost relieved that I wasn't caught up in his stare as well.

With Diego at my side, we pushed through the drinking and talking Camorrista quickly until we reached the door behind the bar and then the deserted corridor. Commotion came from the kitchen and I walked farther down to an even quieter spot. There I leaned against the wall and took a deep breath. So much had happened these last few days. It was mind-boggling.

Diego leaned right beside me, staring down at me with quiet scrutiny. "I thought you'd be happy."

I was happy, ridiculously happy, and yet, I couldn't really give in to that light-hearted feeling. Maybe because after all these years and after thinking it wouldn't happen, I finally had what I wanted all along. I would marry Savio.

The promise that silly ten-year-old Gemma had given herself, it was going to become reality. "Are you?" I asked Diego instead of answering his question.

He frowned. "Happy?"

"Yeah."

I tilted my head to the side, my temple against the cool wall, and studied my brother. For as long as I could remember, he'd protected me, mostly from non-existing dangers, but still. Strangely enough, I wanted his approval, wanted him to be happy for me.

"Can't say that I am."

"Why? Because you're worried I'll take Savio from you?" I didn't think it was that.

Diego snorted. "We're not attached to the hip. You make it sound like we're in some kind of twisted bromance."

I laughed. "You spent a lot of time together. You used to."

A hint of regret passed Diego's face. "It pissed me off how he chased one girl after the other, especially because I knew you wanted him to ask for your hand."

"You were angry because of me."

"Of course, Gemma, what do you think?" He shook his head. "And the reason why I'm not happy is because I don't think Savio deserves you. Not the way he's been acting and certainly will keep acting until you're married and maybe even..." He trailed off.

"He'll have to change his ways now that we're engaged."

Diego sighed and touched the top of my head. "I doubt that's going to happen."

The door to the bar swung open and Savio stepped into the corridor, still only in his fight shorts and barefoot. He stalked

toward us, causing Diego to straighten and narrow his eyes in full protector mode.

The butterflies in my belly fluttered wildly when Savio stopped beside me.

“Give us a moment,” Savio said.

“I don’t think so.”

“Back off, Diego. I talked to your dad. He wants a word with you and Remo.”

Diego stepped very close to Savio. “I warn you. You won the fight and my sister’s hand, but that doesn’t entitle you to anything else. She’s sixteen and not your wife.”

“I’ll behave,” Savio said.

Diego gave me a questioning look. Maybe I should have asked him to stay, but I wanted a moment alone with Savio, no matter how it might make me look. Before he left, Diego leaned down to my ear, whispering. “Savio is a sweet talker. Don’t forget our values.”

He straightened and strode away, banging the door with more force than necessary.

“Let me guess, he warned you off my deviant ways?”

My eyes lingered on his arrogant smile, and sweet talker or not, I could have danced from joy over becoming his wife.

I quickly turned my back to him, clearing my throat. “People might wonder what we’re doing here all alone. I should probably return to my family.” My voice was embarrassingly breathless, a nervous flutter my vocal cords only produced when Savio was around. I didn’t want him to know how happy his victory made me, but my body made hiding my emotions near impossible. His ego certainly didn’t need another boost.

“Now you’re mine, Kitty.” Heat radiated off his body, covered my back in a delicious cocoon as his shadow fell over me. The scent of manly sweat mingled with blood and Savio’s very own enticing aroma. His hot breath dusted my bare shoulder blade as he leaned down. “Every inch of that beautiful skin.” He pressed a light kiss to my shoulder, catching me off guard. Instead of telling him off, my body flushed with heat and the

familiar butterflies that only Savio could create fluttered in my belly. Maybe this kiss was the reason why Mom usually insisted that I wore sleeved dresses.

Savio gripped my hips and turned me around to him. “Won’t you congratulate me? After all, I won you.”

You had me all along.

I stared stubbornly at his naked chest, at the display of muscle there, at the blood and sweat making him look like a warrior straight out of my darkest fantasies.

Savio nudged my chin up. My cheeks were burning because, damn him, I could have jumped him right then. Our eyes met and he let out a harsh breath. He bent down, his expression so full of possessiveness that I shivered again. Savio shook his head. “If you keep looking at me like that, waiting until marriage isn’t going to happen, Gem.”

I licked my dry lips, and his eyes became even darker. He cupped the side of my head. “I know you want your first kiss to happen in church,” he rasped, his lips brushing my cheek then the corner of my mouth before he moved down to my throat and pressed a firm kiss to my skin. My body leaned into the touch, unable to resist. His words registered, but their importance was momentarily lost on me, feeling him so close, his lips against my skin. It wasn’t me who pulled away.

Savio straightened, shaking his head as if he was trying to get rid of a spell. “Kitty, you make sweet sixteen very difficult to resist.”

I should have said something, anything, but I was tongue-tied.



Gemma was frozen, lips parted. Diego always complained that she never stopped talking until she got her will, but with me, her stubborn streak rarely came out. Her head was still slightly tilted, her smooth neck exposed like her shoulder. Both spots beckoned to be kissed. I had already done both, however, when I should really stay away.

Like my brothers I wasn't a rule player. What did I care about laws or traditions? Yet, Gemma's frozen state showed how overwhelmed she was, how young and inexperienced. When I'd been sixteen, I had been a far cry from innocent. I'd slept with women far older, and they definitely hadn't taken advantage of me.

Scruples hit me rarely. They weren't really ingrained in my family's DNA, but making a move on Gemma, knowing that she might let me go further because she was too overwhelmed, would have felt wrong.

Now that I knew she'd be mine, *was mine*, I felt entitled to protect her.

"Come on. I should return you to your father. Don't want to start on the wrong foot with my future father-in-law."

A smile bloomed on her face. "When's our engagement going to be?"

Touching her back, I led her toward the bar. "We'll see." I had no intention of celebrating a big engagement party any time soon. Now that I had secured Gemma, there really was no rush. I didn't want word to get out that I was taken. It would lead to more unpleasant discussions with the girls I fucked, and I really didn't need that.

Gemma's smile dropped and she didn't say anything. Diego stood off to the side with his father and Nonna, a pissed as fuck expression on his face. I led her that way and smiled.

Nonna didn't crack a smile. She was eyeing me like Lucifer personified. I had to stifle laughter. She'd liked me all right until now. I'd get her back on my side with my charm soon enough.

Diego and Daniele would be harder nuts to crack, no doubt. They were getting their bad cop act on.

"Remo said you and him would come over tomorrow to discuss the details of our family's union," Daniele said.

"That's right." Remo didn't like to invite people into the mansion, even loyal followers, even future family.

Gemma glanced between her father and me.

Daniele gave a terse nod. "We expect you for dinner at six." He motioned Gemma over. "Come on, we need to go."

"I'm staying. I need to talk to Savio," Diego said. Gemma sent him a warning look, but he ignored her. She didn't have to worry. Diego couldn't intimidate me.

Gemma followed her nonna and father out of the Arena, frowning.

"I need to shower and change," I said, turned and headed toward the changing room. Diego fell into step beside me. "Dad mentioned you don't want to announce the engagement to Gemma this year. What's that about?"

"Why the hurry? She's mine. We will marry. I think it's unnecessary to get engaged to a sixteen-year-old. I'd prefer to wait until she's a bit older."

"What's a bit older to you?" Diego muttered.

I had no intention of telling him that the engagement would have to wait until Gemma was of age at least, and the marriage even longer. Tonight was for partying, not arguing.

I pushed into the locker room, Diego hot on my heels.

Mick was still inside, talking to his brother and father. Diego let out a low curse. I only nodded a greeting. Mick probably still

needed time to cool off, which I got. If I'd lost a girl like Gemma, I'd have been pissed too.

I was about to pull my shorts down when Mr. Cantucci came over to me, extending a hand. "Congrats on your victory. You and your brothers are admirable fighters. This is what the Camorra is about. You make me proud to be part of it."

Mick lowered his head with a dejected expression. His brother touched his shoulder and sent me a hard look. I preferred it to Mr. Cantucci's flattery, but I smiled grimly. "Thank you. The Camorra would be nothing without the men risking their lives every day like Mick and Diego."

Those two had taken out a few Bratva hole-ups with me. Mick never fought in the forefront, but he didn't shy back from danger either.

He raised his eyes, meeting mine. He was far from mollified but didn't look ready to kill me anymore. After he and his family were gone, I finally stepped in the shower.

Diego perched on a bench, glaring at the floor.

"How about we celebrate my victory in a club tonight?"

His head shot up. "All right." A hint of wariness swung in his voice. I brushed it off. He'd had his panties in a bunch for months now. Maybe now that Gemma was mine, he'd finally pull his head out of his ass again.



Once we hit the dancefloor in one of the Camorra clubs, Diego did loosen up. Drinks in hands, we checked out tonight's offering. Soon a few girls we'd known from school came over. One of them, Dakota's younger sister, Noemi. Diego groaned. "I hope her sister didn't send her."

"I doubt it. She's got her eyes set on me, not you."

Noemi stopped right in front of me with a coy smile. Her family had affiliations with the Camorra but even though she was part Italian, they weren't members, not for lack of interest, but Remo hadn't deemed them trustworthy. "Hey Savio," she shouted, pressing into my side, not even glancing at Diego. He was being groped at by another girl.

“Do I get a wish?”

“A wish?” I took a sip from my mojito, scanning her from head to toe. Not bad.

“It’s my eighteenth birthday. And I’d like to see your bull.” She let out a giggle, her palms sliding down my chest.

Diego sent me a scowl. I doubted he could hear what she said. The music was too loud.

“My bull?” I asked with a grin.

She nodded.

Her flirting annoyed me for some reason. I had a feeling her and Dakota’s interest for Camorra men was orchestrated by their family. “I only take him out for a ride.”

She giggled again then pushed up on her tiptoes to reach my ear. “I’m going to ride him like a cowgirl.”

Her attempt to sound seductive turned out almost comical, but I was wiped out from two fights in a row, so chasing another girl would have been too strenuous. Her offer sounded like the perfect way to end this evening.

“My car,” I said with a nod toward the exit of the club. She flashed me a smile then exchanged a proud look with her companion, who was trying to chew Diego’s ear off from the look of it.

“I’m taking my bull for a ride,” I shouted to him.

Instead of the usual conspiratorial grin, his expression hardened. I didn’t linger on his bitchiness and led Noemi outside toward my new Bugatti. It wasn’t the most spacious car for a fuck. Shoving the passenger seat all the way back, I sank down and Noemi settled on my lap. Her eyes took in the luxurious interior of my car. I hadn’t brought her here for a study of automobile design, though.

Fifteen minutes later, Noemi was showing off her cowgirl moves—which reminded me of a drunk trying to do Hula Hoop—when someone hammered against my window. Noemi almost burst my eardrum with her screech, then proceeded to nearly break my fucking dick off in her attempt to scramble off my lap and clutch her clothes over her pussy.

Diego's face loomed outside the window.

Rubbing my throbbing dick, I let down the window and cocked an eyebrow. "Fuck, Diego. Next time you feel like cock blocking, remember that I still need this dick to satisfy your sister."

Wrong thing to say. He smashed his fist into my mouth. If it hadn't been for my exhaustion and the worry about my affected cock, he'd never succeeded. Enraged, I landed a punch against his still fat lip before he could pull his head back.

Cursing, he clutched his mouth. I pressed my palm to my own bleeding lip. "That hand touched Noemi's pussy and my cock before it burst your lip, asshole."

Diego grimaced, then he nodded toward Noemi. "I'm going to turn around and you get dressed. I need to talk to Savio."

Since my dick was currently out of order, I didn't kick his ass for sending my quickie away. Noemi pulled her pants on then handed me a scrap of paper with her number before she disappeared. I stuffed it in my pocket. Her skills hadn't impressed me enough to warrant a repeat performance. Still, sometimes even I got desperate.

I got dressed then left the car, not even bothering to stop my lip from dripping blood all over my shirt. "What's your problem?"

Diego shook his head, slightly bent forward to keep his shirt clean. "Really? You've got to ask?"

I shoved my hands into my pockets. "I'm not married to Gemma yet. If I remember correctly, I won't have any kind of relationship with her before our wedding night."

Diego straightened. "That's not all there is to being in a relationship."

"How would you know?"

"I dated Dakota."

I gave him a look. If that already counted as dating...

"You are promised to each other."

It took considerable effort not to roll my eyes. “And I’m going to keep that promise, but I’m not going to retire my fucking dick until I marry Gemma. I don’t give a fuck if that pisses you off.”

“Maybe you should think of her feelings,” he seethed, then turned around and stalked off.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to walk home?”

He only gave me the finger.



“That wasn’t Mick,” said Remo as a way of greeting when I got into his car so we could drive to the Bazzolis.

“It was Diego.”

My lower lip was swollen, but I’ve looked worse after fights. The ladies usually went crazy if I looked like that.

“Already trouble in paradise?”

“I haven’t been allowed into paradise yet.”

Remo let out a rough laugh.

When we arrived at the Bazzoli house, Daniele and his wife waited for us. Remo’s and my eyes went to her hand, which rested on her slightly rounded belly. Remo shook Daniele’s hand, then said to Gemma’s mother. “Congrats on your pregnancy.” She lowered her hand slowly then glanced to Daniele. His smile widened. “We haven’t announced it yet.”

“Our lips are sealed,” I said as I shook his hand then kissed Claudia’s. Remo didn’t touch her, which was probably for the best, considering how she watched him.

Diego hovered beside the set table in the small dining room, his lip even fatter than mine. He greeted me with a terse nod which I returned.

“Take a seat,” Daniele said. “Gemma and my mother will serve dinner in a couple of minutes.”

Daniele pointed at the chair at the head of the table—his place as master of the house. “If you’d like the honor, Capo?”

Remo didn't even sit at the head of our table at home. He didn't need the additional boost for his ego. He ruled over everything that mattered. "That's your place, Daniele. I'm a guest in your house."

Daniele's expression flickered with admiration, then he nodded and sat in his usual chair. My brother and I sat to his right with Diego beside me.

When Gemma emerged, I almost snorted with laughter. She was wearing her most conservative church dress. A plaid gray atrocity with long sleeves despite it being summer and a skirt that reached her calves. The worst thing was the bow and the collar though. Gemma's hair was pulled up into one of those Amish updos. When everyone was busy arranging the pots on the wooden table, I leaned toward Remo. "If that outfit doesn't scream Do Not Touch, I don't know what does."

"Heed the fucking message then," he said in a harsh whisper.

Gemma stopped beside me and motioned toward the biggest pot. "Would you like some rabbit stew?"

"Sure, but I can take it myself."

A small smile tugged at her lips but her Nonna cleared her throat and Gemma reached for the ladle to fill my plate, then proceeded to do the same for Remo, Daniele, and Diego before she took the seat across from me.

All right, I was a lazy bastard, but this kind of behavior had to go as soon as she was officially mine. Even Kiara, who was submissive as fuck, rolled her eyes when I asked her to fill my plate.

Gemma didn't look at me once during dinner. It was starting to drive me completely insane. I could tell that the demureness of the Bazzoli women rubbed Remo the wrong way, but he wouldn't interfere in other people's family business. I nudged Gemma's foot under the table, and finally her gaze met mine. I raised an eyebrow. She motioned with her eyes toward her Nonna who was watching me like a hawk.

Sending Nonna my most charming smile, I only got narrowed eyes in turn. Nonna was going to be my biggest adversary, I could tell.

After dinner, the women went into the kitchen to clean the dishes before I had a chance to get a word with Gemma. Diego, Daniele, Remo and I settled on the small porch with a glass of the expensive whiskey that Remo had brought as a gift.

After Remo had laid out the plans, mainly waiting with the engagement at least until next summer and with the wedding until Gemma had finished college, the atmosphere could only be described as frosty.

Daniele shook his head for what felt the hundredth time. “I don’t understand the need for college. No one from our family has ever attended college, and I don’t see why Gemma would need it. She’s going to be a wife and mother, and she already knows everything to be good in both jobs. She can cook, clean, stitch, iron...”

I knew one thing she definitely couldn’t do yet, but I kept the words to myself.

“I realize we don’t share the same beliefs,” I said because I could tell that Remo was growing tired of this. Bartering about marriage wasn’t his thing. “But we can agree on one irrefutable rule. As Gemma’s future husband, my word is law. If I want her to attend college, then she’s going to do it.”

Daniele still didn’t look happy. “Your word will be law from the moment the engagement is official, yes.” He turned to my brother again. “Still, it’s not like your wife attended college, Remo, so why my daughter?”

That was the wrong thing to say. Remo didn’t talk about his family, *ever*. His men usually knew better than to mention Serafina or the twins in his presence. “Because,” Remo said in a harsh voice. “We say so, Daniele.”

Daniele realized his mistake, thank Fuck, and nodded. “All right. But I must insist that Gemma will be adequately protected while she attends college before her wedding. I don’t want anything to happen to her.”

“I can assure you nothing and definitely no one is going to happen to her,” I said. “Everyone will know whom she belongs to.”

Shortly before we had to leave, I was finally allowed a word with Gemma. She’d loosened the top button of her dress and a

few strands framed her face, refugees from that horrid updo.

“Interesting outfit for a first date,” I said dryly.

“I didn’t choose the dress. Nonna and Mom did.” She flushed, then frowned. “And this wasn’t a date.” There was a hint of uncertainty in her voice as if she wasn’t sure what constituted a real date. I’d definitely had to show her my version of a date once she was a bit older.

“I don’t get how you manage to be two different people.”

“What?”

“In the boxing ring, you are confident and outspoken. When your family is around, you’re this demure little thing.”

Her lips fell open. “It’s how I’ve been raised... it’s what my family expects of me.”

“And you never want to break free of it?”

She swallowed. “They wouldn’t allow it. They wouldn’t understand if I started dressing like other girls or talk back. It’s just expected of me to be like this.”

“I don’t expect you to be like that. I want you to be who you want to be and decide for yourself. You know what I think of your oppressing traditions.”

“Until we’re engaged, my parents decide over my life.” She tilted her head. “When are we going to get engaged and marry?”

I shrugged, looking away from her hopeful olive eyes. “Once you’ve finished high school, we get engaged and after college, we’ll marry.”

“College?” she blurted. “I’m supposed to go to college? My father would never send me there.”

“I’m going to send you. I told you I want you to be who you want to be.”

Anger flashed on her face, taking me by surprise. “It’s funny how both you and my family think you know what’s best for me when neither of you ask what I want. You decide over my head like they do. That isn’t letting me decide for myself, Savio. That’s oppression in disguise. Maybe I want to be only a wife and

mother, maybe I don't want to go to college. Shouldn't it be my choice what kind of life I want?"

I was still stunned by Gemma's outburst when Diego ripped the door open. "It's time. Your brother needs to leave."

Diego scanned his sister from head to toe, his eyes lingering on the opened top button. Of course, he'd think that was my doing. Gemma stalked out of the living room, joining the rest of her family in the small entrance hall.

Diego stepped close to me.

"I didn't touch her, bag it," I growled.

"That's not what I was going to say," he hissed. "It's about the college bullshit and you acting like the savior who allows my sister to get a higher education. We both know this isn't about you wanting Gemma to get a degree. You just don't want to marry soon. You want to be free to fuck around as you please."

"Who says I can't do that after the wedding?" I asked.

Diego nodded grimly. "I knew this was a mistake."



Mick was a sore loser as expected. For days, he gave me the stink eye until he agreed to work out with Diego and me again, of course, only to piss me off.

"And have you tapped it yet?" Mick asked spitefully as he lowered the barbell with a grunt.

"He won't tap anything if he knows what's good for him. Dad and I'll make sure that Gemma heeds our traditions, so shut your fucking mouth."

"Fuck off. You know how Savio is. He's probably doing all kinds of nasty shit to her already. Do you really think he'll wait to get it on until they're married?"

Diego glared, then he sent me a hard look. I walked over to them and pushed Mick. "How about you lick your fucking wounds and get over your bruised pride. Stop being a fucking pussy about it. So what, you lost your fiancée, there are a million more fish in the water."

A muscle in Diego's throat twitched. Mick moved to the benchpress, bringing some distance between us, which was probably for the best.

Diego got into my face. "I want you to swear that you won't touch her before the wedding."

"Don't you worry, Diego. Gemma will lose it after we're married, but not because you feel like it's your fucking right to determine when she's supposed to lose it, and certainly not because a few fucking Traditionalists would look down on her if she wasn't a virgin in her wedding night. She's going to lose it in the bond of holy fucking marriage because that's what she wants and that's the only goddamn reason that matters to me." I jabbed my finger into his chest. "And if she changes her mind and wants to lose it before, then I sure as hell won't ask you for permission, because it's only her fucking decision, got it?"

He looked like he considered smashing my head in with the kettlebell, but he'd just have to learn to deal.

TWELVE



Gemma

A few weeks later, I was still so angry at Savio, I wasn't sure what to do with myself. Back at school, I'd hardly paid attention in classes and was glad for recess.

It's not that I'd never considered going to college. Toni was determined to attend, so of course it had crossed my mind to join her. I didn't have a dream of becoming a doctor or a lawyer. My life had always revolved around family life, so I'd never really given a day job more than a fleeting thought, and if I did, it was helping out in our restaurants. What really got to me was that Savio acted as if he was doing me a favor. Did he really think I was that clueless?

I knew what this was really about, him trying to postpone our wedding as long as possible. He wanted to keep up his male slut life while I waited for him to be ready to wed.

Toni slanted me a look. "You're going to break that fork in half."

I loosened my hold and took a deep breath.

"He might as well announce your engagement. It's probably already making the rounds anyway. Savio Falcone willing to marry a girl is too hot of news not to get out quickly."

I scanned the surrounding tables. Most of them were occupied by kids from Camorra families, or families who were by some degree associated with the mafia. They might as well call it Camorra High.

I'd caught the occasional curious glance as well as conspiratorial whispering in the last few days. Maybe the news about Savio and me was already making the rounds like Toni said. It wouldn't come as a shock. Several Camorrista had watched Savio's fight against Mick. Even if Remo had asked them to keep the reason to themselves, some of them had probably let something slip to their wives, and most of them were scandalmongers. I caught Noemi's eyes across the room and groaned inwardly. She'd taken it upon herself to annoy me. Only yesterday she'd made some stupid comment about riding Savio's bull, which could only mean she'd heard something about me and him. She turned away and said something to her crony Will. For a while, I'd thought they were an item, but now I wasn't sure anymore.

He got up and came toward our table.

"Oh no," Toni murmured. "Don't let him rile you up."

"Don't worry." Will thought he was some kind of VIP student, only because his parents were filthy rich and owned half the Strip.

He stopped beside me and perched his ass on the edge of the table, running his hand through his reddish hair. My mouth curled in disgust. "It isn't Halloween yet, but nice Raggedy Ann outfit."

I ignored the jab at my dress. Diego had dragged his feet this morning, which meant I was too late to change into other clothes in school. Because I had been too immersed in my anger at Savio, I hadn't done it before recess.

His grin became even more obnoxious and I braced myself for what would follow. "So are the rumors true that you'll become the next Falcone whore?"

How the hell had he found out? Even if the wives had started talking, it shouldn't have left our circles and Will, no matter how rich, wasn't part of the mafia. His parents were, however, friends with Mick's parents. Maybe my ex-almost-fiancé had let something slip, probably because of his bruised ego. Mick was a nice guy, but he was also a Made Man, and those didn't deal well with rejection in any form.

I gritted my teeth, trying to stop myself from lashing out.

He sat on the edge of my table as if it was his throne and we his subjects. By now almost everyone had turned toward us, listening in. Across the room, I could see Noemi practically glowing with amusement. So that's how it was going to be? She was going to sick her lapdog on me? The cow was too scared to face me.

“I hear the brothers share their women. But Remo Falcone always calls dibs first. Because he's Capo, he's going to fuck you first. Do you think Savio will watch when his brother will pop your cherry? Maybe they'll both fuck you. Ever heard of a sandwich? One up your pussy, one up your ass.”

I jerked to my feet. My chair tumbled over and crashed to the ground. Before I could consider the consequences of my actions, I swung my arm back and smashed my fist straight into Will's face. He fell backward from the table and curled up on the floor, holding his bleeding face. I was fairly sure I had broken his nose. He began sobbing, rocking back and forth.

Toni grabbed my arm as if she thought I'd attack him again. “Gemma, what have you done?”

My eyes followed her line of sight toward three teachers heading our way.

I took a step back when two teachers crouched beside Will. He was crying as if someone had cut his arm off. Diego hadn't shed a single tear when he'd had bullet and knife wounds. Normal guys were such wusses.

“Gemma, in the principal's office right this second,” Mrs. Montgomery said.

Noemi, who had finally dared to approach, now that enough teachers were around to protect her, gave me a triumphant smile.

Sending her a last glare, I headed out of the cafeteria. Toni was hot on my heels. “Will's such an asshat. That right of the first night is an urban myth. The Falcones don't do that.” She paused. “Right?”

I sent her a disbelieving look. But I wasn't really in the mood to talk. My knuckles hurt like hell from the punch. Usually I only fought with bandaged hands or boxing gloves.

We arrived at the secretary's desk. She motioned for me to take a seat on one of the chairs.

"Antonia, you have to wait outside," she then said. Toni gave me an encouraging smile before she left.

The door to the principal's office swung open and he motioned for me to come in. I strode inside and sank down, knowing what was coming. I'd probably be banned from school for a few days. "You know we have a zero tolerance policy when it comes to violence, and what you displayed today was an intolerable act of brutality toward one of your fellow students. You realize that Will's parents will ask me to remove you from this school."

My eyes widened. "Forever?"

He gave a stern nod. "This is no small transgression."

I blinked, stunned. Dad would be furious, and Mom would cry fat ugly tears as if I'd personally stabbed her in the heart. "But... things like this have happened before." This was a school filled with kids from Made Men, or kids who were in the process of becoming Made Men. Violence did happen. Of course, I was a girl and my family wasn't one of the leading families of the Camorra. Only mere soldiers. And Will's parents owned several hotels and had an assload of money and influence. They sponsored many school events.

"I already called home. I left a message for your parents because I couldn't reach them and also a voicemail on your brother's phone."

Oh great. Diego would be delighted. "Will insulted me."

"What did he say?"

I frowned. My engagement wasn't public yet, so I wasn't sure how much to say. "He called me names." I couldn't even say the word 'whore'. It was the worst insult anyone could throw at a girl in my circles.

The principal frowned. "If you can't be more concrete, I can't help you, and even if Will insulted you, that's no excuse to punch him. From what I hear, you broke his nose, Gemma. His parents might press charges against you."

I sunk deeper into the chair. A Made Man would die before he admitted that a girl had beaten him up. But Will would probably tell it to anyone who wanted to hear it.

“I need to have a word with Will in the infirmary now.”

Will definitely wouldn't say anything in my favor. I walked back out and took a seat on one of the chairs across from the secretary's desk. I wanted to scream in frustration.

I wasn't sure how much time passed but suddenly Diego appeared beside me, looking like he was close to exploding. The secretary looked up. “Name.”

Diego glared at me, then at her. “Bazzoli. I'm here to pick up my sister.”

The woman frowned. “Where are her parents?”

“Not here,” Diego said sharply. He was wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt, and was sweaty as if he'd been called out of fight training. His Camorra tattoo was on display.

With a glance at it, the secretary gave a nod. “Your sister is suspended from school until Friday, at least. But expulsion is very likely.”

“We'll see,” Diego muttered. He grabbed my forearm and pulled me to my feet then dragged me out.

“Diego,” I hissed. “Stop, you're hurting me.” He loosened his hold but didn't stop pulling me along. He steered us toward the boys' restrooms, poked a head in, then dragged me inside. He released me and headed toward the only locked door. He hammered his fist against it while I regarded the urinals to my right in disdain. I'd never been in a man's restroom before.

“Get the fuck out of here and take your shit elsewhere or I'll climb over that fucking stall and drag you out.”

After a moment, the stall was unlocked and a freshman boy whose name I didn't know came out. One look at Diego's expression and his tattoo, and he rushed outside.

“Do we have to be in here?” I asked.

Diego advanced on me and grabbed my shoulders. “What's wrong with you? What the fuck has gotten into you? I knew

allowing you to fight was a huge fucking mistake.” He’d never said that.

“He got what he deserved.”

Diego’s eyes flashed with anger. “Did he? But you’ll be the one who’ll get punished. That fucking guy’s parents are going to do everything to get you expelled.”

“But... you and Dad can do something, right?”

Diego laughed darkly. “I could beat him up, cut him a bit, I’m sure then he’d change his mind but his parents own huge hotels that pay us for protection. They aren’t anybody. They deal with Remo Falcone personally because of how important they are. I can’t do anything without getting the permission of my Capo. Or I could ask Savio to talk to his brother for me, but I’m not sure I want to ask him for that kind of favor because you can’t get a grip on your fucking bitchiness. The engagement isn’t even public yet and you’re already messing things up.”

“You’re an asshole,” I bit out. I’d thought Diego would be on my side, had thought he’d smooth things out for me like he always did. Having him this furious at me, made me feel horrible.

Diego only glared down at me.

I swallowed. Why did Mom have to hand down her emotionality to me? I wanted to be tough like steel. Tough like Diego and the other guys who I always only ever got to watch fight.

Diego released a breath. “Are you going to cry?” There was still anger in his voice, but also something gentler.

I shook my head. “He called me Falcone whore,” I got out, and then the rest of what Will had said burst out of me, and I had to catch my breath when I was done.

“That fucking asshole. How dare he as much as look at you? How dare he talk to you like that? I’m going to break his bones.”

“I started with his nose,” I said. Diego shook his head. The anger on his face was no longer directed at me. “You should have let me handle him.”

“I didn’t think.”

Diego sighed. "I'm not going to allow anyone to insult you in any way. We'll deal with this now. We'll get everyone to back off once and for all." He grabbed my hand to pull me along and I gasped in pain when he touched my bruised knuckles. Diego drew back, his eyes shooting down to my swollen flesh.

"Damn it, Gemma," he said quietly, taking my hand carefully. "How hard did you hit him? Your knuckles don't look good. We need to get them checked."

"He looks worse."

Diego chuckled, but he remained tense as he pulled me against him and led me out of the restrooms and the school. We arrived at his car and he opened the door for me. I slumped inside, wondering what Diego had in mind to save my hide.

He slid behind the steering wheel and revved the engine.

"Where are we going?"

"Back to where I've been. The Falcone gym."

My eyes grew wide. "Why?"

"Because I'll have a talk with Savio. I won't have these kind of rumors about you."

He sounded absolutely furious.

"I don't want Savio to know what happened."

Diego sent me a look. "That's not up to you. I'll have to protect your honor and keep you in school."

I closed my eyes. This day got only worse.

We parked in front of the abandoned casino that harbored the private Falcone gym. Only the Falcones would use something this extra to work out.

"Come on," Diego urged.

"You want me to come with you?"

"You bet."

I dragged myself out of the car then trudged after Diego. I didn't want to see Savio again, especially not after what Will had said.

“Gemma, get a move on,” Diego said, and I sped up, not wanting him to reprimand me again, especially not in earshot of Savio. We entered the huge gaming area of the casino where a boxing ring, a cage, and other workout equipment were spread out.

Savio was pummeling a boxing bag while Nino and Remo were sparring in the boxing ring. The Camorra Enforcer Fabiano was doing burpees. He gave Diego and me a curt nod before he proceeded his workout.

I tried to hide my nerves. This would be embarrassing.

Diego pulled me straight toward Savio who stopped and regarded us with cocked eyebrows. Only seeing him filled my stomach with butterflies. I tried not to check out the display of muscles that glistened with a fine sheen of sweat, or the tattoo that peeked out from his low waistband, the horns of the stupid bull that every girl seemed to have seen except for me.

Diego finally released me to step up close to Savio who narrowed his eyes at my brother.

Remo and Nino stopped fighting and looked over to us as well. I could already feel embarrassment crawling up my neck.

“Make it official,” Diego demanded. “An engagement announcement that’ll show everyone that my sister is yours, that she’s under your protection.”

My eyes widened. That had been an order. Diego and Savio were friends, but Savio was also a Falcone.

Savio took a step toward my brother. “I’m not taking orders from you, Diego.” Then his eyes slid to me and my bruised hand that I still cradled against my stomach. Something in his face shifted. “What the fuck happened with your hand?”

I shrugged. I wouldn’t mention Will, much less Noemi, or any of the things they’d said to me.

“Will Reynolds called my sister, an honorable Italian woman, your future wife, a Falcone whore,” Diego growled. So much for keeping things to myself.

Remo swung himself out of the ring and Nino climbed out a moment later. Even Fabiano stopped what he had been doing to watch the freakshow. Savio only stared at me. “That bastard

suggested that your brother as Capo would...fu..." Diego glanced at me. "...would take my sister and that you'd watch. That you two would share her at the same time."

Oh God. Why couldn't the ground swallow me? Expulsion would have been less horrific than this mortification.

"That's what he said?" Remo asked with a twisted smile that raised the little hairs on my neck. "Remind me again, Nino, what is it called? *Ius*?"

Nino shook his head with a frown. "*Ius primae nocti.*"

I'd had enough Latin to know what that meant, and my expression slipped a moment. Remo Falcone's name stirred fears in most people. Even a wife and beautiful children hadn't changed that.

Diego lost his shit. "This isn't a fucking joke. My sister is an honorable woman, and nobody should suggest that anyone but her husband touches her!" My heart skipped a beat. He had screamed not just at Savio but also at Nino and Remo.

Remo's smile slipped off, and Diego fell silent. He took a deep breath. "I meant no disrespect, Capo, but I must protect my sister's honor no matter the price."

Savio seemed to pierce me with his eyes. "We will make the engagement official, and I will make it clear that Gemma is only mine. Nobody will touch her, not a single fucker, and most definitely not any of my brothers."

He strode toward me and took my hand, regarding my knuckles closely. "This will have to heal before you can wear my engagement ring." His voice was pure possession and sucked the air clean out of my lungs, making me feel light-headed. Then he looked up at me and the arrogant mischief was back. "I already know exactly what kind of ring to get you."

I narrowed my eyes.

"She needs treatment for her knuckles," Diego butted in, stepping up beside us, and eyeing Savio's hand on mine critically. I could tell he wanted to shove him away. As if even hand-holding was too much before we were married. I almost rolled my eyes.

"So, when's the engagement going to be?" I asked.

Savio exchanged a look with his brothers. “In two months. That way we have some time to prepare everything. How does that sound?”

For once, I managed to keep my cool. Anger still simmered under my skin, at Savio, at the situation, even at myself. “All right. Will it be a big feast?”

I’d never much cared about a huge engagement celebration, but now I felt the unreasonable urge to show the world that Savio was going to be mine, especially Noemi and all the other girls who’d taken a ride on his bull.

Savio smiled. “Wait and see. It’ll be a surprise like your ring.”

If that was supposed to reassure me, he failed.



“I won’t have a fucking party in my mansion,” Remo said.

“Our mansion,” corrected Nino as we entered the living area of the house where Serafina and Kiara were perched on the sofa watching over the kids playing on the floor. They turned to us.

Kiara got up, her face reflecting worry. “What’s the matter?”

“Savio wants to celebrate his engagement to Gemma in two months,” Nino said before he pressed a kiss to his wife’s mouth.

“You do?” Serafina asked, wide-eyed.

“I don’t really. But thanks to your husband, I have to.”

“Don’t blame this on me,” Remo said.

“You started the fucking *ius primae nocti* rumors,” I said, annoyed.

Remo smiled. “It’s always good to shroud yourself in mystery as a Capo.”

Serafina narrowed her eyes and slapped his shoulder hard. “I really can’t believe you’re allowing this kind of nonsense to make the rounds. Stop them.” My brother caught her hand and jerked her against him, trapping her against his body.

“I don’t take orders from anyone, angel,” he said in a low voice. He nipped her throat. “But maybe I’ll stop them as a gift to you. After all, I got your first night.”

Serafina huffed, but the way she hung in my brother’s hold didn’t suggest annoyance. I turned around, not in the mood to see them getting it on.

I stalked toward the kitchen, hoping for something sweet. Kiara hurried after me. “Do you need help with the party? Or the ring?”

Of course, she was excited about the prospect of the impending engagement. She’d practically organized Leona and Fabiano’s wedding and the twins’ second birthday by herself. Event planning was her obsession.

“I know exactly what kind of ring I want for Gemma,” I said.

Kiara eyed me in suspicion. “You’re not going to embarrass the girl, right?”

“Of course not. I only do what Diego asked for. Staking my claim for everyone to see.”

THIRTEEN



Gemma

I was nervous. This was the first time I'd set foot into the Falcone mansion to officially meet everyone before the engagement in two days.

This was the place I'd spend my life in because Savio and his brothers would never live in separate homes, he'd made that clear. Not that I minded. I loved to live in a big family unit, loved the solidarity and that there was always someone around to talk to.

Today, I'd have dinner with the people who'd become part of my family in eighteen months. That, of course, required for the Falcone clan to accept me.

My stomach knotted itself tightly. What if they didn't? For Savio, his brothers were everything. If they didn't like me, what would that mean for our marriage?

I knew Remo, Nino and Adamo as well as you could know people you'd only exchanged a couple of sentences with. I liked Adamo, even if he was too volatile for my taste. Not to mention that I'd always stayed clear of the crowd he'd hung with at school. I'd never understood why people would put poison into their own bodies for a kick. Besides, Adamo was currently in New York and I wouldn't even see him today.

I *feared* Nino and Remo. Some people, very few, very ignorant people thought they'd become more approachable, maybe even tamer since they had wives and children. These people had never paid close attention to their fights. I had

because I wanted to improve and the only way to do that is to study the best in your profession. Remo and Nino had been the best for as long as I could remember, and Savio had joined them in their unchallenged prime spot a few years ago. When they fought, you saw what really lay beneath, and it wasn't anything tame or less dangerous. These men, all of them, enjoyed inflicting pain, not just to win a fight. No, they loved the actual act of causing someone else agony, and even more than that: the kill.

No one had fought more death fights than Remo Falcone.

Little was known of what went on behind the walls of their mansion, how they treated their wives and children. They mostly stayed among themselves, so speculations always ran rampant.

Diego dropped me off in the driveway of the mansion. It was obvious that he didn't like the idea of sending me off into the Falcone mansion alone, but he had to help Dad in the restaurant.

"Insisting on going with you would be like a slap in Remo's face. I might as well shove a knife into my throat."

"You really think he'd kill you for insulting him, and it wouldn't even be a real insult, just overprotectiveness, and let's be honest, you are terribly overprotective."

Diego frowned. "I'm as protective as necessary given your looks."

I rolled my eyes but then became insecure again. "Do I look okay for my first meeting with them?"

"Yeah."

Mom and Dad had insisted that I wear one of my modest dresses to give the right impression. I had a feeling neither Falcone would judge me by my clothing. They were too cunning and attentive to take someone's exterior as the reflection of their nature.

Diego gave me a tired smile. "You'll be fine."

I nodded, then got out of the car. Savio came out of the house and toward me.

"You look as if you're going to puke any moment," Savio said with a laugh, then he stopped, grabbed my wrist and tugged

me closer. His fingers dug into my skin. “Are you scared of meeting my brothers? You’ve talked to them before, and I really would have thought you of all people would be braver.” Again that deep laugh before he kissed my temple, throwing me off completely. “There’s no reason for you to worry.”

My skin warmed and my pulse sped up even more. The spot where his lips had touched my skin tingled. How would it feel to have his lips on mine?

Savio regarded me closely and shook his head. He turned his face away as if he couldn’t bear looking at me a second longer. “Girls that know of their effect on men are dangerous, but you, Kitty, are killing me without even realizing it.” He chuckled, but it was a very dark, very sarcastic sound. His eyes slanted to me and he leaned down again, cupping my head. I froze. In the few days since Savio had become my fiancé, he’d touched me more often than in the years I’d known him before. None of these touches had been inappropriate, but they felt intimate and possessive, and my body’s reaction to them was far from innocent. “Sweet sixteen is mighty sexy and hella tempting when it comes in a package like yours. I’m glad you’re such a fucking good girl. Maybe I can keep my promise to your father after all.”

“Promise?” I said in a raw voice. His closeness was wreaking havoc with my body and mind.

“To keep my hands off you until you’re officially mine, before God and whoever else needs to give his approval.”

“You are touching me.” Why was my voice so low, so... sultry?

Savio took a deep breath, then he gave me that teasing smile. “Believe me, Kitty, the kind of touching I’m talking about will leave you hot and bothered, and even more breathless than you are now.”

I felt hot and bothered by his simple kiss to my temple and his closeness already.

“Fuck,” Savio muttered and stepped away. “That look’s going to get us both in trouble.”

I had to stifle a smile, even though I really didn’t need the kind of trouble he was referring to.

“Come on, let’s go meet the crazies.”

“What if I say something rude or embarrassing?”

“Rudeness is Remo’s mother tongue and if you manage to embarrass either of my brothers, I’m going to buy you that Porsche you’re so crazy about.” He linked our fingers and dragged me into the house.

“The amount of time it took you to bring the girl from our front door to the dining table makes me wonder if Daniele will ask me to put you down like a horny dog tomorrow.”

“Our encounter was perfectly innocent,” Savio said.

“Not thanks to you, I’m sure,” Serafina muttered.

A very unladylike snort-laugh erupted from my mouth, which made me blush furiously.

Kiara gave me a kind smile and walked over to me. She hugged me. “Welcome to our home.”

I gave her a shy smile then my eyes landed on the people gathered behind her. My heart sped up.

Savio stayed close to me and I was eternally grateful for that. His presence gave me the necessary confidence to face his brothers and Fabiano Scuderi.

The blond man was the Camorra’s Enforcer and his reputation and the fights I’d witnessed made me as wary of him as of the rest of the men. Each of them shook my hand. They were reserved, distantly friendly. Serafina and Leona, on the other hand, were as welcoming as Kiara and hugged me before they introduced me to the kids.

There were Remo’s twins, two achingly beautiful toddlers with almost black eyes and pitch-black hair. The girl wore a pink tutu and had thick curls. The moment Kiara led me toward them, she stumbled toward Remo and lifted her arms. He picked her up and pressed her against his chest. Her twin regarded me boldly, while Kiara’s boys were too small to show a big interest in me.

I was overwhelmed by so many new people, but I kept up the smile.

“Let’s eat,” Kiara said with a knowing expression. “I’m sure you’re starving.”

Everyone headed for the table and Savio tugged me along. I sat down beside him, watching in astonishment how Nino and Kiara carried in the food together. I tore my eyes away and gave Nevio a smile. He poked his tongue out with a cheeky grin. I returned the gesture, causing him to grin.

“Great, another bad influence for the kids. As if there weren’t enough of those around already,” Remo said.

I winced, my eyes widening.

Savio scoffed. “You being one of them.”

I relaxed, realizing the Capo wasn’t really angry at me. It was difficult to tell with his harsh expression.

“Dinner’s served,” Kiara said with a bright smile.

Out of habit, I held out my hands for them to take so we could give our prayers before we ate.

Everyone stared at my outstretched palms as if I was suggesting a satanic ritual, which come to think of it, would probably have been received better. Especially Remo watched my hands with utmost disdain.

“What’s she doing?” Nevio asked.

I lowered my hands, embarrassed. Savio took my hand and squeezed, sending me a grin. He, of course, found this entertaining.

“She wanted to pray before dinner, right, Gemma?” Kiara said gently.

“Why?” Nevio blurted.

“It’s tradition in my family to give thanks to God for the food on the table.”

Nevio pointed a finger at Remo. “Dad’s paying for the food, not God.”

“No pointing with fingers at people,” Serafina admonished.

Nevio looked at his father as if he hoped the man would disagree.

“Nevio,” he said in warning. The boy dropped his hand.

“Who’s God?”

Savio rolled his eyes. I couldn't help but smile. That kid was a handful. "How about we just eat and save the existential topics for cozy snowy winter evenings."

"There's no snow in Vegas," Nevio said.

Savio gave him a grin. "Exactly. Now shut up."

Nevio opened his mouth, an enraged look on his face. When Greta put her tiny hand on his, he snapped his lips shut.

Kiara stood and started to fill the plates with food. I untangled my hand from Savio's and interlinked my fingers, then I closed my eyes and hurried through my usual prayer.

When I opened my eyes, several eyes were on me. Kiara loaded lasagna on my plate. "It's okay," she said quietly. "Don't mind them."

I gave her a grateful smile, ignoring the look Savio exchanged with the other men. I knew they weren't religious, but I had no intention of hiding my beliefs only because they found them ridiculous.

Kiara and Serafina asked me about choir and kickboxing. I could tell that the conversation between the men at the table was... restrained. They didn't see me as family yet, of course not. I was an intruder in their tightly knit unit, and it would take time to find my way into their family, but I hoped I'd be given the chance in the time until the wedding, so I already felt at home when I moved in.

When Diego picked me up later, I felt like Savio and I were on the right path.

Of course, I'd been completely ridiculous to think that.



Nino, Remo, and I were watching Kiara, Leona and Serafina go over last minute preparations with the staff of the most expensive hotel on the Strip—one that belonged to Will Reynold’s parents. They’d agreed to host the engagement party for free in their biggest banquet room, after some light coercion.

“I think Mr. Reynold’s eye is still twitching because of all the money he’s losing today,” I said with a grin.

Remo’s mouth twitched, but a smile didn’t find its way onto his face. This party wasn’t his style. Too many guests, too much attention. It fit me perfectly, however.

Diego strolled into the ballroom, already dressed in a black suit. His eyes took in the many tables and flower decorations. He shook his head. “When I asked for a celebration, I didn’t mean you should host a fucking ball.”

“It’s more fun this way, especially because it’ll piss off the right people.”

I fell silent when my younger brother Adamo sauntered into the ballroom. “What the fuck? Why didn’t you tell me he was coming?” I asked Remo.

“Because I didn’t know,” he said with a strange note to his voice.

Adamo was supposed to spend another month in the Famiglia. I hadn’t seen him in ten months, since Fabiano’s wedding. Despite his promise, he hadn’t visited when Kiara had given birth to Massimo five months ago. He seemed to enjoy his time with the Famiglia. Luca must have really done a good job whipping him into shape.

Kiara spotted him, too, and rushed over to him, hugging him tightly like a long lost son.

“Let’s welcome him,” Nino said, heading toward him. Remo and I followed a few steps behind our brother.

The moment Adamo spotted us, his smile wavered, and guilt flickered across his face. He looked down at my wrists, which were covered by sleeves. I was still pissed at him for helping our crazy-ass mother escape, not so much because of those ridiculous scars from slashing my wrists. That day could have ended far worse.

Nino touched Adamo’s shoulder. My little brother had grown. He was now Nino’s and my height and had even grown something that resembled a beard. Surprisingly, it made him look older than seventeen, and not ridiculous like so many teens that suddenly sported facial hair. I almost didn’t recognize him.

“Why didn’t you tell us that you were coming home? One of us could have picked you up,” Nino said.

Remo and I just stood there. I was pissed, but Remo’s feelings regarding Adamo were an entirely different matter. When he’d allowed our little brother to go to the Famiglia to toughen up, he’d probably expected that he’d be back soon. Yet, after almost one year with the Famiglia, Adamo still seemed content. Few people could see past Remo’s cruel mask, but for me, it was obvious that Adamo’s distance felt like a stab to his heart.

“I took an Uber, don’t worry,” Adamo said with a shrug, shoving his hands into his pockets.

Serafina and Leona came over as well, hugging him.

“Hey stranger,” Serafina said, then her eyes darted to Remo, and something shifted on her face. She, too, could see it.

“An Uber? Why didn’t you steal a car like you used to do?” I asked, softening my words with a teasing grin. I didn’t want this to blow up today, not when the Bazzolis expected a splendid feast. Gemma would be devastated if I had to cancel this last minute because Remo went berserk on Adamo and whoever else looked his way.

“Nah, not my style anymore. Luca broke two of my ribs when I tried it in New York.”

A muscle in Remo’s chin twitched and Serafina casually walked over to him and leaned against him. With her so close, he’d hesitate to lose his shit.

Fabiano sauntered in, finally done beating the shit out of our debtors, and shoved Adamo lightly. “Don’t tell me you’re thinking about getting a new tattoo, Adamo.”

We all knew what kind of tattoo he was referring to. His voice had been joking, but his eyes were harsh. He knew Remo as well as I did. If it wasn’t for the twins and Serafina, Adamo’s absence would have hit Remo much harder.

Remo stepped out of Serafina’s grip and clapped Adamo’s chest, right over his heart. “Maybe he already has. Does the Famiglia credo mark your skin yet, little brother?”

I clamped my hand down on Remo’s shoulder without a word. Diego was heading toward the doors where his family had just appeared, everyone except for Gemma, who would enter with me later.

Adamo held his gaze. “I have the markings of the Camorra on my wrist. I can’t be both Camorrista and a soldier of the Famiglia. Our brother Growl had his Camorra tattoo removed before he swore loyalty to Luca.”

What the mighty fuck?

Remo’s face was like the sky before a hurricane. I grabbed Adamo’s arm and dragged him away. From the corner of my eye, I saw Serafina usher Greta toward Remo. She was dressed in her favorite tutu, which she rarely took off, and hurried to her dad. Remo was about to chase after Adamo and me when he noticed his girl and froze. Fabiano still stayed close to him, just in case, while Nino followed us.

Thank fuck for Serafina’s quick thinking. Greta was the valium to Remo’s burning rage.

I shoved Adamo into a restroom. “What the fuck is wrong with you? Did you come all the way from New York only to twist the knife in Remo’s chest?”

I was so pissed I wanted to smash his stupid face in.

Adamo shook his head with a hint of guilt. “I got mad when Remo suggested I had the Famiglia tattoo.”

“Can you blame him?” Nino said as he entered. “You’ve made yourself scarce these last few months. New York was meant as a temporary thing, a way to give you more stability. It wasn’t meant as more than that.”

Adamo ran a hand through his, as usual, messy hair. “I know. I’ll return in one month.”

He didn’t sound like he wanted to, though.

“You’d better,” I said. I was dead serious. I’d fly over to New York and drag him home personally if I had to. Not because I missed him, but because someone needed to protect Remo.

“Luca allows me to build up their illegal street races. He’s interested in my knowledge. He values my opinion.”

“He’s probably only trying to gain your trust and loyalty, so you betray the Camorra and your family,” I said, pissed once more. “It wouldn’t be the first time that he took in soldiers from other familias after all. Growl, Orazio... you’d be the icing on his cake.”

“I’m not going to defect the Camorra!” Adamo hissed. “Maybe I’m not like you, but I’m a Falcone and I’ll die one.”

“Then why did you provoke Remo by mentioning our half-brother? You know very well how Remo reacts to that name,” Nino said, disapproving.

“Ryan, I mean Growl, isn’t as bad as you make him out to be. I eat with him and his wife Cara once a week.”

“How about you keep that tidbit of information to yourself?” I muttered. That would definitely tip Remo over the edge.

Nino shook his head. “This was a mistake. Our cooperation with Luca should have never extended this far. Maybe it needs to end.”

“It’s not a big deal. I just enjoy helping with the races. I wish I could do it here as well.”

“I’m sure Remo will find a way to involve you in the races,” Nino said.

I glanced at my watch. “All right. As nice as chitchatting with you may be, I have an engagement to celebrate.”

Adamo shook his head with astonishment. “I leave for a few months and you decide to marry? What’s gotten into you?”

“Today’s not the wedding. That’s still a few years away. It’s just the promising ceremony the Traditionalists are so adamant about.”

Adamo gave Nino a questioning look. “You really aren’t pulling my leg? Savio is getting engaged?”

“You think we’d rent a ballroom just to play a joke on you?”

Adamo grinned sheepishly. “Come on. It’s a more likely scenario than you settling down. What happened to never going to put your bull on a leash?”

The ghost of a smile crossed Nino’s face as he and Adamo exchanged one of these looks.

“My bull won’t be put on a leash, don’t worry.”

“I’ll go and help Kiara with the kids,” Nino said, leaving us alone.

Adamo regarded me as if he’d never seen me before. “So, you and Gemma are an item?”

“Depends on your definition of being an item.”

Adamo chuckled. “I guess I’m going to be the one joking about your dick being MIA in the future.”

“Dream on, little brother. My dick’s going to get more action than yours.”

I left him standing there, looking dumbfounded. The ballroom had already filled with our Captains and important business associates. We’d decided against inviting the Underbosses. That could wait for the wedding.



Gemma was waiting in a small ante-room of the ballroom for me. When I stepped inside, my entire body went into shock at the sight of her. I’d sent her to the boutique where Kiara always bought her dresses and told her she could choose whatever she

wanted as an engagement gift. Knowing about the money troubles her family struggled with, that seemed like the best option.

And holy fuck, Gemma had chosen a dress that knocked the breath straight out of me. It hugged her curves like a second skin and the fabric was so light, it appeared almost translucent. As I stepped closer, I realized it was, but all the interesting places were covered by flower applications. Gemma's waist was narrow and her hips and booty designed to bring men to their knees.

She turned around when she heard me and for a moment, my brain short-circuited. The neckline dipped low, reaching her sternum, accentuating Gemma's round breasts.

I couldn't move as I took in every inch of her. I'd sent her clothes shopping because I'd been worried she'd show up in one of those horrible church dresses. Now I wished she wore a modest dress because in this outfit, I'd need to kill a few fuckers who couldn't keep their eyes to themselves.

Suddenly I really wished she were older.

"Hi Savio," she said with a small smile, a knowing glint in her eyes. Despite the blush staining her cheeks, she held her head high and looked regal.

Getting a grip, I walked over to her and fumbled in my pants pocket for the satin box. I finally pulled it out and held it out for her to take.

Her brows puckered. Then she finally grasped the box and opened it. I really wished I'd have taken a photo of her expression when she saw her engagement ring for the first time.

A grin was already forming on my face. Gemma gingerly picked up the jewelry to inspect it more closely. She cast her eyes up. "Are you serious?" Indignation rang in her voice.

"I had it handcrafted. I put a lot of thought into it. I hope you like it." My grin widened at the look she gave the ring. "Let me." I took the ring from her, grabbed her hand and slid it on.

It was obvious that she was fighting for composure.

Originally, I'd chosen the design to piss Diego and Gemma off for insisting on a timely engagement. Yet, seeing Gemma in that dress, I was glad to have staked my claim in this public way.

“It’s white gold with a diamond.”

The ring had cost a fortune, because of that fucking diamond alone, but it was worth every penny seeing Gemma’s struggle not to lose her shit.

“I thought having the ring form my initials was a nice touch.”

Gemma raised her eyes. “Like a brand.”

“Only without the pain.”

“I think I would have preferred the burn,” she muttered under her breath.

I stepped closer. “You wanted people to know you are mine. You wanted people to back off. What better way to do that than have a ring with my initials, Kitty?”

She didn’t say anything. Bending over her like I did, I got an even better view down her neckline. I straightened. I didn’t need additional temptation. Gemma was jailbait as it was. I held out my arm for her to take and she did so but didn’t take her eyes off my ring.

I couldn’t wait for our guests to see it as well.



“You think you’re the funniest,” Diego muttered later that evening. “Could you have chosen a more obnoxious ring for my sister?”

“You insisted that everyone knew she was mine.”

Diego snorted and took a gulp from the expensive whiskey the hotel served. He motioned at everything. “This is a nice show, but in the end, it comes down to one thing, you and my sister are promised to each other. It isn’t a game or a joke. One day you’ll realize it.”

“I know what it is, don’t worry.”

My eyes followed Gemma, who was on the way to the restroom. I had trouble taking my eyes off her. When Will and Noemi followed her outside, I went after them. “I’ll take care of it,” I said to Diego, who was about to follow.

I found all three of them in front of the restroom door. Gemma's fists were balled. She looked like a fierce princess about to enter a throw down. I was half tempted to let this play out. Seeing Gemma kick ass in this dress would be the highlight of my year.

"Sleeping your way to the top?" Will asked. "I never thought Savio would go for plain fare in bed." Noemi let out a nasty laugh, and Gemma's body tensed. I knew that look on her face.

I stepped between them, grabbed Will by the throat and thrust him against the wall. His nose had healed. He hadn't learned a lesson, it seemed.

I nodded at Noemi who was trying to sneak away. "You stay where you are!"

I leaned close to Will, whispering, "Your mother deep throated me a week ago. Did you know she likes to have her hair pulled while eating dick? I thought you should know I fucked your dear mommy to get back to you for talking shit to my fiancée in school."

Will made a horrified little noise. "You bastard..."

I tightened my hold.

"You think that money is going to protect you in this city?" I growled, fingers digging into his skin. "My brothers and I got rid of many rich cocksuckers when we claimed power in the West. If you aren't careful, you'll be next." I pulled my knife and rested the tip against the sensitive skin under Will's thumb. He squirmed with a whimper.

"A punch made you cry?"

He began to shake in my hold. My lips curled. I wasn't used to this kind of cowardice. In the Camorra, we honored bravery and strength but in the outside world these values were lost.

"Savio," Gemma said quietly.

I nicked his skin with the blade before I lowered the knife. Will's eyes practically bulged. I released him and he dropped to his knees, peering up at me. Gemma still hovered behind me, her expression frozen in shock. "Fuck off," I told Will. He shot to his feet and disappeared.

I turned to Noemi who quivered. She didn't have to worry I was going to hurt her physically. That wasn't my style with women. There were better ways to pay her back. "Given your miserable skills, I guess Will taught you how to suck cock?"

Her cheeks turned red, her eyes darting to Gemma.

"You were the worst lay of my life, so run after Will. His standards are lower." She dashed away, looking like she was about to bawl.

Gemma held her purse in a death grip, her cheeks bright red. "You slept with Noemi?"

That was why she looked so glum? I sheathed my knife. "I slept with many girls. It's why dear Mrs. Reynolds was in favor of hosting this party. She didn't want word about our intermezzo to get out."

Not to mention that Mr. Reynolds didn't want people to know that he preferred the dicks of ladyboys to his wife's pussy any day.

Gemma's face flashed with horror. "You slept with Will's mother?"

I paused, reconsidering how much I'd share. I'd done many things with Mrs. Reynolds. Her tastes were of the kinkier sort. "It won't happen again, believe me. It was only a revenge fuck. I prefer younger women."

Gemma's expression morphed into anger. She raised her hand with my ring. "What about this? Doesn't this mean anything to you?"

"It means you are mine, and that I'm going to crush every fucker who doesn't get the message."

She threw her purse at me, hitting me square in the chest. I laughed in surprise. Then she took her pumps off and threw them at me as well, but I managed to dodge the pointy things. "Keep the stupid purse and shoes. I don't want your gifts!"

"That dress was a gift as well," I said teasingly.

For a moment, she seemed to consider taking it off, but then Gemma whirled around and stormed away.

What did she think? That I was going to turn into a monk because of our engagement? I picked up the purse and pumps from the floor and followed after her at a leisured pace.

FOURTEEN



18 months later

I stared down at the obnoxious ring, how Diego put it. The cursive S and the F held the diamond between them. Diego was absolutely right. This wasn't a heartfelt engagement ring. For Savio, it had been a joke, a game. It hadn't changed anything for him. He'd staked his claim, and everyone backed off.

When in the past, everyone in school had whispered behind my back because of my modest dresses, they did it now because of who owned me. It wasn't really more than that. Not for Savio. He'd wanted me for himself and so he'd staked his claim.

Then he'd moved on. He didn't wear a ring. Nothing in his life showed that he was mine like I was his.

Feeling eyes on me, I looked up to where Diego leaned in the doorway to my room.

"I told you it was a bad idea," he said.

"Thanks."

He walked in and sank down on the bed beside me. "Savio is a player, Gemma."

"At some point he'll have to stop. I'll turn eighteen in two days and he hasn't even talked to Dad about a possible date for our wedding."

“Because he doesn’t want to give up his man-whoring ways anytime soon. He enjoys his bachelor days.”

I swallowed down my hurt, embracing my anger. “Has he slept with half of Reno?”

Shortly after our engagement, Remo Falcone had sent Savio and Adamo to Reno. For one, the designated Underboss was still a teenager, so it was Savio’s job to keep everyone in line up there because he didn’t have a family to take care of yet. Since that day I’d hardly ever seen him. I wasn’t allowed to go up to Reno, unlike Diego who’d spent a couple of weeks at a time there over the last sixteen months.

Diego avoided my eyes. “There’s a reason why Remo sent his brother away, and it wasn’t only because of the teenage Underboss. He wanted Savio away from you because even Remo didn’t trust his brother to keep his hands to himself.”

I huffed. “It’s not as if it was only his choice. Trust me, I wouldn’t have let him touch me after all the girls he’s been pawing.”

Diego gave me a look. “Maybe now you wouldn’t. Back then you were still more infatuated. Now you see him for who he is: a player.”

That was true. I was still infatuated. However, being engaged to the man of my dreams was far from the fairytale I’d hoped for. Savio kept sleeping around. Maybe I should have seen it coming. We weren’t in a relationship yet. An engagement in our circles was a formal statement, nothing emotional, especially for the men.

“He’s coming back to Vegas tomorrow,” Diego said suddenly.

My heart sped up. “What?”

Diego regarded my face with blatant worry. “Like you said, you’re almost eighteen.”

“What do you mean? Is he going to agree to a wedding soon?”

Diego groaned. “Gemma, that’s not why. Savio thinks you’re ready to be plucked now. Remo didn’t want that to happen as long as you were still too young, but now he won’t stop his

brother anymore. Savio will amp up the charm to get into your pants.”

“Good luck with that,” I muttered. “How many girls has he been with while you were around?”

Diego got up. “Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answer to.”

“I want an answer, believe me.” I needed an answer because I needed my fury as armor against Savio and my still simmering crush.

“Too many to count, and I doubt he’ll stop now that he’s back here. Not unless he gets it from you, but even then...”

I jumped to my feet, too agitated to stay still. “He won’t get anything before we’re married. If he thinks this stupid ring entitles him to anything, I’ll kick him in the balls.”

“Oh, he won’t get a chance to try anything. I’ll make sure of that.”

“You don’t have to hover all the time, Diego,” I muttered. “I can handle myself even against Savio.”

Diego hesitated. “The Falcones are powerful. Remo is my Capo and Savio is my boss, too. He might think he can break the rules of our world and do things before you are married. Savio knows how to sweet talk girls into doing what he wants.”

“I hear you aren’t bad at sweet talking girls into your bed either,” I teased to lighten his mood. His constant worry about me and our financial situation had turned him way too serious.

Diego let out a groan. “Don’t listen to stories about me. They’re not meant for your ears.” He became serious again, leaning forward to stare in my eyes. “I’m serious, Gemma. Dad and I gave you a lot of leeway when we allowed you to fight, but I need to make sure you don’t cross other boundaries as well.”

I rolled my eyes at him, but the worry in his eyes stopped me from provoking him. “Diego, you don’t need to worry. I believe in waiting until marriage,” I said quietly. This serious sex talk drove a blush into my cheeks. “Maybe I like to fight and use words I’m not supposed to, but I’m still a girl. A girl raised with Mom’s values and no sweet talk will make me give anything away before I’m married.” Especially not after how Savio has

been acting. He had a lot to make up for. Maybe now that he was back in Las Vegas, he'd finally try to build our relationship and prepare everything for our wedding.

Diego's eyes softened and he touched my leg, looking proud.

I squirmed. "Don't look so proud. I didn't win the Nobel prize."



Toni and I spent the afternoon of my birthday in a beautiful spa, getting massages and rubs—a gift from the Falcone clan, whom I'd only met at the engagement party so far. Kiara had invited me over for dinner a couple of times, but without Savio, I'd been too shy to follow the invitation. I hadn't seen Savio yet, so I wasn't sure if I'd get a present from him as well.

"You need to give him the cold shoulder," Toni said again. "From what I hear, Savio's messed around with Dakota."

I froze. "You're joking."

She shook her head with an apologetic grimace. She had no reason to be sorry. Savio Falcone had. "You know how he is. I doubt she's the only one."

"She's Diego's Ex! Isn't there some kind of codex against that?" I couldn't believe him. I was so angry, I had to resist the urge to smash something. I curled my hands to fists, trying not to lose it.

Toni's lips thinned at the mentioning of Diego. I wasn't sure what was going on between them, she insisted nothing, but she always got that pinched expression when I mentioned him. "I don't think he cares. It's been years since Diego and Dakota danced the horizontal limbo."

I burst into laughter despite my anger. Someone in the relaxation area shushed us and I clamped a hand over my mouth to stifle the sound.

Toni shrugged. "It's just sex for him. He uses those bitches, Gemma. You don't have to worry. You'll be the one who'll be his wife, not some skanky plaything. Apparently, Dakota is super smug about getting Savio into bed."

“I don’t know what she has to be smug about. As if it’s such an achievement to get Savio to sleep with her. He sleeps with pretty much anything with a vagina,” I muttered.

Toni rolled her eyes. “She’s only one-quarter Italian and still thinks she could be part of our world, stupid ass bitch.”

My eyes widened. Toni hardly ever cussed. I didn’t mention that Toni wasn’t a full-blooded Italian either. Her paternal grandmother had been Corsican, which was why her father hadn’t been allowed to become a Made Man when Benedetto Falcone had still been Capo, even though he had to swear loyalty to the Camorra. Things had changed since then, and he had by now made the official vow.

She shrugged with a grin. “She brings out the worst in me.”

“What if he keeps sleeping around once we’re married?” I asked quietly, hating how insecure I sounded. I wasn’t like that, but for some reason, Savio made me feel that way all the time.

Toni touched my arm. “It’s still some time until your wedding. Maybe he’s trying to sleep around as much as possible now so he won’t feel the urge once you’re married.”

I gave her a look. “I don’t think it works that way. He’s such a player.” I couldn’t believe I was repeating what Diego had been telling me for years, but it was an undisputable truth.

“Many men are. I’m not sure if there’s anything you can do.”

“There’s always something I can do. I’ll talk to him.”

Toni shook her head. “Don’t be crazy. You can’t just tell him what to do before you’re even married. He’s a Falcone for God’s sake.”

“As if I could ever forget. Everyone reminds me. And then there’s this,” I said with curled lips as I raised the atrocity that Savio called an engagement ring. The sight of his initials like a goddamn branding still made my blood boil.

Toni stifled a smile. “I’m sure your wedding ring will be better.”

“I sure hope so.”



Toni's dad picked us up afterward and drove me home. Nobody was in the house when I stepped in. Worry overcame me. I called Diego because he was the only one who usually carried his phone with him. "Did something happen?"

"Sorry, Gemma. The stove in the Capri isn't working again. Dad and I need to get it running. The place is booked tonight. We'll be back as soon as possible." He paused, and I could practically feel his hesitation.

"Is anything with Carlotta?"

Our little baby sister had been born with a heart defect and had spent a great amount of her first year in hospitals, which was why Dad worked even harder in the restaurants to pay for the medical bills. Without the money Diego earned as a Camorrista, we wouldn't get far anyway. That was why I had been spending more time with Toni recently.

"She turned blue today, so Mom and Nonna took her to the ER. I don't know when they'll be back."

"Is she okay? Should I go to the ER?"

"No, they'll do the usual check-ups. She needs a new heart, or this will keep happening." He sighed. In the background, I could hear clanging then Dad cursing.

"I'm sorry, Gemma. We wanted to celebrate with you. Nonna baked a cake. It's in the kitchen."

"Don't worry. I had a great day with Toni in the Spa. I'll put on something comfortable and watch a movie."

"All right. See you later."

I hung up. It was strange being in the house all by myself. Usually there was always someone home and that's how I preferred it. I was about to head upstairs to exchange my jeans and shirt for something more comfortable when the bell rang.

Peering through the peephole, my stomach did a little flip. Savio stood on the doorstep, smiling.

I jerked back, stunned by the strong way my body reacted to his presence. I hadn't seen him in over a year. He'd avoided me, I knew that now, and today he showed up as if nothing had happened.

I opened the door, trying to act casual, even as my emotions warred between fury and delight.

“Happy birthday, Kitty,” Savio said before I could tell him off and pulled out brand-new boxing gloves and shoes from behind his back. I’d been wanting these forever, but they cost too much so I’d kept using Diego’s old things.

My eyes widened and I snatched the shoes from his hands. I preferred to wear shoes when I sparred with Diego because he had a habit of stepping on my feet, and these boxing shoes were ultralight.

Savio smirked. “Good to know that you’re more excited about shoes than your fiancé. A typical girl after all.”

I bit back a comment, actually happy that he was here. The quiet house seriously freaked me out.

“Won’t you ask me in?” Savio asked with open amusement.

I hesitated. I was alone and explicitly forbidden from having male visitors. But Savio was my fiancé.

“I’m alone.”

Savio’s brows drew together. “On your birthday?”

“Emergency in the restaurant and my mom and Nonna had to take Carlotta to the ER.”

“Fuck,” Savio said. “Is she all right?”

His honest concern for my little sister made me forgive him momentarily. “Yeah. Her heart is too weak.” I stepped back and opened the door. Savio strode in, as usual, impeccably dressed in black jeans, white T and leather jacket. He looked impossibly good and it was the worst idea to invite him in when no one was around.

“Your dad and brother need to stop being so stubborn and accept the money my brothers and I offered to lend them.”

“To just interest rates?”

Savio turned and in our narrow corridor that brought us closer than I’d intended. His eyes slid over me. “No interest, Gem. We want to help our men. And we’ll soon be family. We wouldn’t even want it back, but your dad refuses to accept money.”

I nodded. That sounded like Dad and Diego. They both wanted to take care of us without help.

It was strange being alone with Savio, and suddenly I wasn't sure how to act around him. Before seeing him, I'd been furious at him, but now I felt mostly confused.

"You look gorgeous. Eighteen suits you," Savio said and set the boxing gloves down on the sideboard.

"Thanks," I said, then quickly walked past him and into the living room to bring more space between us. Savio followed. He looked relaxed and self-assured as he took me in. He shrugged out of his leather jacket and the tight shirt beneath did nothing to hide his muscles.

I stopped in the middle of the room. Suddenly completely at a loss what to do. I'd never been on a date, of course. I hadn't even spent time with Savio alone except for the few times he'd trained with me when I was younger. This was new to me.

Savio didn't share my hesitation. Of course, he didn't. He came closer and stopped in front of me. "Did you miss me?"

"You distracted yourself pretty good from what I hear, so you probably didn't waste a single thought on me," I bit out.

Savio took another step closer. I tilted my head back to keep an eye on his face, wary of his motives, and worse, my traitorous body. "Did Diego badmouth me again?"

"Is it a lie then?"

"Is what a lie?" he asked in a low voice. His head was closer than before and his gaze slid over my body once more. The possessive glint in his eyes sent a shiver down my back.

I stood my ground, however. I wouldn't let him distract or sweettalk me. Diego's warning and Toni's words about Dakota rang in my head. "That you were with Dakota yesterday and God only knows how many more girls in Reno."

Savio grinned, but there was something dark about it. "It's true." At least he didn't lie, but my stomach turned, all the same, hearing the words. "But it's also true that I thought about you every fucking day. I couldn't get that last image of you in that dress out of my head. You were always in the back of my mind when I was with other girls."

Did he expect a thank you? Anger surged up in me, and I turned around. My skin throbbed and I wanted to scream. “I’m glad to hear that you honor our engagement this much.”

Savio appeared in front of me again. “I *do* honor our engagement. I promised to marry you and I will. I enjoy seeing my initials on you.” He motioned to my ring and I lost it.

“How dare you? You can’t just reserve me like a table in a restaurant and go on living your man-whore life while I sit back and wait for you to make up your mind about our wedding.”

“I’m a Falcone. I can do whatever the fuck I want, Gemma. And I want you, so no one else is going to get you.” He leaned closer. “Nobody will as much as look at you, or I’m going to rip the fucker to shreds, got it?”

I swung my arm back and punched him. Despite his quick reflexes, my knuckles grazed his chin. For once, I’d taken him by surprise. If I hadn’t been this enraged, I would have celebrated my success. I turned on my heel, burning over with rage. An arm wrapped around me and before I could aim a backward kick at Savio, he lifted me off the ground and lowered me to the sofa. I lay flat on my back while he knelt over me and held me down with his bigger body. He didn’t look pissed. The bastard was actually amused by my outburst. “I can’t wait to find out how much of a wildcat you’ll be in bed.”

I couldn’t believe his audacity. “If you think I’ll sleep with you anytime soon, Savio, you’re insane. I’d rather eat one of Diego’s dirty socks than have your hands on me. So if you’re here because of that, you wasted your time.”

Savio leaned down as if he was going to kiss me. I snapped my teeth at him, trying to bite his lip. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to kiss him. I’d spent countless minutes imagining how it would be to kiss Savio, to feel him close, but not like this, not when he kept kissing other girls. “Don’t you dare.”

Savio chuckled then kissed the tip of my nose. “Don’t worry, Gem. I won’t touch you until you’re officially mine. I can wait.” His smile widened. “Especially since no one else will touch you either.”

“You’re not always around, and Diego is neither. There are enough guys who’d love to be with me, Savio.”

It was true and yet an absolutely ridiculous thing to say.

His eyes darkened and my belly did a little flip. “Everyone in this city knows you’re mine, and just remember Gemma, if a guy touches you, Remo, Nino and I are going to dismember him slowly. You know the rumors about how we deal with traitors.” As quickly as it had come, the darkness disappeared from his eyes and was replaced by the usual arrogance. “And we both know it’s me you want, not some loser. You said it yourself, you believe in waiting until marriage, so as your future husband, all your firsts are mine.”

I glared at him. “Get off me.”

He pushed up and jumped to his feet, then he held out his hand. I took it and allowed him to pull me to my feet. “I was thinking, why don’t we work out together again? That way, we can spend more time together doing something we both enjoy until you’re ready to try something else we’ll both enjoy even more.”

“You’re unbelievable.” I stalked away. Despite my annoyance, his stupid comment made me smile. I wasn’t even sure why I couldn’t resist his strange humor. “There’s cake in the kitchen if you’re hungry.”

It was a chocolate cake with eighteen candles. I didn’t bother lighting them. That was Dad’s job. Instead, I cut two pieces off, sad that Mom wasn’t doing it like every year. Feeling Savio’s eyes on me, I tried to get a grip. “I’ll get plates.”

“Wait a sec,” he said, grabbing a lighter from the counter. He lit up all the candles then raised his eyebrows expectantly. “I know you already got your biggest wish, but give it a try.”

I scoffed. “You’re impossibly arrogant, do you realize that? Who says you were my biggest wish?” I blew out the candles, feeling lighter than before.

Savio leaned forward, peering into my eyes. “So what was your wish?”

“I’m not going to tell you.”

“I bet I know it. You want to see my tattoo.”

“No,” I said quickly. Though, I was really curious about it.

Savio narrowed his eyes. “You’re a bad liar.”

I was, but I hadn’t lied. Since Carlotta had been born, I had only one wish. “I want Carlotta to become healthy, that’s all.” My voice broke and I quickly looked away from Savio’s intense gaze. Tears prickled in my eyes. Way to go to ruin the mood.

“Hey,” Savio murmured and pulled me against him. It was an innocent hug, but the feel of his warm, strong chest so close still awakened my body.

His palm stroked my back, again the most innocent touch, but my insides seemed to come alive with a need that terrified me. Clearing my throat, I pulled away. “How about we eat cake and watch a movie. Or do you have somewhere to be?”

Another woman, maybe.

“I have all night,” Savio said as he took our plates and carried them into the living room. We sank down on the sofa. I reached for the plate that Savio held out to me and took a bite.

Savio had already shoved a big chunk of the chocolate cake into his mouth. “Your nonna is a goddess in the kitchen.”

“She’ll slap you for the blasphemy if you tell her that, and she won’t even care that you’re a Falcone.”

When he lifted the fork to his mouth again, my eyes fell on the tattoo on his wrist. Not the Camorra tattoo on the right but the broken watch, speared by a knife on the other. Savio noticed my gaze of course and some of the lightness disappeared from his eyes. I didn’t want to ruin the mood but at the same time, I wanted to find out more about the man whom I’d marry in the not too distant future—hopefully.

“What’s the meaning of that tattoo?” I asked, and Savio relaxed again. Had he thought I’d ask him about his mother and how she’d tried to kill him and his brothers? Savio turned his body to me and extended his arm so I could see the tattoo more closely. The watch was so intricately inked that it looked real, just like the knife which had been driven into it from above. If you didn’t know they were there, you could even miss the scars. I didn’t dare to touch him, not just because I worried this spot was too personal for him but also because I didn’t trust myself this close to Savio. My body had never before felt this abuzz.

“The watch symbolizes time and mortality. People always tell you time’s running out. We have limited time on this earth and that we have to make every moment count.”

“But don’t you live by that credo? You seem to be enjoying your life more than a little, so why the knife destroying the watch?”

“Because I don’t let anyone, not even time or death, dictate how I live my fucking life. So the knife stops the watch from ticking, from reminding me that every moment could be the last. I don’t need reminding.”

I released a small breath. “I feel as if I haven’t really lived yet. You have already experienced so much, and I haven’t.”

Savio moved closer and cupped my face. I became still, as a war raged inside of me. Part of me wanted to kiss him, to feel his closeness, but the other part couldn’t commit to this, not as long as Savio couldn’t commit fully. He couldn’t have part of me, when he saw fit. I wouldn’t allow him to half-ass this. Yet, I didn’t pull back.

Savio searched my eyes. “You’ll experience everything you want with me, Kitty.”

His face came closer and I still didn’t move. My brain didn’t function, even when my mind started screaming at me to stop this.

Our lips were only a couple of inches apart. The lock turned and I jerked away.

“Gemma, I’m home!” Diego called.

I quickly moved to the other end of the sofa, as far from Savio as possible, before Diego stepped in. He was carrying takeout from the Capri. His smile fell the moment he saw Savio. His eyes darted from him to me. “What’s going on here?” He stalked into the room, dropped the takeout boxes on the table then glowered down at us.

Savio leaned back and motioned at the cake. “We celebrated Gemma’s birthday. I didn’t want her to be alone so I kept her company.”

Diego looked at me for confirmation.

“I was lonely.”

Savio’s expression flickered with protectiveness, but then he stood. “I’ll leave.”

Diego shook his head. “I brought enough food. You can eat with us.”

Savio seemed as surprised about his offer as I was. He met my gaze. “What do you think, Gem?”

“Stay.” I didn’t say more.

Savio sank back down and stretched out his legs while he rested his arms on the backrest. His shirt rode up, revealing those infamous horns. Noticing my gaze, Savio smirked.

“What have you got?” I asked Diego who was unpacking the boxes.

“Lasagna and gnocchi.” He fixed Savio with a hard stare. “Why don’t you grab plates and cutlery?”

Savio heaved a sigh but pushed to his feet. “So you can interrogate your sister? Don’t worry, no traditions have been broken.”

He left for the kitchen and Diego turned to me. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” I said with a roll of my eyes.

“Because I came home?”

I flushed. Diego cursed. “I knew it. I just knew it!”

“Nothing happened, Diego. We almost kissed, but we didn’t and we won’t.”

“Next time you’re considering kissing Savio, just remind yourself that his mouth has been between another girl’s legs not too long ago.”

My face scrunched up. “Thanks for the image. I didn’t need that.”

“You do. Maybe it’ll keep you from making a mistake.”

Savio came back with plates and cutlery. He scanned my face then cocked an eyebrow at Diego. “What kind of horror story did you tell now?”

“Only the truth.”

“That’s always the worst,” Savio said with a grin, and Diego actually laughed.

“You’re both idiots.”

They both settled on the sofa, Diego between Savio and me. Savio sent me a wink over my brother’s head. I smiled. I had missed him. Everything. Even his annoying arrogance and teasing smirk.

Diego turned on the latest cage fight. Together we ate and chatted about fighting.

Savio enjoyed it as much as I did. Then why couldn’t he finally give up on other girls and really give us a chance? Turn this engagement into more than a sign of his ownership around my finger?

FIFTEEN



Gemma's family invited me over the next day. They wanted to reconnect and probably get me to commit to a wedding date, which wasn't going to happen. Fuck, I was turning twenty-two in two months. I had absolutely no intention of settling down.

Daniele opened the door for me. He seemed to have aged ten years since I last saw him. We shook hands. "The offer stands," I told him as a sort of greeting. He knew what I was referring to.

"No," he said immediately. "I'll take care of my family. I may not have much, but I have my pride."

I tilted my head, even if I thought his pride was endangering his family. I followed him into the house, three bouquets of flowers in my hands. Diego nodded at me as he carried a huge dish with lasagna over to the dining table. Nonna and Gemma were behind him, carrying a salad bowl and antipasti. Gemma sent me a small smile. She seemed to have gotten rid of her modest dresses once and for all. The skirt and blouse she was wearing weren't exactly sexy, but she made them look that way. Her dark hair fell in dark curls down her bare arms.

Nonna clucked her tongue, drawing my attention to her, only to be met with a frosty glare. I smiled at her, but she didn't return the gesture. I walked up to her and held out the flowers. She took them with narrowed eyes.

Then I handed the next bouquet to Gemma's mom who'd entered the room with a pale Carlotta on her arms. I gently stroked the little girl's head before I finally stepped up to Gemma

and handed her the bouquet with red roses. Then I leaned down and kissed her cheek, which was a sign for Diego and Daniele to back off. Gemma was my responsibility as my fiancée. “You know how to wrap people around your fingers,” she said with a small laugh. “But you’re playing with fire.”

“I can handle your dad and Diego.”

“I’m not referring to them. If I was you, I wouldn’t turn my back on Nonna today.”

Gemma pulled back and pressed her nose into the roses, a teasing twinkle in her eyes.

Her nonna was giving me a death glare that might even impress Remo. We settled around the table. Of course, I wasn’t allowed to sit beside Gemma. Diego and Daniele took the seats beside me.

“So how are things in Reno?” Daniele asked halfway into the dinner when Nonna’s prodding about the wedding got a bit too forceful.

“Shaky. Cristiano is of age now, but soldiers don’t like to be ordered around by a teenager. Only Remo’s protection is keeping him in power, but you know my brother. He thinks a true leader can control his men, so I don’t know how long Cristiano can hope for our support.”

“Remo is the best Capo,” Daniele said.

“He is,” I agreed.

“I hear you’re looking for another Enforcer to support Fabiano,” Diego said suddenly.

“We are. He’s been taking over more administrative jobs recently. He’s probably going to become Captain of the Betting Department.” Remo would have made him Underboss by now if Fabiano didn’t want to stay close to us. I regarded Diego closely, knowing where this was going. Enforcers earned a percentage of the money they collected. If you were good, that meant an assload of cash.

“Do you think Remo would consider me for the job?”

Gemma’s eyes widened.

“Diego,” Claudia whispered, shocked.

Diego ignored all of them. Daniele's restrained reaction showed that he had been involved in Diego's decision. Diego had helped me deal with a few Bratva members. He didn't enjoy torture like I or my brothers did. He did what was necessary. I wasn't sure if he would be a good Enforcer, but his family needed the money. "If you throw your hat in the ring, I'm sure he'll choose you."

Nonna shook her head and began clearing up the plates. Gemma soon joined her, but both were listening in. My eyes lingered on Gemma's enticing shoulder, remembering how I'd kissed the spot too long ago, then I focused on her mouth, a mouth I desperately wanted to claim.

"I don't want the job only because you're going to marry my sister," Diego said sharply.

I dragged my eyes away from Gemma. "Remo would never favor you for any reason but your qualifications." That wasn't exactly true, but he didn't need to know that. I'd talk Remo into giving Diego the job and had to hope he could deal with the duties of an Enforcer.

Daniele stood and helped Gemma's mom bring Carlotta to bed while Gemma and her nonna cleaned the dishes in the kitchen.

"If you keep undressing my sister with your eyes, I'll kick your ass," Diego muttered when we were alone.

I grinned. "She's doing the same. Don't tell me you can't see how she's looking at me. Gemma wants to see my bull."

"Keep your dick in your pants around my sister."

"If she wants my dick, she can have it, no matter what you say."

Suddenly Nonna stepped up to us and hit us both over the head.

Gemma was right behind her, her eyes shot open in shock, and Diego, too, gave me a stunned look. Did they think I'd strike down their grandma just because she'd slapped me? Even Remo, who was as twisted as they come, would at least hesitate before killing a granny. And I actually liked Nonna. Even if her beliefs

belonged in the middle ages and she wanted to take a potato peeler to my balls.

“I don’t want to hear that word again.”

“Nonna,” Diego said fiercely. “You can’t hit Savio. You know who he is.”

“Of course, I do,” she said, regarding me like a schoolboy in need of reprimand. “He’s a young man lacking manners.”

“Ahh, Mrs. Bazzoli, I didn’t mean any disrespect.” I gave her my most charming smile as I cupped her hands in mine before kissing the back of one. “I apologize.”

She raised one hand in warning, but she was smiling. “Oh, you’re a dangerous one, aren’t you? My Gemma needs to be careful around that charm of yours.”

Nonna glanced at Gemma. “That boy can charm the frock right off a nun, Gemma. Be vigilant.”

Gemma bit her lip. “Don’t worry, Nonna.” Her cheeks were flushed in mortification. “Would you like a sweet treat? We made tiramisu.”

“I’m always up for a sweet treat,” I said.

Nonna narrowed her eyes, obviously unsure if I’d made an innuendo. I gave her an innocent look. She muttered something unintelligible in Italian and disappeared in the kitchen. Gemma glanced after her then turned to me. Diego’s phone rang that moment and he got up to get it.

I stood and pulled Gemma toward me. Her eyes widened as they darted to the kitchen door. I used our moment of privacy to wrap my arms around Gemma. “Savio,” she hissed. “Nonna could be back any moment.”

Nonna was still clanging in the kitchen. “Come on, Gem. Won’t you give me a little something for the pain I suffered through your grandma’s hand?”

“You can handle pain.”

“That’s true,” I said quietly, bringing us closer. She glanced at my lips then quickly looked away. “So can you, but you’re scared of pleasure.”

Her expression hardened and she pulled away. “I’m going to get you a piece of tiramisu.”

It seemed I had hit the nail on the head. Kitty was scared of pleasure, which meant she wanted me like I wanted her. She only needed a little nudge in the right direction.



Savio had amplified his charm since his return to Las Vegas two weeks ago. He’d come over several times to spend time with my family and me, and I knew it was because he thought he could impress me that way, and it was working.

Especially when Savio talked to Carlotta, I couldn’t stop my heart from swelling.

He knew it.

Today was the first time we’d be allowed to fight together in years. I could barely contain my excitement, but at the same time, I had to admit I was nervous. Of course, Diego would be there as a chaperone, but still.

When I faced Savio in the cage and saw the teasing twinkle in his eyes, I knew he had something planned. I kept my eyes firmly above his waist, trying to ignore the horns.

Diego pretended to be pummeling the boxing bag when, in truth, he kept an eye on me and Savio.

For good reason, it turned out, because Savio used the fight to bring us as close as possible, as often as possible.

None of the touches were inappropriate and yet they felt like they were. When I landed on my back after another futile high

kick, Savio crouched over me, my arms pressed into the ground above my head. His other hand clamped down on my hip and for some reason I could feel the touch between my legs.

We stared at each other, breathing harshly.

“I think this was enough training for one day,” Diego muttered.

Savio straightened with obvious reluctance and pulled me with him. I quickly took a step back. Diego’s phone rang again. He cursed and picked up, nodding grimly. “I’ll be there in five minutes.”

He hung up. “Fuck.”

“What’s the matter?” I asked as I climbed out of the cage.

“The stupid stove again. That thing is only giving us trouble. We should have bought a new one a long time ago. I need to get over there immediately.”

“I need to shower and stretch,” I said.

“I can take Gemma home,” Savio offered at once.

Diego glanced between him and me, obviously suspicious of my fiancé’s motives, and probably for good reason. “All right. But I probably won’t be long. I might be able to pick you up.”

I nodded. “Help Dad. I can handle this.”

Savio cocked an eyebrow.

With a last warning glance at Savio, Diego left. I sank down to the ground and stretched out my legs, then touched my feet with my fingertips, feeling the slight tug of my hamstrings.

Savio lowered himself beside me. “I didn’t think Diego would agree. He’s been slacking with his guard duties recently.”

“You’re my fiancé. That’s why. It’s only a matter of time before we’re married and I’m no longer his responsibility.”

Savio nodded, but as usual, didn’t comment when it came to our wedding. He touched his feet as well. As a kickboxer, you needed to be flexible, and Savio was. That was why he could do the most amazing high kicks.

My eyes kept checking Savio out as we went through the stretching routine, and I caught him doing the same with my

body. I was flushed when we were finally done.

Grabbing a towel, I headed for the locker room but stopped when Savio followed close by. “I need to shower and get dressed.”

He grinned. “I know. So do I. There’s enough room for both of us, don’t you think?”

I stared. “I won’t change in front of you, much less shower.”

“Scared?” Savio murmured, leaning down. The challenge in his eyes was a trap, and yet I stepped into it.

“Of course not.” Savio pushed the door open and motioned for me to step in.

I shook my head. “I’m not going to be naked in front of you.”

“Then go ahead and change. Once you’re in the last shower stall I can’t see you if I stay in the front.”

“Don’t you dare take a peek. I mean it, Savio.”

“Go in, Kitty. I won’t take a peek, don’t worry.”

I entered the changing room. My stomach was buzzing with a billion butterflies from the feel of it. What was I doing? Every night I lay awake, touching myself in the dark as I imagined Savio’s touch.

Savio closed the door, waiting outside. “Hurry up. I need a cold shower.”

I quickly got out of my gym clothes, keeping an eye on the door, then grabbed a towel and clean clothes. The moment I was in the shower, I called for Savio to come in. My voice was croaky.

I turned the water on but regretted it when I couldn’t hear Savio anymore. What if he didn’t keep his promise and came to the last stall. I was proud of my body. I knew he’d be pleased, so it wasn’t that, but I was scared like Savio had said. Not of him doing something I didn’t want. Savio wasn’t the type to force a woman. I’d never heard those kinds of rumors about him. He was too vain for that. He wanted the girl to yearn for his touch, not fear it.

And I yearned for it, despite my traditional upbringing, despite Nonna's and Mom's and Dad's and Diego's warning words.

I washed my hair quicker than ever before then turned off the water. Savio was still showering from the sound of it. I dried off and got dressed. I was pulling my sneakers on when the water in the stall at the other end stopped. Savio reached outside and gripped the towel.

I could have left the room without tying my laces. I could have turned around. I could have...

Savio stepped out of the shower stall, the towel slung loosely around his waist, only held up by the hand holding it against his body.

I let go of my laces and straightened.

Savio stood still, allowing me my appraisal. The towel hung much lower than his boxing shorts and half of the horns and the top of the bull's head teased me. My mouth ran dry, but at the same time heat pooled between my legs. I needed to get away, needed to turn around, but I was immobile.

Savio took a step closer and I stiffened, scared of his effect on me, of my body's reaction, of my lack of restraint.

Savio stopped, searching my face. I wasn't sure what he saw, but he shook his head with a harsh exhale. "Kitty, you only need to say the word and I'll give you what you want."

I wanted him, only not in the way he thought. Not only in that way. I wanted him to be mine first, only mine. Savio had been doing this with too many girls. For him, it was nothing special. Even the ring on my finger didn't change that.

He lightly tugged at his towel, one corner of his mouth lifting upward. "How about I give you a little decision help? You have been eying my tattoo in secret for a long time. What do you think?"

I stared, unable to form a coherent word. I shook my head no, because I needed to get a grip as long as I still could but it was too late. Savio had already released the towel. It fell to his feet.

I couldn't breathe. My eyes took in the tattoo of the bull's head, magnificent and imposing, right above his... Oh help.

Savio chuckled. The dose of reality I needed. Anger replaced my surprise and desire. Not bothering to grab my gym bag, I stormed out of the changing room.

“Kitty, come on! It’s not going to bite!”

His obvious amusement only fueled my fury at him. He thought I was his toy, another one of his girls. Bastard. I didn’t stop running until I was outside. My hair was wet, so I shivered as the cold February air hit me, but I didn’t care. I needed to get away from Savio, his arrogance and most of all, his body—which was sin turned to flesh.

I’d left my phone and everything else in the gym, so I couldn’t even call Toni—calling Diego was absolutely out of the question.

It was starting to turn dark, and despite my fighting skills, I wasn’t comfortable walking in this area by myself. Home was too far away. That left me with only one choice: going to the Arena. It was the closest to the gym.

I kept jogging, even if it meant my shower had been for nothing. After fifteen minutes, I reached the bar. I could only hope that Toni was there by some stroke of luck.

I froze in my tracks when I saw Diego’s car in the parking lot. Hadn’t he said he had to help Dad in the restaurant?

Frowning, I entered the Arena through the front door. The bar was still deserted as it wouldn’t open for another hour. I walked past the bar and into the back area. The corridor was as quiet as the front of the place, but clanging came from the kitchen. That wasn’t what caught my eye though. The door to Roger’s office was open a gap. I headed in that direction and peered in.

The second shock of the day hit me square in the face. Toni was sitting on her father’s desk and Diego stood between her legs, kissing her, his hands on her waist.

I gasped. Both turned to me. Toni’s face flashed with horror, then guilt. Diego grimaced. Could this day get any worse?

I backed away, completely shaken. How hadn’t I noticed anything? How long had this been going on? I turned and walked away.

“Gemma!” Toni called. “Wait!”

Diego caught up with me and grabbed my elbow. “What are you doing here?” He took in my wet hair and ruffled appearance. “What happened? Did Savio do something?”

I stared at him, then at Toni. She was biting her lip, looking like she was about to cry. Did she think I was mad at her for dating my brother? It was an icky thing to consider, but nothing I’d get mad over. That she hadn’t told me bothered me.

Diego shook me slightly. “Gemma, tell me right this fucking second what happened. Did he touch you?”

Toni approached us slowly.

I shook my head.

Diego forced me to look into his eyes. “What the fuck did he do?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“You don’t look like nothing!” he snarled. “Fuck it. I’m heading over there and talk to him. I swear if he touched you, I’m going to rip his dick off.”

He stormed away. “Stay with Antonia! I’ll pick you up later.”

I stood, stunned. When he was gone, I looked at my best friend.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry, Gemma. Please don’t be mad at me.”

“I’m not.”

“You look mad.”

I was mad. Not at her. I was mad at myself and Savio, and Diego. “How long has this been going on?”

Toni shrugged. “A few weeks.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? I thought we could tell each other everything.”

She blushed. “I was worried about how you’d react.”

I linked our fingers. “You know I’d support you with anything. Even if seeing you kiss my brother makes me want to bleach my brain.” I grinned and finally she smiled back.

“Come on,” she said, tugging me into the office, even if the desk now held disturbing images for me. We sank down on the couch.

“What happened with Savio?”

“Nothing. I mean...” I flushed. “I saw him naked. Not on purpose. He just removed his towel to show me his tattoo.”

Toni’s eyes widened. “You saw all of him?”

I nodded, biting my lip, torn between embarrassment, anger, and giddiness.

“And?”

“Don’t tell me you want me to describe his you-know-what!” I wouldn’t even know where to start. Even that part of Savio had been magnificent and a bit intimidating if I was being honest.

“Was he excited?”

I covered my face with my hands. “Toni...”

“Come on, tell me.”

“No, he wasn’t. Not really.” He hadn’t exactly been soft, but not hard either. But what did I know?

I fixed her with a stare. “Now it’s your turn to answer my questions. What’s going on between you and Diego? I thought you weren’t in love with him anymore.”

Toni shrugged. “I’m not in love with him.. A few weeks ago, he had business here. Dad wasn’t there so we talked. We hit it off, so we met again and then it happened.”

“You kissed?”

She looked away, and my mouth fell open. “Don’t tell me you slept with my brother?”

Toni looked down at her hands. “It just happened.”

“You had your first time with Diego and didn’t tell me?”

The images forming in my head were too disturbing to bear. Toni had slept with Diego. Dread filled me, remembering Diego’s words. He would marry for tactical purposes. Toni’s family had some money due to the Arena, but they weren’t well-respected in

the Camorra. A marriage to her wouldn't improve my brother's standing.

She nodded slowly. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing to me? You had to sleep with him."

"I wanted to." She sighed. "I know that you think sex belongs in a marriage, that your family is traditional, so I was ashamed to tell you. I was worried what you'd think of me, and I didn't want Diego to get into trouble."

Diego wouldn't get into trouble for sleeping with a girl. He'd been sleeping with girls before and Dad didn't really care. Then part of what Toni had said registered in me. I hugged her tightly. "You are a dumbass, you know that? I'd never judge you for sleeping with a guy, even if that guy is my idiot of a brother. You can do whatever you want, Toni. I love you. If you want to have sex, then that's only your decision."

It wouldn't give her bonus points in our still very traditional society. The mafia didn't play by the rules of the outside world, even the Camorra.

She released a shaky breath and I realized how much this must have bothered her. "I'm so glad that you know. It was horrible not being able to talk to anyone about Diego and me."

Diego and Toni. I simply couldn't wrap my mind around it.

I pulled back. "Are you dating?"

"We didn't really put a label on what we have, but I think we are." She didn't sound certain.

"So how was it?" Then I grimaced, realizing that Toni would have to tell me about doing it with my brother. I really wasn't ready for that conversation. At least it distracted me from Savio's impossible behavior.

Toni made a face. "Do you really want to know?"

I didn't, but Toni was my friend and I could tell that she wanted to share. "Yes, but please be vague."

Toni giggled and I fell in. Her expression became tender—in love, and suddenly I was worried for her. I'd have to talk to Diego the moment he picked me up. "He was very careful. I

didn't think he could be like this. He kept asking me if I was okay."

I tried to keep a neutral face, which was difficult, considering I was imagining Diego with Toni. She regarded me with a knowing look. "You're freaked out, right?"

"It takes some getting used to."

"I know," she said. "But wouldn't it be amazing if we became sisters-in-law?" Alarm bells rang in my head. I wanted nothing more than that, but I wasn't sure about Diego.

My thoughts drifted back to Savio. Toni had taken what she wanted, without care and worry. She was free to do so. Her family wasn't traditional.

Not to mention that Diego, unlike Savio wasn't chasing after every skirt.

"What are you thinking?" Toni asked gently.

"Savio. He's driving me crazy."

"Do you want to sleep with him?"

"I do," I admitted. "But not like this. I just can't allow closeness outside of a committed relationship."

Toni smiled. "Then don't. If he wants you, he needs to work for it. He knew what he signed up for when he agreed to marry you."

Sometimes I wasn't sure if he really knew.

SIXTEEN



I was on my way to my car to search for Gemma. She'd overreacted, but my worry forced me to look for her anyway.

Diego shot into the parking lot and came to a stop with squealing tires. The pissed-as-fuck look on his face could only mean he'd found her first.

He jumped out of the car, not even bothering to close the door before he stormed toward me. I braced myself. I wasn't in the mood for a split lip again.

Diego shoved me hard, causing me to stumble a step back. "What the fuck did you do to my sister?"

"I didn't do anything." I frowned. "What the fuck do you think I did?"

"What do I know? You can never keep your hands to yourself. Gemma looked a mess. Maybe you thought you could steal a taste before the wedding. We both know how bad at patience you are."

I locked gazes with him. "I really hope you're not suggesting that I forced myself on Gemma."

He scoffed. "If that were the case, you'd be dead." He shook his head, taking a deep breath. "What happened, Savio?"

I shrugged. "She kept checking me out, so I showed her my bull tattoo. You should have seen her face." I laughed, couldn't help it.

Fury contorted Diego's expression. "You can't fucking do this! Do you get it?" Diego snarled into my face. "My sister's never seen a naked man and she wasn't supposed to until her fucking wedding night. You had no fucking right to show her your dick."

I had to resist the urge to beat the shit out of him. His tone really pissed me off. Instead, I smirked. "I showed her my tattoo. Besides, I already own your sister, Diego. The ring says it and everyone knows it. She'll see me naked for the rest of her life. So what does it matter?"

He shook with rage. "It matters. She's honorable, and you should treat her with respect. I'll say this again, don't you dare try to touch her before she's officially yours."

"Or what?" I challenged.

"I'll kill you."

I gave him a dark smile. "You won't succeed, Diego. You know I'm the better fighter. I've killed and tortured so many more than you."

"Then I'll die trying. I don't care," he said fiercely, and I could tell he meant it. Diego was my friend, and while I didn't trust him like I did my brothers, I did trust him to some degree.

"Calm the fuck down, all right? Why don't you allow Gemma to decide what she wants to do before our wedding?"

"She wants to wait until her wedding. It's what we believe in!"

"Oh, is that so? Are you magically going to re-virginize yourself before your wedding night?"

As usual, Diego avoided my eyes when I mentioned his goddamn hypocrisy. "That's not even a word."

"Nice comeback," I deadpanned.

He glared. "You're pretty good at hypocrisy yourself."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Come on, you keep sleeping around as if there's no tomorrow but mark my sister as yours so nobody as much as looks at her."

“It’s your tradition that forces me to wait for her. If it was up to me, I’d have fucked her already. Maybe you don’t want to see it, but she wants it too.”

Diego returned to his car and drove off without another word.



I went into the gym at four the next day. Gemma’s usual workout time.

Gemma was pummeling the boxing bag when I entered. She was alone, but Diego couldn’t be far. Her eyes darted to me then she quickly looked away. She was flushed, and I wondered if it was still because she’d seen my dick or from exertion. She ignored me as I approached her. Eventually, she gripped the sides of the bag, breathing harshly.

“Your brother wants to kill me.”

She didn’t say anything, only glared ahead. I moved closer and finally, her eyes met mine.

“He thinks he can tell me what to do.” I took another step toward her so we were almost touching. She raised her head to meet my gaze.

“I think it’s between us what we do before and after our wedding.”

Gemma laughed bitterly. “You don’t get it.”

“Oh, I get that you’ve been hot for me for years and I don’t see why we can’t have fun before we’re married.”

Gemma shoved the bag away, turned on her heel and stormed off. I jogged after her and finally caught up with her in the next room. I backed her into the wall, peering down at her cleavage in the sports bra. She looked up at me. “I’m not one of your other girls, Savio. I’ve been brought up traditionally by my family. My mother raised me with strict values. I believe in the sacred bond of marriage. I believe in giving myself to my husband, and no one else. Nothing will change that. And even a Falcone can’t.”

Surprise washed over me at the vehemence in her voice and the fierceness in her eyes. She meant it. There was not a hint of doubt in her expression. Her crush had led me to believe that she

might be open to a bit of playing outside of the rules. Now I realized I might have misjudged her.

“I’ll be your husband soon, and then everything is mine.”

“But you aren’t yet,” she said firmly. “And until then I won’t give you anything. My family will seek retribution if you take something. They won’t care that you are a Falcone. They will protect my honor.”

Diego’s words from last night flashed in my head, and my anger spiked once more. “They would die.”

She swallowed. “Maybe.”

I leaned down, regarding her olive eyes, resolute and anxious. “They won’t have to seek retribution, Gem. If you want to wait until marriage, I won’t push you.”

Suspicion filled her face. “You won’t? That’s not your usual style.”

My smile widened. She was right. I loved to push her buttons, and it would be difficult not to keep doing so, but this was different. While my brothers and I weren’t Traditionalists, we respected our men and their families, and that included their old-fashioned values. Remo kept reminding me of that fact repeatedly.

Besides, it gave me a thrill knowing that Gemma would only be mine alone, even if the wait until our marriage would prove tricky. But I had other girls for fucking and sucking until then. Maybe the wait would add even more thrill to our wedding night. I tilted my head, bringing our faces closer. Gemma was the full package. Choir girl and sex bomb, a lethal combination of heaven and hell. Being around her, you couldn’t help but want to be sinner and saint, only so you could be closer to her.

“Savio...” Gemma said in warning, bringing her palms up against my chest.

I got that she didn’t want to have sex before our wedding night, but why deprive herself of all the other fun things I could show her? “Is a kiss really so bad? Your mouth is so fucking kissable.”

“Well, your mouth is coming around too much for my taste. You’ve probably kissed more lady parts than most toilet seats.”

My arms gave in from the force of my laughter. Fuck, Gemma was one of a kind. Resting my forehead against the wall, my body pressed into Gemma. “Lady parts?” I repeated between chuckles as I tilted my head down.

Gemma raised her head. We were so fucking close, her lips were begging for me to bridge the few inches between us. “How about you call them what everyone does? Pussy.”

Her cheeks turned red. “I’m not going to take that word into my mouth.” She pushed harder against my chest, but I didn’t budge.

“I’d love to have your pussy in my mouth,” I growled, and doing my usual routine without even thinking about it, I ground myself against the woman in front of me to show her what she was doing to me.

Gemma tensed, her eyes widening in shock. She jerked her knee up and hit my balls. Pain shot through my body and I groaned. She quickly slipped out under my arm and stormed away. “That’s called Bull’s eye!”

Fuck. Anger surged through me. I chased her despite the fucking throbbing in my balls, and I grabbed her wrist. She whirled on me. “Don’t do that ever again,” I growled.

She narrowed her eyes. “How about this then?” She swung her fist at me, aiming straight for my nose. My arm shot up, blocking her assault. I’d been fighting in the cage for years now against guys weighing twice as much as Gemma. She was a good fighter for a small girl, but that was it. I gripped her other wrist and jerked her against me, holding her fast. Her hair had come undone from her ponytail and framed her face in wild curls. “Apologize,” she seethed.

My eyebrows shot up. “I’m not the one who smashed his knee into your *lady parts*.”

“Apologize for disrespecting me.”

I regarded her. She was dead serious.

“If anyone else treated me the way you just did...”

“I’d cut his dick off and let him bleed out,” I finished.

“Do you want people to think I’m someone who can be disrespected? Do you want people to call me your slut like they do your other girls?”

“Nobody would dare because you are my fucking fiancée, because you’ll be a Falcone. That’s a fucking big difference.”

“Then treat me different to your sluts.”

I sighed. “Fine, Kitty. I’ll honor your boundaries from this day on if that’s what you want.”

“I do.”

She’d be the one who had to get herself off with her own hand while I’d just do what I’d always done. The thought of Gemma touching herself wedged itself into my brain.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked suspiciously.

I stepped back with a smirk. “Don’t you need to head home to prepare for your confession this Sunday?”

“You should consider confessing.”

“I don’t want to give the pastor a heart attack.”



Diego came to pick me up. He’d only dropped me off at the gym, claiming he had something to do. I suspected that something was Toni. I’d ask her later. He’d avoided me since I’d caught him with Toni yesterday, had spent our entire drive talking to Dad on the phone as if their conversation about the new opening hours of the Capri couldn’t wait until we were home.

Diego nodded a greeting at Savio who returned it. I used the chance to step away from him and grabbed my gym bag before I followed my brother outside without another look at Savio. “Anything I need to know?” Diego asked when we were in the car.

“No. Anything I need to know about Toni and you?”

His mouth tightened as he started the car and pulled on the street. “There’s no Antonia and me.”

“Really? It didn’t sound that way when she told me about you two.”

He slanted me a wary look. “You talked about me?”

“She’s my best friend, Diego. So, are you two dating?”

Diego made a small noise that could have been confirmation or denial, I couldn’t tell. When I didn’t stop staring, he sighed. “No, we’re not dating, Gemma, and we won’t.”

“But you took Toni’s virginity!”

Diego looked as if he considered jumping out of the driving car. I couldn’t take his comfort into consideration when Toni’s heart was on the line.

“She talked to you about that?” he growled.

“Of course, she did.”

“We’re just having fun, Gemma. Antonia hasn’t been brought up with our values. Her virginity doesn’t have the same importance in her life.”

“Are you serious?” I hissed. “That doesn’t mean it didn’t mean anything. My God, Diego, can you be any more of an asshole?”

“Don’t stick your nose in my business, especially my sex life.”

“I couldn’t care less about your sex life if it didn’t involve my best friend!” I paused. “And ditto, by the way, concerning my sex life with Savio.”

Diego jerked. After a glance at me, he relaxed. “You don’t have a sex life.”

“Yet,” I said, enjoying the tortured look on my brother’s face.

SEVENTEEN



Gemma

Savio didn't try to initiate anything in the months that followed. No word about marriage either. He kept visiting Diego like he'd done in the past, but he'd returned to treating me with a distant respect and the occasional teasing. It wasn't really what I'd hoped for. I'd thought he'd make an effort, not pull back entirely.

It was the beginning of April—Savio's twenty-second birthday, and I baked a cake for him. Even if things between us were currently more distant, I wanted to surprise him with it. One of us had to make an effort, at least.

My phone rang when I was about to pull the cake out of the oven. Nonna frowned, still not happy with me having my own cell phone, but she removed the cake for me. I sent her a smile before I picked up.

"Hey Toni, what's up?"

"Nothing."

She didn't sound like nothing. "Toni?"

Nonna watched me closely. Her feelings toward Toni hadn't changed, and she didn't even know about her and Diego. No one did, except for me.

I headed into the living room, away from Nonna's watchful eyes. Mom was playing on the floor with Carlotta, who had been getting worse. She'd need a heart transplant soon, if we found a heart for her and if Dad got the money we needed for her treatment.

I touched Carlotta's head in passing.

Toni sniffled and my insides tightened. She, unlike me, wasn't a crier. "Diego broke things off today."

I froze. Diego had refused to talk to me about Toni, and she had kept seeing him despite my veiled warning that he might not be serious about her. "What happened?"

"I don't know. He didn't say much. He didn't have much time. Apparently, he's helping Savio with his birthday party."

"Party?" I echoed. I hadn't been invited to a party. A suspicion wormed its way into my head.

"Yeah," Toni said, already sounding more like herself. I wished I could stop crying this quickly. "I asked around a bit. It seems Savio is throwing a big party for friends and fellow Camorrista in a mansion he bought for that purpose. The house party of the year."

Mom regarded me in concern, probably because my face showed my anger. I turned around. "I'm going to kick his ass."

Toni huffed. "I bet Diego broke it off so he could have a blast at the party and fuck as many girls as he can."

"When does the thing begin?"

"Around eight, I think. Why?"

"Because we're going to crash a party tonight."

Silence. "Are you an impostor?"

I choked on a laugh. "I mean it, Toni. Diego's been an absolute ass to you, and Savio hasn't exactly been a model fiancé. I'm so sick of it."

"But how are you going to get your parents to say yes?"

I slanted a look at Mom who was busy distracting Carlotta from her breathing problems. Dad was in the restaurant working all night. Diego, my constant shadow, was busy with party preparations. Nonna would soon watch her favorite telenovela. "Don't worry. Can you pick me up so we can get ready together?"

"Sure, I'll be there in ten minutes. Do you have clothes to wear?"

“Not really. Nothing for a party.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll figure something out.”

I hung up and picked up the cake. “Mom, I’ll take this cake to the Falcone’s as a surprise for Savio. Toni’s driving me there.” Other than me, Toni was allowed to drive. I didn’t even have a license.

Mom nodded distractedly.

I grabbed a jean jacket, then stepped outside. As promised, Toni pulled up a few minutes later in her father’s Mustang. I slipped in. Her nose was slightly red and her eyes still a bit swollen. She glanced at my cake. “Don’t tell me you want to give that to Savio. He didn’t even invite you to his party!”

“I’m invited to coffee tomorrow,” I muttered. “Today I’d obviously be in the way. He’s probably going to bang half of Vegas.”

Toni laughed. “Bang? I didn’t even know you could pronounce that word.”

I poked my tongue out at her. Toni’s home, an apartment not too far from the Arena, was silent when we stepped in, but that was usually the case. Her dad worked even more than mine.

Thirty minutes later, we were both dressed for the party. Toni wore hot pants, Doc Martens and a black bodysuit. I’d squeezed into the only pair of jeans that fit me. Toni wasn’t as curvy as me, so the black fabric hugged my body like a second skin. Above it, I wore a crop top with flowing sleeves and a low neckline that dipped down to my sternum. Toni helped me fixate the fabric with double-sided tape to prevent an embarrassing show of nipple.

“I’d kill for your abs,” Toni said.

“And I’d kill for your legs.”

We smiled at each other. Toni sighed. “Thanks for being there and distracting me.”

“Always. But I’m not sure if this is the best choice as far as distractions go. You’ll see Diego.”

She shrugged. “If I see him with another girl, I can move on.”

Was it really that easy? I wasn't sure how I'd feel if I saw Savio with another woman today. After we were done with our hair and makeup, we took Toni's car to the address that one of the girls in the Arena had mentioned to her.

It was a mansion not too far from the Falcone mansion. The moment we got out of the car, the bass of the party reached us. Different colored lights flashed up.

"He's got a bouncer for his party. He's so damn extra," Toni whispered as we approached the gate where, indeed, a huge man was standing guard.

I knew the man distantly, probably a Camorrista.

"How will we get in?" she asked when we'd almost reached him.

"I have the entrance ticket around my finger." I smiled at the bouncer whose face flashed with recognition. I held up my engagement ring. He stepped back at once. Toni clutched my arm in a death grip as we made our way up the driveway. A few half naked girls were chasing each other with bottles of champagne.

The inside of the house was crowded with people and the irresistible throb of the music. I recognized many faces from school and from the gym. Most of the men were Camorrista while the majority of the girls weren't from Italian families. The usual.

I scanned the crowd for two particular faces. Soon I noticed the appreciative looks of the men surrounding us. I usually didn't wear this much makeup and in the dim light they probably didn't recognize me. A few guys headed our way, pushing each other in our direction until the tallest stopped in front of me and his friend in front of Toni. He grinned and was about to say something when his friend said something to him. His eyes flitted to the ring on my finger and his expression morphed into shock. He looked around then disappeared without a goodbye. Toni shook her head. "With you at my side, I probably won't find a cute guy today. They're all scared of Savio."

My mood dropped.

We fought our way deeper into the house. I could only hope word about my appearance wouldn't reach Savio or Diego. In the

living room, several platforms rose up, on which girls danced in different states of undress.

Toni gripped my arm tightly. I followed her gaze to Diego who was dancing with a blond girl, his hands on her ass and his tongue in her mouth.

Toni scowled. "I knew it."

"Do you want me to go over and break his nose?"

"No," she said firmly. "He's free to do as he pleases, but so am I." She searched the crowd until she spotted a guy who seemed to be her type. She smiled. That was all it took. He came over to us at once.

My attention was distracted by a familiar face who'd just entered the room in the back. Savio. He had his arms wrapped around two girls, one on each side. He led them over to a sofa then sank down. One girl immediately sat down on his lap, the other began kissing him.

Bile traveled up my throat, followed by a rage unlike anything I'd ever felt before. How dare he? I could barely breathe. The girl on his lap reached down between them. I knew what she was reaching for. Nobody seemed to care that Savio was getting it on in public. Others were doing the same. This was same business as usual. Savio didn't even try to hide his ways.

Toni sent me a worried look, ignoring the guy in front of her. I gave her a shaky smile. "I'll grab a drink."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, I'll be back soon." I pushed through the crowd, never taking my eyes off Savio. When I was almost at the table with the drinks, I could see him from the side. The girl's hand was massaging him through his pants.

I grabbed a beer, clutching it in a death grip. Tearing my eyes away from Savio, I peered out of the huge window front. An illuminated pool was outside. Naked guests splashed each other in it.

"Hey pretty lady," a deep voice said.

I turned to the voice. The face, too, was distantly familiar. He smiled, and I hid my ring behind my beer.

“Have we met before?” he asked.

I glanced at his Camorra tattoo. “Probably,” I said with a teasing smile. He didn’t recognize me without the ring because nobody expected me to be here. Our girls weren’t allowed to attend.

He moved a bit closer and leaned down to my ear when the music was turned up another notch. “What’s your name?”

He stood close, too close for my taste, so I took a tiny step to the side. I hadn’t come here to flirt with other men. That wasn’t how I’d pay Savio back. I didn’t want to sink to his level. A female screech rang out. I looked toward the sound and stared at Savio. The girl who’d been fondling him sat on the floor and he was standing. Had he thrown her to the floor?

The look on his face called to a primal part in me, awakening a strange animal fear I hadn’t known I was capable of.

He shoved people out of the way as he stalked toward me. The guy beside me glanced from me to him and took a step back from me as if I was contaminated. Savio reached us, looking like he was about to kill someone.

The guy raised his hands. “I didn’t touch her. We just talked. I didn’t know who she was.”

Savio gripped him by the throat and shoved him right through the French doors behind us. Glass splintered, the noise bursting through the music like a wakeup call. Everyone stared. First at me and Savio, then at the guy who lay bleeding among broken glass. I didn’t get the chance to see if he was seriously injured because Savio grasped my wrist and pulled me toward the staircase then up to the second floor. Trying to escape his grip was futile because I couldn’t find my footing.

He pushed into one of the bedrooms and threw the door shut. He looked absolutely livid. I’d never seen him like that. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Excuse me? I wasn’t the one getting it on with two girls!”

“You flirted with one of my soldiers.”

My eyes bulged. “I didn’t flirt. And you pushed a guy through a window for talking to me!”

“I told you what would happen if a guy touched you.”

“He didn’t touch me! We talked!”

“He wanted to touch you, believe me,” he said in a low voice, backing me into the door. “How could he not?” His eyes dragged over my stomach and then he reached out to touch my abs.

I shoved his hand away. “You are not going to touch me.”

His eyes snapped up to mine. “Fierce Kitty protecting her virtue until our wedding day, how precious.” He moved even closer and I could smell alcohol on his breath.

“You keep yourself entertained,” I gritted out. “You probably would have slept with one of those skanks if I hadn’t shown up.”

“I already fucked the blond skank, Kitty, and I’ll fuck the other skank once I’ve made sure you’re safely home.”

I tried to push him away, but he braced himself to both sides of me. “If you don’t back off, I’m going to kick you in the balls.”

He tilted his head and smiled, then he stepped back. He ran a hand through his hair. “I’ll call one of my brothers. They can take you home.”

We weren’t really dating yet, so what he did wasn’t even cheating, but it was so disrespectful that it hurt all the same. “So you’re sending me home so you can sleep with the next girl?”

He pulled out his phone, ignoring me completely.

I slapped the phone out of his hand, unable to stifle my anger. “When do you think you’ll stop sleeping around? I’m sick of this.”

“Who says I will stop at all?”

Was he really suggesting what I thought? That he’d keep sleeping around once we were married? I narrowed my eyes and jabbed my finger into his chest. “I don’t care if you’re a Falcone, if you and your brothers rule over this city, I won’t tolerate cheating. The moment we’re married, you’re mine and if you as much as kiss another girl, I’m gone. I’ll leave and no one, not my family, not my brother, not even your brother Remo will be able to make me stay. I’ll pack my things and find someone who knows how to treat a woman right.”

Savio's face twisted with rage. He backed me into the wall. "What makes you think you can make fucking demands like that? I think you forget the nature of our arrangement. Marriage will make me your fucking owner, not the other way around. I can do whatever the fuck I want, can fuck whoever the fuck I want, and fuck you whenever the fuck I want."

My lips fell open in shock.

Savio nodded, his eyes harsh. "I own you. I own your lips and your tits and your pussy. I own every fucking inch of you, Gemma." He pressed his palm to my stomach. "And if I want to touch you, I do."

I slapped him hard across the face. He gripped my wrists and pressed his body into mine so I couldn't bring my knee up. I struggled but stood no chance. A battle raged in his eyes. "Don't slap me ever again."

I only glared, not trusting my voice.

"I know you think you know how to fight, but you've never fought a real fight in your life, Gem. You live in a world of fairytales and Disney princes, but that's not how the world works. It's an ugly place. A place where men don't want to carry you on their hands, they want to see you on your knees, sucking their dick. They want to fuck those silly dreams straight out of you. I know I do."

I could feel the first treacherous prickling in my eyes.

He breathed harshly and then he shoved away from the wall, and me, and stalked toward his phone.

I had half a mind to rush after him and kick him in the balls, but it took all my energy to stop myself from bawling. I hated that he had the power to make me want to cry. I hated that I was emotional. No matter how hard I fought, it didn't change the fact that I was emotional. I'd lost count of the movies that had made me cry.

He typed a message into his phone then pushed it back into his pants. "Come on." He reached for me, but I stepped away and left the room. He led me downstairs.

"Toni's here."

"I don't give a fuck."

“I’m not leaving without her.”

He grabbed my wrist and pulled me down the driveway and didn’t stop until we reached the gates. “She’s probably fucking Diego again. If not, I’ll call her a taxi.”

A Porsche pulled up and Remo Falcone got out. He was only dressed in boxing shorts.

“Can you make sure she gets home safely?”

Remo regarded me then his brother with narrowed eyes. He motioned for me to get into the car. “You didn’t mention I was supposed to play taxi for your fiancée.”

“I can walk,” I said.

“Get in,” Savio ordered.

Remo held the door open for me so I had no choice but to sink down on the passenger seat. I buckled up while Remo talked to Savio for a moment, then he slipped behind the steering wheel.

I leaned against the window, as far away from the terrifying Capo as possible. He started the car and pulled away. In the side window, I watched Savio return to the party. I took a shaky breath and blinked hard as I wrapped my arms around my bare stomach.

“What happened?”

I jumped. I risked a look at the man beside me. When his dark eyes met mine, I swallowed hard.

“Answer me,” he ordered.

“Nothing.”

He slowed then came to a stop, still a few blocks from my home. He narrowed his eyes. “If you want to make lying a habit, you should practice to being more convincing.”

I was too exhausted to deny it. “I caught Savio with two girls. He lost it and said horrible things to me.”

Remo considered me. “Savio’s used to women who do what he wants and who don’t talk back. If you act like them, he’ll treat you like them.”

I wouldn’t let anyone treat me like that, not even Savio Falcone. “I talked back, but I didn’t get through to him.”

Remo set the car in motion again. “I thought giving up wasn’t your style.”

I shrugged. “I’m done. I’ve tried for too long.”

We parked in front of my house.

I faced Remo fully. “Can you please cancel my engagement to Savio? I don’t want to marry him anymore, and I don’t think he really wants to marry me either.”

He became still. “You’re asking me to cancel your promise to my brother?”

I merely nodded. “Then he’ll be free to do as he pleases, and I can find someone who really wants to marry me.”

EIGHTEEN



My head was pounding and when I opened my eyes, sharp pain slashed through my brain. I groaned, then rolled over, only to be met with a warm body.

Covering my eyes with my palm, I tried to move to the other side of the bed, only to touch another body. Blinking against the brightness, I sat up and checked my surroundings. I was in a bed with two girls. I slid down to the foot of the bed and stood, pressing a palm against my temple.

Slowly the events from last night filtered through the fog, cloaking my memories. “Fuck.”

I got dressed slowly, then headed downstairs. Passed out people were strewn about the house like a goddamn obstacle parkour. Diego was snoring on the sofa, only in boxers. Maybe he hadn't seen Gemma last night.

That was probably the only good thing about the fucking shitshow that was my birthday. I made my way down the driveway to my car and froze. It was smeared with something brown. For a moment, I was sure it was shit, but as I got closer, I saw the remains of a chocolate cake on the hood. Someone, and that someone could only have been Toni, had rubbed the goddamn cake all over my car. I knew who had baked the cake though. A hint of guilt flared up unexpectedly.

I walked toward our mansion, which was probably for the best, considering I still felt slightly drunk.

It was already noon, so Gemma was supposed to come over in two hours. I needed to get my act together until then.

The entire family sat at the lunch table, having some kind of council of war from the look of it, even Fabiano and Leona were there with their daughter Aurora. She was crawling over the floor, trying to keep up with the rest of the kids, who were all older and more mobile.

The women of the family looked at me like I was a cockroach they wanted to squash, even Kiara shook her head with a disappointed look.

Remembering how I'd called Remo to pick up Gemma, I could only assume she had told him something and he'd recounted everything to Serafina like a fucking gossip.

I walked over to the table, surprised to see cake, *my cake* on there. "Aren't you going to wait with the cake until Gemma and her family come over?"

"They aren't coming over. Gemma asked me to nullify your engagement," Remo said as if he was talking about the fucking weather.

I stared at him, feeling like I'd been sucker-punched.

Serafina got up to stop Nevio from trying to climb the bar. "You are the biggest idiot on the planet."

Ignoring her, I walked around to Remo. "Don't tell me you agreed to this nonsense."

Remo pushed to his feet, looking pissed. "I told you to be sure you wanted to marry. I told you this wasn't a fucking game. I told you that I wouldn't tolerate you offending a loyal family again after what happened to the Carluccis. And what do you do? You not only fuck around, you do it in public."

"I won't give up Gemma, Remo. I don't give a fuck what you say or decide. I'll marry her. And don't play the high card, you fucking kidnapped a bride and held her captive until she succumbed to your madness."

Remo gripped my collar and jerked me against him, his eyes burning with rage. Everyone fell silent, and even the kids watched open-mouthed. Remo shook with the effort not to beat me to a pulp, or try at least. "Never mention it around the twins

again, got it?” he said in a deadly voice. “You’re lucky I don’t want Greta to see me breaking your fucking jaw.”

My eyes slanted to his little girl, again in her favorite pink tutu, staring at us with huge terrified eyes. Nevio, on the other hand looked like he was getting a huge present. Massimo and Alessio watched in curiosity while Aurora kept crawling around.

“It won’t happen again,” I said quietly, my version of an apology. The only one I was capable of and Remo knew, because he was the same way. He released me and took a step back.

“I didn’t nullify anything. I talked to Daniele this morning. He was pissed, but he doesn’t want to cancel the engagement at this time because it would reflect badly on Gemma and their family.”

“What about Gemma?”

“He was careful with his words, but it’s safe to say that at the current time, she’d rather go to a nunnery than become your wife.”

Gritting my teeth, I looked away from his twisted expression. Guilt wasn’t a feeling I kept in my standard repertoire. I didn’t care about enough people to invest that level of emotion often. Only my family... and Gemma, I realized now, because I felt like an asshole for how I’d treated her. These last few weeks had been kicking my ass with the Bratva trying to gain their footing in Las Vegas again. The city was too important to give it up easily. For a while, our shaky understanding with the Pakhan of Chicago had helped but that was a thing of the past now too. Diego and I had been leading a few attacks on Bratva outposts, the last one two days ago, which almost ended with both of us dead.

I’d thought that party and the two girls would be the perfect distraction, I was wrong.

Fuck it.

I never wanted to hurt Gemma.

“Maybe you should move your ass over there and apologize to your fiancée,” Fabiano suggested.

“You think?” I muttered.

I turned around and headed toward my Bugatti, only to remember that it was still in front of the party mansion, covered in cake. Grabbing the key to Nino's Tesla, I headed out to the Bazzolis.



Daniele opened the door with a tight expression. “Savio.”

“Daniele,” I said, waiting for him to invite me in. He didn't. Behind him, I could see Claudia and Nonna looking at me like I was the Devil.

“Where's Diego?” Daniele asked.

I rubbed the back of my head. “He's still sleeping...”

Daniele shook his head. “We don't condone alcohol abuse and promiscuity. When we accepted you to join our family, we hoped you'd respect our values, not convince our children to trample on them.”

Ouch. Diego had never needed much convincing, and Gemma still held true to her values, but I got his point. “Can I have a word with Gemma? I need to clear a few things up.”

Daniele glanced at his wife, who was halfway up the stairs, then he turned back around to me and shook his head. “Unfortunately, Gemma doesn't want to see you.”

“She's my fiancée.”

“That she is, not by her choice at this point.”

I grimaced.

“I think it would be for the best if you don't see Gemma until you've made up your mind about a wedding date and the meaning of the sacred bond of marriage.” He gave me a nod and closed the door right in my face. Stunned, I waited for a couple of moments then I walked around the house to the tree. Gemma's window was right next to it. I was about to climb the tree when Nonna's face appeared in the window. The look she gave me could have frozen the Mojave.

All right. They needed time to cool off.

On my way to the car, I sent Gemma a text.

I won't let you go, Kitty. I promised to marry you and I will. Thanks for the cake, by the way. I guess I deserved that.

It wasn't an apology, but it was the best I could do. The Falcone gene seemed to make it impossible to utter the actual words.



When the bell rang, I knew it was Savio, and with the same certainty, I knew that I didn't want to see him. Not today, and not in the foreseeable future. I'd marry him because that's what my family wanted, but I was done trying to make it work. I was done, period.

My tears had dried and my eyes didn't water when his voice carried up to the hallway where I listened to his and Dad's conversation.

Mom came up the stairs, her eyes landing on me and softening. Nonna was close behind her. After they'd given me a lecture for going to a party, they'd stayed up all night consoling me.

Toni had already called me this morning. She'd taken her car home after getting in an argument with Diego and covering Savio's car in the remains of my cake.

I turned around and went back to my room, sinking down on my bed. Nonna came in, glancing at me, then walking over to the window. She let out a disapproving cluck.

My phone beeped. I skimmed over Savio's message, then shoved the phone under my pillow. That was his version of an

apology? Did he really think that was all it took to make up for his actions and words?

Nonna sat down beside me and took my hand. “Men aren’t like us.”

I let out a derisive laugh. “Yeah.”

“You chose Savio, knowing who he was. It’s a burden every woman has to carry, accepting their husband’s mistakes. Women make marriages work. It’s what we do.”

“We aren’t married yet and if it’s up to Savio, that won’t change until I’m old and wrinkly.” Besides, I had absolutely no intention to be the only one who was going to make a marriage work. That wasn’t a one-man—or rather one woman show.

Nonna clucked again. “He’ll marry you. Your father is going to put pressure on him.”

We both knew that Dad’s hands were bound. If Savio wasn’t a Falcone, then he could have done something, but as it was, we could do nothing but wait.



It was the summer after I’d finished high school. Toni and I had both been accepted to the University of Nevada, if only because Savio had a hand in it. He still hadn’t given any indication that he wanted to marry me anytime soon, but I was done playing woe is me. I hadn’t seen him since his birthday, had done my best to avoid any place where he could cross my way. Diego had stopped bringing him to our house, after a talk to Mom.

I’d spent the two weeks since the end of school with Toni, making plans for college, or working in the Amalfi, helping Dad with his insane workload. It was strange thinking of going to college, because it had never been part of my life plan.

I had chosen Romanic languages as a major with a minor in Gender and Sexuality Studies as a subtle form of protest—Toni’s amazing idea. She was majoring in Entrepreneurship in preparation to take over the Arena in the distant future.

Even though college had never been my dream, it now became the distraction I needed. I had something to look forward to.

“Gemma, pay attention. The tomato sauce is going to burn,” Nonna said, clucking her tongue.

I quickly stirred the red sauce in the ginormous saucepan. It was the only workout I’d been getting in, except for the occasional round of sit-ups or push-ups in the morning. Still, after a day of carrying dishes and stirring sauces, my arms ached all the same. Nonna and I worked in the restaurant from ten in the morning until eleven at night every day, except for Mondays. Dad stayed even longer, brooding over bills. Sometimes Mom helped as well, but Carlotta had been spending more time in the hospital these last couple of months with check-ups and tests to determine if she was strong enough for a transplant.

Male voices rang out. The restaurant was still closed. It would open for lunch in thirty minutes.

A bang sounded.

“Bratva! Lock the back!” Dad screamed before the first shots rang out.

I dropped the spoon, completely frozen.

Nonna rushed toward the backdoor and quickly locked it. Seconds later, someone kicked against the massive door. My heart pounded in my chest.

Shots and screams rang out in the restaurant. Dad was there with two waiters. Nonna grabbed my wrist in a crushing grip and opened the door of the kitchen cupboard. “Get in there.”

I shook my head. “Nonna, no. Let me fight.”

“These men have guns! Now climb in there, Gemma.” She kissed my forehead and practically shoved me down on my knees.

“Nonna,” I whispered.

She gave me a stern look. “Now.”

I crawled into the cupboard and pressed my legs against my chest.

“Swear not to come out, not to make a single sound, no matter what happens.”

Then Nonna closed the door. Not a second too soon. A bang sounded as the kitchen door flung inward and two men came inside. Through a tiny gap, I could see Nonna move toward them.

One of the men screamed something in Russian and then he pointed the gun at Nonna and... pulled the trigger. I jerked. Everything seemed to suddenly move slowly.

Nonna sank to the floor behind the kitchen island, out of my line of sight.

I couldn't breathe.

The Russians said something else, then one of them left. The other moved toward where Nonna had been and whatever he did to her, it made her hand move so I saw it. Unmoving. Lifeless. Was she... was she dead?

A sob slipped out of me. The man straightened and he looked straight at me. I tensed as he stalked toward me and ripped open the door. He leered. "Ahhh, what have we here?" he said in a strong Russian accent.

Kneeling before me, he grasped my ankle and tried to pull me out. I kicked upward, thrusting my heel into his chest. He stumbled backward with a string of what sounded like curses.

I quickly scrambled out to get in a better fighting position, but before I could brace myself, he gripped my hair and ripped hard. I bit my lip, stifling a cry. If I made a sound, the other men would come running, and my opponent obviously didn't want to call for help against a girl. He dragged me toward the door and past Nonna who stared at me with wide, lifeless eyes.

I twisted in his hold and drove my fist upward, ramming the heel of my hand into his nose. With a muffled groan, he released me, staggering back. He looked pissed. His nose spurting blood, he lunged at me at the same time as I aimed a high kick at his head. My foot collided with his chin, throwing it back. It smashed against the edge of a wall cabinet and his eyes went out of focus. He fell forward. My eyes went wide when he collided with me, taking me down with his much heavier body.

My head crashed against the floor. Stars burst in my vision and then all went black.

NINETEEN



“We should talk to a few of the Underbosses with stronger Bratva Outposts and plan a simultaneous attack. They are getting too bold. We need to kill as many as possible in a single effort,” I said.

Diego nodded, scanning the map of our territory where Nino had marked the biggest Bratva strongholds. Diego had started working as an Enforcer alongside Fabiano, but because I trusted him the most from all the soldiers, he still accompanied me to dangerous missions. Despite the mess with his sister, he and I had come to a silent agreement—by pretending I wasn’t engaged to his sister. It was a cowardly thing to do and I knew I needed to get a grip, man up and finally ask Gemma to set a date for the wedding, but I had cold feet.

Diego pointed at L.A. and San Diego. “What about them?”

“No signs of Bratva yet,” I said. “They’re trying to get Las Vegas first. It’s a matter of prestige. Remo’s killed and tortured so many Bratva fuckers these last few weeks, but they keep popping up like weeds.”

My phone rang. Remo. “What’s up?”

“The Bratva attacked the Amalfi.”

It took my brain a moment to register his words. Gemma worked in the Amalfi every day. Even if I hadn’t contacted her in the last two months, I’d kept an eye on her.

“Nino and I are on our way.”

“What about Gemma?”

Diego rose from his chair, paling.

“We don’t know anything,” Remo said.

I pushed to my feet, staring at Diego. “The Bratva.” I didn’t need to say more. The Amalfi had been attacked before. In the fifties and sixties, it had been a Russian restaurant, run by the Bratva, before the Camorra had taken it from them. We ran toward my car, jumped in and I floored the gas, my heart beating in my fucking throat.

Diego clutched his phone against his ear, but no one was picking up in the restaurant.

“Call Gemma. She always has her phone with her to talk to Toni!”

He tried—nothing.

Diego gripped his hair. “If...if...fuck.”

“Nothing will happen to anyone.”

Nothing would happen to Gemma.

Diego called home, reaching his mom who was taking care of Carlotta.

I slammed on the brakes in front of the restaurant and shot out of the car. Remo’s SUV was already parked in the front. Pulling out guns, Diego and I stormed into the restaurant.

Remo whirled around, pointing his guns at us then pointed them back at the kitchen doors, approaching them slowly. Nino knelt beside a body. Diego rushed toward them.

His father lay in a pool of his blood. Bullet wounds littered his body. His eyes stared unseeingly up at the ceiling. Diego made a small choked sound. Two dead assholes lay near the bar, dead. Russians, no doubt. The waiters next to the bar were dead as well.

“Where’s Gemma?” I asked.

“We arrived shortly before you,” Nino said. “We didn’t have time to check the kitchen yet. There wasn’t a sound though.”

Which meant everyone still around was dead. Whoever had done this would be gone by now.

“Gemma and Nonna were supposed to be here,” Diego said tonelessly.

Remo motioned for us to follow and together we went toward the kitchen. Raising our guns, Remo shoved open the swing door and we all rushed inside. Like Nino had said, nobody inside the kitchen was capable of making a sound.

Diego’s nonna lay on the floor, a bullet hole in her forehead. Dread settled in my bones and my heart slammed against my ribcage. Diego pushed past me and Remo, and stormed toward his grandmother, then he looked at something to his right.

He let out a hoarse cry, his face scrunching up with despair and he dropped his gun. “No!”

He rushed forward and I followed after him. Then I saw Gemma on the floor in a pool of blood. A tall man lay half on top of her. I froze and everything seemed to stand still.

My breath lodged itself in my throat. My fingers around my gun loosened.

Remo grasped my shoulder, looking at me. “Get a grip!”

I gripped the handle of my gun, even if I hardly felt my fingers or any other part of my body.

Diego fell to his knees beside Gemma. “No,” he roared then softer, “No, God, please.” I staggered toward him and helped him shove the Bratva asshole off Gemma. At least, she was still dressed. She wasn’t raped before they killed her. That was the only consolation. She didn’t have to suffer.

My eyes prickled and I swallowed. The sensation was foreign, one I hadn’t felt since I was a little boy—a heavy pressure in the back of my throat and in my chest. Diego pressed his forehead to Gemma’s stomach and began to cry.

With a shaking hand, I touched his back. Remo appeared beside us.

I looked up at him and for some reason he was blurry. I couldn’t stand the look on his face and so I looked back to Gemma. Fuck. The last words I’d said to her flitted through my head, the horrible things I’d told her, how badly I’d treated her. As if she was nothing but a sex toy for me, nothing important when she was the only girl who’d ever been a friend, the only girl

I'd ever wanted for more than sex. Yet, I hadn't shown her. I had clung to my freedom, because the rush of those meaningless flings and party nights had brightened the darkness that so often filled my insides. It hadn't worked, not for long. Like a flash that broke through the night for only an instant, the thrill of my flings hadn't banished that darkness for long.

I bent over Gemma's head, cupping her bloody cheek and kissed the tip of her nose. She was even still warm. She couldn't have been dead for long and that realization made this even harder. If we'd been quicker, maybe we could have saved her. Regret over the past is wasted time—that was Nino's credo. The fuck did he know?

Stroking her blood-covered face, I leaned down to her ear. "I was an asshole. I'm so fucking sorry, Gem, so fucking sorry. I'll miss you so fucking much, every annoying little thing. You are the only girl I ever truly wanted, and I fucked it up."

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. My fingers traced her throat, so soft. So fucking gorgeous even in death. I'd thought I'd have time, that we'd have time to be together, had taken it for granted. The speared watch on my forearm taunted me as I stroked Gemma's skin. Outsmarting time, what a stupid thing to think.

A gentle pulse throbbed against my fingertips. I jerked my head up, staring at Gemma.

"What is it?" Remo asked immediately. Diego lifted his tear-stained face.

I dug my fingertips into her throat. A pulse. A fucking pulse. For a moment, I didn't dare believe it. "Remo," I got out. He knelt beside me and shoved my hand aside, then he pressed his fingers against her pulse point. "Nino!" he roared.

"What... what's going on?" Diego whispered.

Nino came in then rushed over to us and bent over Gemma, feeling her pulse. "She's alive."

Diego sucked in a sharp breath.

Relief washed over me.

Remo moved to the Bratva asshole. "He too." He grinned twistedly.

“He’s mine,” I said. Once Gemma was taken care of, I’d turn the last few hours of that asshole’s life into a nightmare.

Remo inclined his head.

Nino felt Gemma’s head then moved on to her ribs.

“What are you doing?” Diego asked, eyeing my brother’s hands on Gemma’s belly.

Nino cocked an eyebrow. “Making sure she stays alive. Back off.”

Diego nodded and crawled to Gemma’s head, stroking her hair. “Gemma, can you hear me?”

“Don’t move her yet,” Nino said.

I took Gemma’s hand, linking our fingers. They twitched. Then her lashes fluttered, and she opened her eyes, fixing me with those stunning olive irises. Confusion showed on her face. She glanced from me to Diego who looked a teary mess.

She frowned. “Diego, what’s—” Realization flashed in her eyes. “Nonna?” Her voice was small, bringing out my protective side. There were so many things I wanted to tell her.

Diego closed his eyes and gave a small shake of his head. Tears gathered in Gemma’s eyes. “Where’s Dad?”

Diego didn’t react, but got up and turned his back to us, covering his face with his hands. Gemma looked at me, her eyes two pools of misery. “Savio?”

I squeezed her hand. “I’m sorry, Gem.”

She shook her head in denial, then winced, her eyes going out of focus for a moment. She tried to push up into a sitting position, but I grabbed her shoulders, stopping her. “Careful. We don’t know how bad your injuries are.”

Tears slid out of her eyes, and the sight of them trailing down her cheeks cut me deeply. I promised myself to never be responsible for them again.

“Let me take a look at your head,” Nino said. Slowly he and I brought Gemma into a sitting position. I steadied her with an arm around her shoulders, feeling her shake.

Gemma flinched when Nino touched the back of her head.

“Say something,” I said to Nino.

“She’s got a concussion. I don’t think it’s more than that.” He held a finger in front of her eyes and moved it slowly. “You should have a head scan just to be sure.”

Gemma shook her head, grimacing. “I’m fine.”

“Gem, being tough is honorable, but don’t be unreasonable. A head injury isn’t a joke.”

“I need to see Nonna and Dad.”

I looked toward Nino and he gave a small nod. I stood and helped Gemma to her feet. She swayed slightly, causing me to wrap an arm around her waist and pull her against me. She leaned into me, her head resting in the crook of my shoulder. That she didn’t push me away after how much of an asshole I’d been showed how bad it was.

Diego still hadn’t moved. He clutched the kitchen counter with closed eyes.

“Diego?” Gemma asked softly.

His shoulders tensed then slowly, he turned to us with red eyes. “Give me a moment, Gemma. Go ahead.” He looked me in the eye. “Will you keep her safe?”

Fuck, yes. From this day on, I’d make sure she was protected at all times. “Sure.” He nodded then returned to staring at the kitchen counter.

I led Gemma toward her nonna. She grasped my hand in a crushing grip as we stood over her nonna’s body. Someone had closed her eyes. Gemma twitched in my hold. Silent tears still rolled down her pale skin, caught on her full lips.

She looked up. “My dad?”

“Are you sure you want to see him?”

She tried to shake me off but I tightened my hold. “All right. I’ll take you to him, but he’s been hit by more bullets than your nonna.”

Gemma swallowed, resolved. We stepped through the swinging door into the restaurant. Daniele’s eyes were closed as well. Yet, he looked less peaceful than Gemma’s grandma. His

expression was frozen with determination and his body littered with wounds.

Gemma tore from my embrace and stumbled toward him. For a moment, she simply stared down at him, then she began to sob. Every single sob wracked her body, shook her shoulders. She sank to her knees beside her dad, pressing her palms against his chest as if she hoped for a heartbeat.

“Fuck, Gem,” I said gently as I crouched beside her and touched her shoulder.

She shook her head. “Dad, *please*.” Slowly she pulled away, then looked at her palms now covered in his blood. Her clothes and hair were already soaked with her and the Russian’s blood.

She began quivering, her wide-eyed gaze hitting me. “Savio...”

“Shhh,” I crooned, touching her cheek.

She threw herself against my chest, wrapping her arms tightly around my waist. I almost lost my balance, but then I tightened my hold on her. Her body vibrated with her crying. I hugged her and pressed my cheek against her hair. Maybe I should have said something, consoled her. Words never failed me, but now I couldn’t come up with a single thing to say. Nothing that wouldn’t sound empty or like a goddamn Hallmark card.

For a long time, she only cried. Nino walked past us to let the arriving soldiers in. Soon the room was filled with our men, who kept their distance to Gemma and me.

Nino gave me a sign that indicated he needed space to search the entire restaurant for proof. His face remained emotionless as usual.

I stood, taking Gemma with me, who still clung to me.

“What about Mom and Carlotta?” She sniffled as she peered up at me so fucking scared, I wanted to kill every Bratva fucker in the country.

“They are at home. Diego called them on our way here.”

Relief followed by dread filled Gemma’s face. “Does... does Mom know?”

“Not yet.”

“Oh God.” Gemma pressed a hand over her mouth, horrified. “What are we going to do now? Without Dad? How’s Mom going to pay the bills for Carlotta? How are we going to get by without Dad? Without the restaurants?”

“I will take care of all of you,” Diego said.

He stood near the swinging door as if he couldn’t bring himself to come closer to his father.

Remo stepped into the restaurant from the kitchen, dragging the Russian behind him. The man was twitching but still unconscious. “I’m going to take him to the Sugar Trap.”

“I’ll take Gemma home with me. That way, you can check on her, Nino, and she’ll be safe,” I said.

Diego didn’t even protest, which showed how distraught he was. “I’ll head home to check on Mom and Carlotta.”

“I already sent a few men over just in case, as well as the pastor,” Nino said.

Diego nodded, then glanced at the Russian before his eyes locked with mine. “You and I, Savio?”

I nodded. Remo handed Diego his car keys. “Here, take my car and check on your mother and sister.” Finally, he walked over to his dad before he rushed outside.

Wrapping an arm around Gemma’s waist, I led her toward my car. She seemed in a state of shock, judging from the way her teeth were shattering and the zoned-out look in her eyes. She slumped in the backseat and closed her eyes. She didn’t say anything on our drive to the mansion. Nino had said she needed to lie down for a while. He’d later check on her again. She followed me inside, leaning heavily on me. Kiara and Serafina sent us worried glances as I led Gemma past the common room.

Once upstairs, I helped her toward my bathroom. I handed her a pair of my sweatpants and the smallest shirt I owned. “Can you shower?”

She nodded but still didn’t say anything.

I left the door ajar when I returned to the bedroom to hear if she passed out, then I sank down on the bed. For a moment, I stared blankly in the direction of the bathroom, then I fell back,

closing my eyes. My pulse was still too fast and the tight sensation in my chest was only slowly lifting.

Gemma emerged fifteen minutes later. My sweatpants hung low on her hips and my white-tee showed off the fact that Gemma wasn't wearing a bra. I tore my eyes away from her chest and returned my gaze to the ceiling.

She surprised me by crawling into bed with me. She looked small and scared. Slowly, I rolled over until I was facing her.

“What’s going to happen now?”

First, I was going to dismember the Russian, then I'd burn the remaining Bratva fuckers out of their hole-ups in our territory.

That wasn't something I could share with Gemma, though, and it wasn't really what she'd been asking.

“Diego’s working hard, but he can’t rebuild the restaurant, manage the Capri and earn enough money as an Enforcer to pay for Carlotta’s bills.”

“Gem,” I said quietly. “My brothers and I own the West. We have more money than we can ever spend. Your family sure as hell won't run out of money. No matter how much money you need, I'll give it to you.”

The look in her eyes was like a punch in the stomach. “What do you want in return?”

“Fuck,” I breathed. “You think I'd want you to sleep with me, so I'll help your family and baby sister?”

She only looked at me with those forlorn olive eyes. I moved a bit closer. “I'm not that much of an asshole, Gem. I'd never do that,” I said fiercely.

She let out a teary laugh. The sound inexplicably tore at me. “You aren't?”

“Fuck. I deserve that, don't I? I was an asshole, I'll admit it.”

“Yes, you were.” She leaned in, bringing us closer, drawing in a deep breath. “Does that mean you won't be an asshole anymore?”

I nuzzled her neck without thinking about it. I just wanted, needed to be close to her. Less than an hour ago, I'd thought she

was dead, and that had gutted me like nothing ever had before. “A tricky question. Assholery is in my DNA and has a penchant of coming out in unfortunate moments. It’s the infamous foot in mouth disease I suffer from.”

Gemma laughed, almost a happy sound. She slid even closer and lifted her face. I could feel her warmth, smell her sweet breath, and the shea butter she always used to moisturize. A very dangerous, very tempting position. And fuck the look on Gemma’s face was gasoline for the fucking fire of my desire for her.

She was sad and scared, and wanted distraction. And fuck, my specialty was distracting girls, give them a good time, make them forget their boyfriends, responsibilities and even annoyance with me. But this was Gemma.

“You hurt me,” she breathed.

“I won’t hurt you like that ever again.”

It was a promise I’d do my fucking best to keep.

She snuggled closer, her fingers splaying out on my hip, her olive eyes wide and hopeful, those kissable lips parted. “I want to forget.”

“Gem, don’t rely on me doing the honorable thing. My moral compass is out of whack, especially with your gorgeous body pressed up to mine.”

It wasn’t even desire that made me want to act on her offer. I just wanted to be with her. Fuck, this was new.

“Kiss me. I want to feel something else than this pain.” She shuddered. “Please, Savio, make me forget.”

Screw it. Who was I to deny her? Cupping her face, I kissed her lightly, fully determined to leave it at a chaste kiss, but Gemma’s scent and the warmth radiating from her was too much for my non-existent self-control. My tongue stroked along her lips, tasting the saltiness of tears, and something sweeter. Unable to resist, I parted her and dipped my tongue into her mouth.

Fuck, even the hints of saltiness didn’t change the fact that she tasted like perfection. Like a goddamn salted caramel toffee. I wanted to devour her whole. My tongue dove in, tasted every

corner of that perfect mouth, teased her tongue until she played along. Her fingers dug into my hip and neck, pulling me closer.

I rolled on top of her, settling between her legs, giving her what she wanted. For a moment, she stilled, but then she kissed me even harder.

I slid my hand lower and hooked it under her thigh, lifting one leg over my back so I could bring us even closer, every inch of our bodies flush together. The moment I did, Gemma's kiss became hesitant, her body tenses, and my senses started returning.

I remembered her words, the promise she gave to her nonna, her convictions. Gemma had told me countless times that she wanted to wait until marriage.

Gemma would hate herself and me, if I took this further. She panted, her chest rising, pressing her breasts against me.

Good Lord, what kind of test was this?

I closed my eyes and released a harsh breath, trying to remain still so my dick didn't accidentally brush up against her thigh again and blast the last shreds of my resolve.

The moment I opened my eyes, any horny thought fled my mind. Gemma was biting her lower lip, crying. I kissed away the tears. "Is this because of the kissing?"

Gemma looked at me, confused.

"Because you wanted your first kiss in church." Personally, I thought having your first kiss in front of hundreds of guests was a bad idea, but I didn't understand the whole chastity thing anyway.

I touched her cheek. "Gem?"

"No," she said hoarsely. "I just realized that Dad can't walk me down to the altar." She started shaking and harsh sobs burst out of her. I rolled off her and pulled her in my arms, rubbing her back.

She cried against my throat, big gasping wails that rocked through her body.

After a few minutes, she quieted and then became soft in my hold. I leaned back and peered down at her tear-stained face. She had fallen asleep. I gently moved away and after pressing a kiss to her forehead, I got out of bed. My shirt was soaked with tears

and stained with Gemma's makeup. I dragged the fabric over my head and dropped it on the ground.

I left my room without a shirt and headed downstairs. Maybe my brother had an update on the Bratva situation.

I ran across Kiara on her way to the kitchen. "Where's Gemma?"

"In my bed."

Kiara looked at my naked chest, worried. "Please tell me you didn't sleep with her, Savio. She's vulnerable after what happened today."

"Of course not." I was starting to grow annoyed. "Where are my brothers?"

"Gaming room."

I left her standing there and headed toward the common area. Like Kiara had said, I found Nino and Remo in the living area, probably going over counterstrikes. They looked my way.

"How's she?" Nino asked.

"Good."

Remo raised an eyebrow. "Don't tell me—"

"No, I didn't fuck her for God's sake!"

"You've unleashed your bull in unfortunate situations before," Remo said.

Ignoring him, I walked over to them and sank down on the sofa. "Gemma is my fiancée."

Remo shrugged.

My phone beeped with a message from Diego. "Diego's on his way here."

Nino nodded, then got up. "Fabiano went ahead to the Sugar Trap. He's waiting for you and Diego to begin with the Russian. As soon as Diego's here, you should head there. The sooner we get information out of the Bratva soldier, the better."

Remo nodded grimly. "I'll come along as well. Nino will stay here and keep an eye on the women and children."

"Will you check on Gemma later? She's asleep."

Nino narrowed his eyes in thought. “Given her head injury, I don’t think she should sleep.”

“I can wake her,” I said.

Nino shook his head. “I’ll go up there in a few minutes and check on her reflexes and light sensitivity levels.”

The bell at the gate rang. I jogged toward the door and after checking the security camera, I pressed the button so Diego could drive on the premises.



Diego looked a mess when he stepped into the mansion. I could only imagine how his mother had reacted to the news of losing her husband and Nonna. Carlotta was probably still too young to understand the situation. He glanced around. “Where’s Gemma?”

“In my room.”

Without warning, Diego lunged at me, aiming a punch toward my face. I blocked him with my forearm and we both tumbled to the floor. Diego landed on top of me. I tried to shove him off and he punched my cheek. Growling, I bucked my hips, throwing him off and rammed my fists into his stomach, then another uppercut against his chin.

We struggled, but eventually, I knelt over Diego and held him by the collar. He was panting. “What the fuck is wrong with you, man?”

“You are such a bastard. I trusted you with my sister and you don’t hesitate to take her into your bed. She’s broken up over Nonna and Dad, and you use her.”

“Fuck, why does everyone think I’m that much of an asshole?” I released him and staggered to my feet. “I didn’t touch Gemma, you idiot. I respect her and you too much.” I chose not to mention that unfortunate kiss. It would do nothing good.

Diego wiped his bloody mouth. “You didn’t sleep with her?”

I gave him the finger, then held out my hand. “I didn’t, and I won’t until we have the blessing of the holy church.”

Diego allowed me to pull him to his feet then winced and held his ribs. Nino came over and felt them. “Nothing broken.”

Diego looked around before his gaze halted on Remo. “I’m sorry Capo for disrespecting your home.”

Remo waved him off. “You have suffered losses today.” He paused. “But next time you consider starting a fight in my home, remember I have children and nephews that don’t need to see something like that.”

Diego nodded and his shoulders slumped. He looked twice his age. I touched his shoulder. “How are your mother and Carlotta?”

“Carlotta is too young to understand anything. She won’t even remember our father but my mother...” He swallowed and straightened. “We’ll get through this together.”

I gave Remo a look. He tilted his head. “Your father died for our cause, Diego.”

Diego pressed his lips together. I knew him well enough to see he was fighting with himself.

“The Camorra takes care of the families of their soldiers. We will provide for you and your family until your sisters are out of the house.”

Diego shook his head. “That’s a generous offer, but I’m going to provide for my family.”

Diego earned good money as a soldier, especially now that he had started as an Enforcer, but if he intended to take over the restaurants, his share of the Camorra pie would be smaller, not to mention that he had four mouths to feed including himself. And Carlotta’s bills were on another level.

“Pride is an honorable thing, but don’t be stupid,” I growled.

“No,” Diego said firmly. “We can’t accept that much money. We’ll take what every other family would have gotten, not a dollar more.”

“What about Carlotta?” Gemma asked, surprising us all.

She was stealthy, I had to give it to her. Her face was tear-stained, her nose red—which distracted from her kiss-swollen lips.

“I will take care of her,” Diego insisted.

“How?” Gemma stepped up to him. “How are you going to pay for her surgery? Even with Dad, we were hardly getting by, paying all those bills, and now that he’s gone and the money he hid in the restaurant, how are you going to get that much money?”

Diego flushed. “I won’t live on charity.”

“Then don’t. But Carlotta needs that money.” Gemma turned to Remo, but Diego stepped in her way. “No, that’s an order, Gemma. I’m the master of the family.”

Gemma shook her head.

“Gemma could pay for Carlotta’s surgery. As my wife, she has free access to my bank accounts.”

“By the time you want to marry, it’ll be too late for Carlotta,” Diego said.

“We’ll marry in two months. That gives us time to prepare.”

“I thought you needed time to give your bull a few more rides,” Gemma said, her lips twisting. I could already tell that her grudge had returned. The immediate sadness had made her forget my actions, but she hadn’t forgiven me that much was clear.

“My bull’s got enough rides.”

Anger flashed on her face then suspicion. “Two months then, and you pay for Carlotta’s surgery as a wedding gift to me.”

“Deal,” I said.

Diego shook his head.

Remo raised his hand. “Accept it. Your sister needs that heart surgery.”

“Let’s go deal with the Russian,” Diego said simply.

“I should head home to Mom and Carlotta,” Gemma said.

“Nino needs to keep an eye on you for now. Once he’s sure your head’s all right, someone will take you home.”

Gemma glanced at Diego. He gave a small nod.

I moved closer to her. “Will you be all right?” I murmured.

She searched my eyes then nodded. “I have to be. Thanks for consoling me.” A delicate blush stained her cheeks, which Diego

didn't seem to notice, or I would have had his fist in my face again.

I didn't say anything. All the playful comebacks seemed wrong.

Nino motioned for her to follow him into the infirmary. "Maybe you should take care of your sisters and mother and not seek revenge," Remo said. "We'll dish it out in your stead. You have a family to take care of."

I touched Diego's shoulder. "I'll make him pay for you. He'll regret every second of his pitiful life."

Diego nodded slowly. "I could never be as good at torture as you anyway."

"Take care of Gem."

Remo and I headed for the Sugar Trap to torture the Russian.

TWENTY



Gemma

My heart felt heavy as I stepped into our house. Diego's hand on my shoulder felt less like a steadying presence, more like an anchor that he needed to stand upright.

Two Camorra soldiers guarded the driveway. Inside we found Mom bent over the kitchen table, crying. I hurried over to her and wrapped my arms around her. She embraced me tightly, shaking against me.

“Where's Carlotta?” Diego asked gently.

“Upstairs with your aunt.”

Dad's sister lived close by, so of course she'd be the first to help us in this time.

Diego wrapped his arm around Mom and me. “I'll take care of you.”

I knew he'd work every second of every day to provide for us. He'd kill himself to make sure we were all right, but he couldn't do this on his own. Even if two months wasn't nearly enough time to organize a wedding or make Savio pay for what he'd done, I'd marry him then so Diego could accept the money without losing face.

I made Mom lie down in bed, but Diego refused to rest. He sat on the sofa, bent over our bills. I knew it was his way to distract himself so I let him.

The bell rang and Diego jumped to his feet. Grabbing his gun, he answered the door. Toni stood on the doorstep, behind her one of the Camorra soldiers. Her eyes darted from Diego to me, and her expression softened. I staggered forward, falling against her. She hugged me tightly. Diego slowly backed away and returned to the sofa.

With her arm wrapped around my shoulders, Toni led me upstairs then laid down with me in my bed. She held me all night as I cried.



We had a big family, and yet they didn't even make up half of the people attending Dad's and Nonna's funeral. Loyal customers from the restaurants and Camorrista filled the pews of the church. Diego steadied Mom who seemed to shrivel under the force of her grief.

When I spotted Savio, Remo, and Nino followed by their wives, surprise washed over me. I'd expected them to show up at the graveyard, but knowing their aversion to religion, I hadn't thought they'd show up for church. They came over to where Mom, Diego, and I stood beside the open coffins. Every word of condolence left another wound in my heart. By now, it was tattered. I hadn't once dared to look at the bodies of Nonna and Dad, could hardly bear being here at all.

Savio stopped in front of me and took my hand. He didn't say he was sorry, and I was glad. The words had become meaningless, unable to encompass the magnitude of our loss. His touch was warm, steady, the comfort I desperately needed. Diego was staggering under the pressure of being the master of our family, but Savio, he was solid and strong.

I swallowed hard, my fingers tightening around his when he was about to pull back. I needed someone to hold me up, to steady me. I felt like I couldn't hold myself anymore. It was all too much. The grief filling not just my heart but also the church and back at home, every inch of the house. I tugged at his hand and his brows drew together. He bent down. My lips came up to his ear. "Get me out of here," I begged.

He nodded, and wrapping an arm around me, he led me off to the side, away from hundreds of solemn faces, and teary eyes. Not away from my guilt and grief. Those clung to me.

He pulled me into a small side room and closed the door.

“Better?” he asked in a gentle voice.

He searched my eyes. His face didn’t hold a trace of his usual arrogance or teasing, and I almost wished for it, for that flicker of normalcy among the shambles of my life. I’d spent the last week in a bubble of darkness. Mom and Diego, even Carlotta, were as broken as I felt, and with every new member of our extended family that visited, their sadness was added to our own, until I buckled under its weight.

“Gem, say something. Tell me what to do.”

I lifted the hand he wasn’t still holding and curled it over his neck.

His expression became wary. I stepped closer, my chest pressing against his. So steady and warm, so strong. The Falcones were a force—invincible, every single one of them. I knew the stories, what they had to endure, what they survived. They shouldn’t be here, none of them, but they’d beaten death over and over again. These last few days I’d been so scared of losing more people I loved—Toni, Mom, Carlotta, Diego...

With Savio, I knew he’d never allow death to get the better of him. A silly thought and yet I believed it.

My fingers tightened around his neck, trying to pull him down to me as I stepped on my tiptoes. Savio resisted, confusion flickering in his dark eyes. “Gem, say something.” His voice was rough, a purr deep in his chest that I could feel where our bodies touched. Even on my tiptoes I couldn’t reach his lips. “Savio,” I said softly. “Please.” I didn’t need to say what I wanted, he knew.

“You’ll regret this.”

“Maybe,” I said, but right this second, I needed this more than air.

Finally, Savio let me pull him down and his lips pressed against mine.

I sunk into his taste, his warmth. I yearned for him, all of him. His strength and scent were intoxicating. His tongue teased, stroked, caressed. His hands kept me steady, brushed over my back, then cupped my cheeks, deepening the kiss further.

I was completely at his mercy. His presence made me feel protected, cared for. Standing on my tiptoes, I leaned into him, needing to be closer.

“Fuck, Gem, you taste perfect,” he rasped between delicious swipes of his tongue. I couldn’t reply, slave to the sensations the kiss evoked in me. After days of cold, I felt warm. He lowered me on the bench, never stopping the kiss as he bent over me. I clung to his neck, wrapped my legs around his middle as he knelt before me.

The bells started ringing, announcing the exit of the congregation.

I froze and Savio pulled out of our kiss. Our lips were still brushing as we panted.

“We’re in church,” I whispered horrified over my own shamelessness. How could I have let this happen? Nonna and Dad would have been so ashamed of me. This was a day for grieving, not for this.

I could feel myself crumbling, wasn’t sure how to stop it.

“Hey,” Savio said, brushing my cheek. “You always wanted your first kiss in church. That didn’t happen, but at least we made your second kiss work.”

I shook my head, unable to speak under the weight of my guilt.

Savio became serious and cupped my face firmly, forcing me to meet his gaze. His dark eyes were fierce with a hint of compassion. “We don’t live for the dead. We live for the living. If kissing me helps you deal with your grief, then nobody’s got a right to judge you or I’ll cut them down.”

I released a shaky breath as a weight lifted itself off my chest. Slowly, I lowered my legs from Savio’s waist, but we stayed close. I’d promised myself to keep my distance from him to punish him, but in this moment, I was being unflinchingly selfish,

because he was the only one who could stop me from drowning in my sadness.



Gemma's lips were parted. My lips still burned from our kiss. I wished I knew what she was thinking.

Her gaze dropped to my scar on my wrist which she'd started tracing. I resisted the urge to push her away, allowing her this. Her brows pulled tight. "How do you keep going?"

I covered her hand with mine, stilling her wandering fingers. "For one, to spite the people who tried to kill me."

She let out a small, sad laugh. "After losing someone, I mean..."

I'd never lost someone I loved. When I'd found out our father had been killed, I'd felt anger on Remo's behalf because he'd wanted to kill the man himself, but not a flicker of sadness. And my mother... I hated her with every cell in my body. "You just do. You don't focus on what you lost but on what you have."

She looked away. "I lost half of my family. It feels like I lost part of myself. What could possibly take their place?"

"You'll soon have a bigger family, Gem. My family. They won't replace what you lost, but they'll fill the void all the same."

Gemma turned to me. "That's the first time you said that I was going to be part of your family."

I'd been a goddamn bastard to her. "Of course, you're going to be part of my family. You'll be my wife."

She swallowed and began to pull away. I stood and helped her to her feet.

“We should head out to the graveyard. My family needs me.”

I nodded and together we returned into the now empty church. We drove to the graveyard in my car. They were lowering the caskets into the ground when we arrived.

Diego gave me a curt nod. Gemma slipped her hand in mine and I squeezed briefly. She didn't release me even as we stood on her family's side. Tears streamed down her face, and even then, even without a stroke of makeup, she was gorgeous. When the casket hit the ground, Diego's mother ripped out of his grip and fell to her knees at the edge of the hole. She let out a wail that carried over the graveyard, a lament that even I could feel in my black heart. Gemma shook against me then she too stumbled to the grave and fell to her knees beside her mother, clutching her tightly. Diego was frozen.

I'd never encountered grief this raw. My eyes slanted to my brothers. Nino had his arm wrapped around Kiara, who was bawling. Remo's expression was the fiercest I'd ever seen it, as he gripped Serafina's hand. She, too, was crying but in her proud, dignified way. In the past, it had only been my brothers and I. We had little to lose, except for each other, but now the number of people we cared about and had sworn to protect grew every year, and it would keep growing. I looked at Gemma.

My brothers had embraced their new responsibilities, and I would too.



I gave Gemma a few days after the funeral before I asked her if I could come over. We had our wedding to plan. Life needed to go on. It was easy to get lost in your grief, but I didn't want that for Gemma.

She was in sweatpants and a T-shirt when I got there.

The house was strangely quiet with her mom and sister over at their aunt's. Only Diego and Gemma lived in the house now, and Diego had become awfully quiet.

She let me in but kept her distance. I'd suspected that the two kisses we'd shared had been the result of her broken-heartedness.

We sank down on the sofa and she regarded me with a quiet scrutiny that made me nervous. "Are you still sure about marrying me in six weeks?"

I laughed. "Kiara's already halfway done with the planning. She'd have my balls if I canceled the thing now."

Gemma didn't crack a smile. "I'm being serious."

Sighing, I took her hand. "I'm sure about marrying you. I'll probably be a lousy husband, but I'll do my best."

She swallowed. "I want you to be faithful to me. I want you to be only mine like I'm only yours."

"I will be faithful."

"You *will* be. So, until our wedding, you're going to keep seeing other girls?"

I released a breath. "I haven't been with another girl in two weeks." Since I almost lost her and realized I couldn't bear the thought.

"Congrats," she said, her lips thinning.

"What do you want to hear, Gem? It's the longest I've gone without sex since I lost my V-card at thirteen."

"And the wait is going to be even longer, are you sure your bull can handle it?"

I hid a smile at her feistiness. I preferred it to her grief. "He'll be fine. Six weeks will pass in no time." It would be hard, of course, especially my poor dick. Just the thought of only having my hand for relief, nearly brought tears to my eyes.

"Six weeks?" Gemma echoed.

"Until our wedding, or did you reconsider the waiting until marriage thing?" I had to tease her, I couldn't help it.

"Definitely not," she said with a strange smile.

TWENTY-ONE



Gemma

Our house had become horribly empty and quiet. I even missed Nonna's disapproving cluck. I shoved the thought aside before grief could overwhelm me again. Four weeks had passed since their death, but sometimes it still felt like yesterday. Carlotta was still in the hospital after her surgery, but she was recovering quickly and would most likely be able to attend the wedding at the end of August.

It was still strange thinking that I'd really marry Savio in four weeks. For a while, I hadn't been sure that would happen at all. Toni picked Mom and me up in her car because neither of us had a license. Now that Dad wasn't there anymore, Mom had decided to learn how to drive, but so far, she'd been busy taking care of Carlotta. I, too, would start driving lessons after my wedding. There was still too much to do until then. Not to mention that I already had a license, thanks to my affiliation to a certain Falcone clan. No police officer in their right mind would give me a ticket once my last name was Falcone, but I still wanted to actually learn how to steer a car.

When Toni, Mom, and I stepped into the most expensive bridal store of Las Vegas, my heart seemed to be torn in two. On the one hand, I was excited to choose my wedding dress, something I'd dreamed of since I was a little girl, on the other hand, I felt horrible every time I saw Mom's heartbroken expression. She tried to hide it but occasionally it broke through.

I chose a few dresses to put on and walked into the changing room. Mom came inside with me. She touched my arm. "Gemma,

I want you to be happy. I want you to enjoy this day. It's a special day, and I'm so happy for you. Dad and Nonna would have wanted you to enjoy it, so we will, do you hear me?"

I swallowed and nodded. The first two dresses I tried on were beautiful and I felt like a princess in them, but it was the third dress that completely stole my breath. When I stepped out of the dressing room, I could see on Mom's and Toni's face that they felt the same way.

"That's you," Toni whispered.

Mom nodded, blowing her nose with a teary smile.

It was me, and it was the dress I'd marry Savio Falcone in.



I'd gotten ready for the wedding in our house. It still felt surreal that I'd spent my last night there. Tonight, I'd move into the Falcone mansion—share a wing and bed with Savio.

A car with a driver picked Toni and me up, and drove us to church. We entered through a back entrance and hid in one of the back rooms until it was time. A couple minutes later, Mom stepped in. She'd helped Kiara arrange the flowers in church.

"I'll see if I can help with preparations," Toni said, kissing my cheek before she dashed off.

Mom closed the door and took me in. "You're so very beautiful, Gemma. Savio won't know what hit him."

Tears glistened in Mom's eyes. She swallowed hard, fighting the tears and losing her battle. A few droplets trailed down her cheeks. She blew out air. "I promised myself not to cry before church."

I took her hand. "We both know that was never going to happen." My eyes, too, stung with unshed tears.

She nodded. "If your dad could have seen you like this..." Her words died away in a choked sob and a tear slid out of my eye. I fought for composure. Maybe the waterproof makeup would keep everything in place, but swollen eyes and a red nose were difficult to hide. "And your nonna." Mom closed her eyes,

her face scrunching up. She shook her head desperately, trying to hold back.

Wetness gathered on my cheeks and I pressed my lips together.

Since I was a little girl, I'd dreamed about my wedding day. Mom and Nonna would show me photos from their day, beaming and wistful. They'd both been beautiful brides, and they never stopped telling me that I, too, would be a gorgeous bride.

Nonna had always been so excited about witnessing my wedding, the first wedding from her grandchildren. Now she wouldn't be there.

Neither would be Dad. My stomach hollowed out, a gaping abyss of grief and sadness.

"They are watching from above," she finished firmly. "That should be our consolation today. This is a day of joy and we can't allow grief to ruin it. I've waited too long to see my beautiful Gem walk down the aisle."

Mom squeezed my hands tightly, staring into my eyes. "Be happy. That's what both of them wanted for you." She smiled. "Happiness and many beautiful children."

"Mom!" I choked out, then laughed. "I'm only eighteen. I won't give you any grandchildren anytime soon."

Mom shrugged. "You never know. I was your age when I got pregnant with Diego."

I didn't mention that Savio and Dad were nothing alike. Savio definitely didn't want any children yet, and to be honest, neither did I.

Mom regarded me in a strange way, stroking my cheek. "So grown up. I can't believe my little girl is going to become a married woman today." A hint of embarrassment crossed her features.

She cleared her throat. "Tonight will be a special night."

My eyes grew wide, realizing the direction of Mom's words. Heat crawled up my neck.

Mom's cheeks, too, were stained pink. "I think," she said with a small embarrassed laugh. "I'll ask your future sisters-in-

law to have this conversation with you.”

“Oh no, Mom, I don’t need a conversation.” Toni had explained everything I needed to know. After all, she’d been with Diego, but Mom didn’t know that, of course.

Mom shook her head and walked toward the door. “Every bride needs that kind of talk.” She slipped out before I could try to dissuade her. I stared at my reflection.

My tears had dried by now, and fortunately my eyes weren’t swollen. I hadn’t cried enough for that. I fumbled with the necklace. Nonna’s family heirloom.

A knock sounded, tearing me from this dangerous path of mourning.

“Gemma?” Kiara’s voice rang out. I cringed at the conversation that was about to happen.



Guests had started trickling in and began filling the pews. To see the day that a Falcone would marry in church...

I’d gathered with my brothers in the back, greeting everyone. Kiara and Serafina were busy instructing Greta and Nevio once more. Gemma’s mother hurried toward Kiara and Serafina and said something to them while throwing a quick glance in my direction. They nodded, then Mrs. Bazzoli walked away.

“What is it?” I asked.

Kiara blushed.

Serafina smiled coyly. “Mrs. Bazzoli asked us to have a talk with Gemma before you marry.” She paused for emphasis. “A girl’s talk.”

I shook my head. “Gemma doesn’t need a talk. I’ll show her everything she needs to know.”

Serafina huffed. “Of course, she needs a pep talk. Unlike you, she hasn’t slept with half of Vegas.”

I grinned. “I know. She’s all mine.”

Serafina exchanged a look with Kiara. “Why don’t you return to your groom duties and we’ll handle the girl stuff?”

“As I see it, giving her a good night is my groom duty.”

Fabiano exchanged a look with my brothers as he sauntered toward us with Aurora on his arms.

“I think you need to lower your expectations,” Serafina said.

“Don’t ruin tonight for me.”

Kiara rolled her eyes.

“I’m sure you’ll manage to do that on your own,” Serafina said with a laugh.

“Don’t ruin his night, for fuck’s sake. His fucking blue balls moodiness of the last few months is intolerable. I’ll turn fucking homicidal if he doesn’t get laid soon,” Remo snarled.

“You’re homicidal on the best of days, Remo, let’s be honest here,” Fabiano said, rocking Aurora whose face was red from her last screaming fit. It made her blonde hair and blue eyes stand out even more.

Kiara and Serafina slipped away before I could stop them.

“Damn,” I muttered.

“Maybe you should listen to Fina’s advice and lower your expectations. Maybe Gemma won’t sleep with you tonight, and even if she does, it probably won’t be the fireworks you expect,” Fabiano said.

“Speak for yourself,” I said. “Only because you didn’t give Leona any fireworks in your first night, doesn’t mean I’ll fail too.”

Fabiano rolled his eyes.

Remo smiled twistedly, his eyes following his wife.

“Any tips?” I said.

“Whiskey goes well with the taste of blood.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Thanks.”

Fabiano shook his head, covered Aurora’s ear with his palm. “Aurora will be banned from visiting your mansion once she’s older.”

Diego came over with impressive bags under his eyes. We shook hands and he probably would have uttered another warning if a murmur hadn’t passed the present guests.

I followed their gazes toward the entrance of the church and let out a low whistle.

“That girl is going to get someone killed one day,” I said.

Luca Vitiello towered in the doorway with his stunning wife and even more stunning daughter. His son was already taller than his three years older sister.

“How old is she?” Diego asked.

“Twelve,” Fabiano said in warning. “And you better look at something else when they come over, or Luca’s going to cut you down.”

“Luca won’t cut down anyone in my territory,” Remo said with a dangerous smile.

“If someone checked out Greta in that age, would you hesitate to cut them down if you were in Luca’s territory?” Fabiano asked.

I scoffed. Remo would rip the fucker’s throat out with a smile.



Kiara, followed by Serafina, entered the room, and I wanted to disappear in the ground. Kiara appeared even more flustered than I felt. They both took me in.

“God, you are so beautiful, Gemma,” Kiara said, pressing a palm to her mouth.

Serafina nodded slowly. They both were absolutely stunning. Kiara in a long red dress that contrasted beautifully with her pale skin and dark hair, and Serafina like a regal angel with her straight blonde hair and a dark blue dress. “You will bring Savio to his knees.”

I wasn't sure how my marriage with Savio would be.

“Your mom asked us to talk to you,” Serafina said, coming closer.

“I really don't need a talk,” I said quickly. “I already talked to... someone.” I couldn't really say that I'd talked to Toni because it wasn't public knowledge that she'd slept with Diego.

“Well, I wouldn't rely on Savio's ample knowledge alone, if I were you,” Serafina said.

“Did you ever meet any of the girls?”

Kiara touched my arm. “No. Savio never cared about any girl enough.”

Serafina leaned in. “From this day on, you're the only girl that matters. Like I said, you need to bring him to his knees.”

“Do you think that's possible?”

“Oh yes,” she said, exchanging a look with Kiara. “Every man can be brought to his knees.”

They'd have to know. They were married to Nino and Remo.

“So, you're sure you don't want to ask us anything?” Kiara asked softly.

“One thing...among Traditionalists the bloody sheets tradition is still upheld but since your family isn't very conservative, I was wondering if there's something like that.”

“No!” Both of them said at once.

Serafina touched my shoulder. “You decide if you want to sleep with Savio, only you. There won't be any bloody sheets or anything else putting pressure on you and please promise me that you won't let him push you into anything you don't want to do.”

I smiled at their concern. “I won't.”

Savio had made me wait a long time before he'd made up his mind, first about our engagement, then about our wedding. He could wait for what he wanted a while.

TWENTY-TWO



I loved Gemma in tight clothes that showed off her breathtaking curves, but I'd been expecting her to opt for a modest wedding dress. After all, the spectacle took place in church and her family was in attendance. So, seeing her in her high-collared, long-sleeved dress with the veil covering all of her face didn't come as a surprise, what did, was that she knocked the breath straight out of me. A hush fell over the crowd.

An apparition of white.

Diego led her toward me. The closer they came, the more of Gemma's face became visible through the fine material of her veil. They stopped beside me, and Diego pulled back her veil. The tender look that passed between them made me forgive Diego for the veiled threats of the last few weeks. This was his little sister. I'd never had a sister to protect, but I had Greta.

I held out my hand, surprisingly steady, and he handed Gemma over to me with a curt nod. His jaw was locked tightly as he turned and headed to the first row where our families sat.

Gemma's hand was shaking against mine, beckoning to my protective side. I slid my thumb over her soft skin and was rewarded with a small smile. Leaning down, I whispered. "You look like a princess, Gem."

The smile got a bit wider, then the priest started his sermon and Gemma's expression became focused. I zoned out. This spectacle was for Gem, nothing else. I still didn't believe in any of this hocus pocus.

I caught Remo's eyes who stood next to me with his arms crossed and a mildly pissed expression. Nino wore a look of mild exasperation. For him, it was completely unreasonable to believe in God. Good thing that he hadn't involved Gemma's conservative family into a discussion about the existence of a higher power. Knowing my brothers and my devilish little nephew, it would be a miracle if this wedding ended without a scandal and half of the Bazzolis never talking a word to us again. Only Adamo managed an expression that suggested he actually listened to a word the priest said, though he was probably daydreaming about the next street race in two weeks.

Gemma's "I do" cut through my thoughts and I quickly returned my focus to the front. The look she sent me made it clear that she knew I hadn't paid attention.

"I do," I said firmly, and then ice-cold realization hit me. Right this second, I was a married man. From the corner of my eye, I caught Fabiano and Remo exchange surprised looks. Had they thought I'd say no? I wouldn't put it past them to have placed bets on the outcome of this day. If that was the case, I wished they'd told me so I could have placed my own wager.

Greta tiptoed toward us in her pale pink flower girl dress, led by Nevio in his tux. Without him, she would have never walked down the aisle with so many people watching. I gave Nevio a warning look. If the little monster did anything to mess up this day, I'd kick his devious ass. In spite of himself, Nevio didn't as much as make a face. He looked focused on Greta. Those two were like yin and yang. He and Greta stopped in front of us. Greta held up the ring cushion, giving me a tiny smile. She didn't once look at the priest, Gemma or anyone else.

Gemma leaned down and whispered something that made my niece smile a bit wider, surprising me briefly, but then my eyes were drawn to Gemma's back, which was bare. Her defined back and elegant shoulder blades, her delicious spine that I wanted to run my tongue over. My pulse sped up. Gemma straightened with the ring in her hand and faced me.

I don't know what my expression was like, but it must have reflected my hunger because Gemma's cheeks turned red. "Your hand," she whispered, and I held out my hand for her.

She slipped the ring on. I bent down to Greta and took the remaining ring. This time I'd opted for a less obnoxious ring, a simple gold band with a few diamonds. "Thank you, dollface."

Nevio pouted.

"And thanks to you."

Together they turned around as I straightened. I gripped Gemma's hand and slid the ring on her finger. A familiar wave of possessiveness washed over me, seeing my ring on Gemma's hand. Glancing at my own hand, I realized that now I, too, would wear a sign that made me someone else's. It was a strange feeling, knowing Gemma would be the woman I'd spend the rest of my life with, the only woman I'd have sex with...

"You may kiss the bride," the priest said, tearing me from my thoughts.

I smirked.

Snaking my arm around Gemma's waist, my palm pressed to the soft, hot skin of her back, I pulled her against me.

"Behave," she said almost desperately a second before my mouth crashed down on hers. The priest had given his official blessing for a kiss, so Gemma's stuck-up family could suck it up. Sliding my lips over Gemma's soft ones, I nudged her open with my tongue. Gemma tensed, but I didn't give her a chance to react, pulling her even closer, my pinky slipping below the fabric of her dress to tease her tailbone as my tongue tasted her. Applause rang out in the church, at first only by a few people, probably orchestrated by Remo, until everyone fell in.

Eventually I pulled back, breathing heavily. I would have kept kissing Gemma if blood hadn't started pooling in my cock. A hard-on in church was definitely something that Gemma would hold against me. Gemma's skin was flushed, her lips swollen, her eyes lidded. For a moment before she remembered herself, desire filled her gaze and fuck it, I wanted to throw her over my shoulder right then and carry her to the car so I could take her to a secluded place where I could have my way with her.

Then Gemma's eyes narrowed, and realization settled on her features, her eyes darting to our audience.



Outside of the church the guests gathered around us, clinking champagne glasses and cheering. Remo and Serafina were the first to congratulate us, of course. As Capo and my brother, it was his honor. He shook his head, then grabbed my hand and pulled me against him to hug me briefly. Many men avoided public displays of affection, especially if they were a high-ranking mobster. Remo knew he didn't need to impress anyone. Every person in the room respected or even feared him. "I can't fucking believe that you're married. I was sure you'd pull a Hugh Hefner on all of us."

I snorted, pulling away. "How could I not agree to marry, considering the hottest girl in Vegas was waiting at the altar?"

"That's a lot of trouble for a piece of virgin ass," Remo muttered. Gemma stiffened beside me.

My hand around his tightened, my lips curling in anger. "Careful."

Remo's mouth twitched into his twisted smile. "I see. Not just some hot ass after all." He stepped back with that insufferable knowing expression and Serafina took his place. She smiled. "Congrats." Then she hit my arm. "Don't mess this up. I love her."

"I'd never do anything to destroy your special bond."

She hit me again before she stepped back, then searched the area for Nevio, who'd disappeared.

Diego and his mother Claudia, the latter holding Carlotta, who was still pale, were next. Diego gripped my hand and touched my shoulder. "Congrats." He leaned forward, his eyes dead serious. "You are like a brother I never had. You are my best friend. But if you hurt Gemma, I'm going to kill you."

I smiled in response. By now, I'd gotten used to his threats and they didn't piss me off anymore. "She's mine to protect now, Diego, and I will protect her."

Diego nodded, but the hint of doubt lingered in his expression.

Claudia with Carlotta was next. She gave me a one-armed hug. "Please be good to my girl, Savio," she whispered, her eyes earnest in their worry for her daughter. "Gemma is a good girl. She's got a heart of gold, but even gold isn't indestructible. I know as a Falcone, Diego's threats mean nothing to you, but maybe the wish of a mother does."

Tears filled her eyes. She looked exhausted and too-thin. Since Daniele's death, she'd been breakable. "Claudia, you don't have to ask me to be good to Gem. I won't hurt her, and if I tried, she'd kick my ass as she should."

Carlotta smiled shyly. I held out my arms, and she immediately leaned forward. Claudia handed her to me, and I pressed her to my chest. She was a tiny kid, no surprise, given her illness. "Hey Lotta, you look dashing in your dress. Like a princess."

She giggled and actually snuggled against me. Her dad was gone, a constant male presence in her life, and knowing Diego's workload, he probably didn't have time to fill the void. I stroked her head.

Gemma pulled away from Diego who'd been hugging her for a long time. They both stared at me. I gave them a wink then turned back to Carlotta. "Will you dance with me later?"

Carlotta nodded, biting her lip.

"Your other guests are waiting for their turn," Claudia said and took Carlotta from me before she and Diego moved to the side. Gemma linked our fingers and stood on her tiptoes to whisper in my ear. "Thank you for making her feel special. She's been through so much. She really likes you."

I squeezed her hand as she turned back to the guests. Nino and Kiara waited before us. Kiara had tears in her eyes. Each of them carried one of their sons. Both were dressed in bow ties and suspenders, earning admiring glances from all the women around.

Gemma's face twisted with rapture as well. My baby alarm went off at once, and I realized I should have talked to her about not wanting kids within the next ten years at least. Four kids in the house were already more than enough, five if you counted Aurora who was over half of the time with Leona. Did Gemma even take the pill or was that against her traditions?

Fuck. If I had to use a condom tonight, I'd kick myself.

Nino gave me a nod and clapped my arm. "Congrats."

I raised an eyebrow, remembering his words about marriage. "I thought marrying wasn't an accomplishment that warranted congratulating."

"That's true under normal circumstances, but given your promiscuity, attempting such a bond is a daring endeavor worthy of congrats."

"Is a *fuck you* or *thank you* warranted in response, because I'm honestly not sure," I said. Leave it to Nino to insult me without batting an eye.

Nino gave me the ghost of a smile that equaled a full-blown laughing fit in his case. "Just remember how much this wedding cost us when you consider returning to your old ways."

"Okay, this is definitely a case of a heartfelt fuck you."

Kiara moved in front of Nino, giving him a meaningful look before she hugged me. "I'm so happy for you. I knew you'd find the right girl for you."

The congratulation ordeal dragged on forever after that, but eventually Gemma and I were in the back of the limousine that would take us to our mansion for the festivities. I pushed the button that raised the barrier between the back and the front with the driver.

Gemma gave me an indignant look. "Savio..."

I reached for her waist and hoisted her on my lap. With a gasp, her hands clamped down on my shoulders.

"This dress is so you. Innocent choir girl and sex on legs at once. Fuck, Gem, you're killing me. I won't be able to think about anything but tonight."

"Who says anything will happen tonight?"

I raised my eyebrows then smiled lazily as I cupped her face and pulled her closer. "It's tradition for the bride and the groom to consummate the marriage, Gem. You of all people should know. Wasn't your family one of the last supporters of the bloody sheets tradition in the Camorra?"

“There won’t be any bloody sheets tonight,” she said angrily, but the delicate blush traveling up her throat took away from the venom in her voice. I ran my thumb across the pink trail.

I pressed my face into the crook of her neck, kissing her soft skin right where her collar ended as my fingertips discovered the soft bumps of her spine. Goose bumps rose on her skin, making me smile. “Oh, you’re absolutely right, Kitty.” Slowly, I trailed kisses up to her chin. “There won’t be any blood because I’m going to make you so fucking wet that your pussy is ready for my cock.”

Gemma released a sharp breath, and I used her startled state to claim her mouth once more. After a moment of hesitation, she kissed me back. Her fingers grabbed my neck as she pressed herself against me. Grabbing her butt and back, I flipped us over so she was splayed out on the leather bank of the car and me on top of her. The way her body moved under me, the low moans deep in her throat, the urgent twitching of her fingers in my hair, they all spoke a clear language. Gemma was as desperate for my touch as I was for hers.

The car came to a stop and Gemma ripped out of our kiss, her eyes wide, her breathing ragged. She blinked at me, almost dazed. Her lips red and fucking pouty. The sound of our driver getting out of the car made her tense. Her eyes darted to the back door. “Savio, get off me.”

I nipped at her lower lip. “I’m really not in favor of that plan. How about an early wedding night? A quickie in a limousine is the perfect start to our marriage, don’t you think?”

Gemma’s eyes narrowed. “You really think that I want my first time to happen on a backseat?”

“There are worse places,” I joked. “A limousine is a comfy place.”

“I bet you’ve tested that theory with other girls.”

“What does it matter? You are my wife now, Gem. None of the other girls can say that.”

She shoved at my chest when steps sounded outside our door. “Get off!”

I pressed a quick kiss to her tight lips then bent over her ear. “Tell me, are you already wet for me?” I rasped. “I bet you are.”

“Savio,” she gritted out.

I sat up and pulled Gemma up with me just when the door opened. It wasn't the driver though. Diego stood in the door and his expression darkened upon seeing the state Gemma was in. Some of her hair had fallen out of her updo and framed her face in messy curls, her lips were swollen and her face flushed.

I slipped out of the car, then helped Gemma to her feet. She avoided Diego's eyes like he did hers. He had no trouble glaring at me though. He brought his mouth close to my ear. “Couldn't you have waited until tonight, you asshole?”

I chuckled. “Don't get your panties in a bunch, Diego. Gemma is still perfectly entitled to that snow-white dress. I can wait until tonight.”

Gemma was definitely pissed at me after that. Probably because she hated how hot and wet I could get her with a few kisses.

When I led her into the garden where everything for the feast had been set up, thanks to Kiara's organization skills, Gemma's expression morphed into one of awe. It was an outdoor wedding. The chances of rain in Vegas were close to zero at this time, so tents would have been a waste. Dozens of round tables filled the center of the garden, which offered more than enough room. Behind them, a dancefloor had been set up which was covered by garlands which would illuminate the place once night fell. I didn't much care about the flower decorations, but Gemma seemed happy with it and that was all that mattered.

This was the biggest wedding that the Camorra had seen in decades, since our parents had married, and every Underboss and Captain was in attendance as well as Luca as the leading man of the Famiglia. Remo had been wary of having the festivities on our premises, but it would have suggested weakness if we'd been too cautious about inviting our men into our home.

Gemma shook her head, obviously overwhelmed.

Soon the guests took their places and food was served. Gemma was oddly quiet when we moved to the dancefloor for our first dance. With hundreds of eyes on us, she presented her

most beautiful smile, but I saw the lingering sadness. It would have been her father's turn to dance with her after this.

She swallowed, her eyes darting to the black sky. "Do you think Dad and Nonna are watching?"

A tricky question. I wasn't a believer. I kissed her temple and tightened my hold on her, leaning down to her ear. "Your dad would be happy to see you like this. And your nonna would be proud of you for making it to your wedding night before succumbing to my charm."

Gemma choked out a laugh, slapping my chest lightly. "You are so full of yourself."

I kissed her lips, glad that she was smiling again.

Diego danced with his sister after that and I danced with their mom. One dance followed the other after that, an endless string of women coming and going. I'd made sure that none of my past lovers were invited, which wasn't a problem considering I'd steered clear of Italian women. Diego wasn't that lucky. His dance with Toni was a prime show of awkwardness.

"Dance with me," a high voice said.

I lowered my drink. I'd only just managed to escape the dance floor and now found myself staring at a girl with black hair and blue eyes. "Is that an order?" I asked.

From across the room, I found Remo to see his reaction to my predicament, but he wasn't looking my way. He was watching Luca with narrowed eyes. Luca, on the other hand, looked at me as if he was currently imagining how to slice me into the tiniest pieces possible.

His daughter batted her lashes at me. A death trap in the making, that girl. "It would be rude of you to say no."

"Is that so?" I asked, setting down my drink.

"Definitely," she said.

"Remind me of your name again." I knew her name, everyone did, but she was a bit too confident.

Indignation flashed on her face, a flicker of childish poutiness. "Marcella Vitiello."

“Ahh, yes, now I remember.”

She flushed, obviously confused by my bored voice. In New York, everyone probably fawned over her like she was a princess.

“Are you going to dance with me or not?”

“That’s a polite *or not*.”

“You’re scared of my dad,” she muttered. “I thought in Las Vegas, at least, people would be braver.”

“I’m not scared of your dad, Marcella. If you’re so brave, go to my brother Remo and dance with him. I have a wife I need to keep entertained.” I gave her a nod, then walked away. I wouldn’t be the pawn of a pre-pubescent spoiled princess from New York.

I went in search of Gemma, who I hadn’t seen in a while. I found her at our second pool, staring at the illuminated cascades. Her arms were wrapped around her middle. She wasn’t crying, which was a huge relief. I snaked my arms around her from behind, making her jump.

“Why are you hiding out here?”

“I’m not hiding. I just needed to get away from all the attention for a moment.”

I kissed her throat. “See, it wasn’t so bad having your first kiss before today without all these fuckers watching.”

“I doubt Nonna would agree with that,” she said, a mix of guilt and sadness reflecting on her beautiful face.

“You really think she would have been mad at you for having a few kisses before we got married? You’re my wife now, so what does it matter?”

“I don’t know what she would have thought because I can’t ask her, because she’s not here. Neither is Dad.” Her voice wavered and she quickly turned her head away, but I caught the treacherous glistening of her eyes.

“Fuck, Gem,” I said in a low voice. Turning her around, I gripped her face and pressed our foreheads together. “You know they both would have wanted you to be happy. That’s all they wanted.”

She searched my eyes. “Will you make me happy?”

Several answers manifested themselves on the tip of my tongue, none of them appropriate in a situation like this. But the truth was, I wasn't fucking sure. This marriage was the result of my dick running the fucking show. I wanted Gemma in my bed, and for that to happen, I needed to seal the deal. Of course, that wasn't all there was to it. But I'd never had to take care of someone. I'd always only done what I wanted, fucked who I wanted. Now that was over. Gemma was my wife.

Fuck, that truth hit me like a sledgehammer.

Gemma huffed. "You're already regretting this, aren't you?" She tried to pull away, but I tightened my hold on her.

"I'm not," I said firmly. It was the truth. I'd marry Gemma again, and not just so I could bury myself in her undoubtedly pretty pussy, but also because I wanted her for myself in every other regard as well. The idea that Mick could have gotten her still sent me into a jealous rage.

But now forever stretched before us in all its terrifying magnitude. Could I make her happy outside of the bedroom? Looking into Gemma's vulnerable eyes, I wanted nothing more, but I just didn't know.

I kissed Gemma because that was something I could do. My tongue stroked hers, the promise of more. She leaned into me, allowed me to avoid an answer, a little sin of omission. A rustling made me pull back, my body tensing and hand going to the gun under my jacket.

TWENTY-THREE



Gemma

Toni and Diego stepped out from behind a bush, looking ruffled. One of Toni's spaghetti straps hung off her shoulder, her lipstick was gone, and her hairdo was ruined. Diego didn't make a better sight with his wrongly buttoned shirt, open zipper and tousled hair.

I grimaced.

Savio didn't share my embarrassment. "Sex with the ex?"

I stifled a laugh at my brother's caught expression. Toni looked completely mortified, so I decided to save her before Savio said something that would make it worse. I went over to her and grabbed her hand, then led her away to another secluded spot of the ridiculously vast premises.

"Sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean for you to see that."

I gave her a look. "Toni, there are only two reasons why I don't want to see it: I'd rather pretend my brother doesn't have a sex life, and I don't want you to get hurt. You know how it ends."

She shrugged. "It's just sex. I'm not holding my breath for a relationship with him."

I gave her a doubtful look.

"It's true," she said. "But the sex is too good to say no."

My nose scrunched up. "Toni, please."

She laughed and touched my cheeks. "You're turning red again. I wonder how long that'll last now that you're married to

Savio.”

I glanced at my elegant gold watch, my seventeenth birthday gift from Savio. It was almost midnight, which was the designated time to retire for the groom and bride. A hint of nerves filled my belly thinking about spending the night with Savio. I'd been in his bed before, but I hadn't been myself back then, so it seemed almost like a dream, not something that had really happened.

Toni linked our hands. “Are you nervous?”

“I'm not going to sleep with Savio tonight.”

Surprise flashed across Toni's face. Wasn't she the one who'd told me to make him work for it after how much of an asshole he had been? It seemed sex with my brother had shifted her priorities momentarily.

“Really? After years of pining for him, you won't allow yourself a joyride on his bull?”

I rolled my eyes. “It's more about not allowing him any joyrides before I've made him suffer.”

“You think he'll accept that?”

“What can he do?”

Toni made a face and motioned around us. “He is a Falcone. He owns the West. He can do whatever he wants and get away with it.”

Toni sometimes had a tendency for dramatics. “Savio is not like that.”

“Oh, Gemma, even you can't be this lovestruck. Did you hear what he and his brothers did to the Russian that attacked you? You know what kind of man he is. What kind of men he and his brothers are. Don't tell me you think he'd have qualms about non-consensual rough play.”

“What's gotten into you?” I asked. Toni usually wasn't like this.

She flushed and looked away. “Nothing.”

“Toni,” I said firmly. “Tell me what the fudge is wrong with you.”

Not even that brought a smile to her lips.

“It’s about the Arena. Apparently, Dad’s been slacking with bookkeeping, so we didn’t send enough money to the Camorra. Fabiano had a talk with him about it yesterday.”

“Oh, no. I’m sorry. Is that why he’s not here?”

“It’s not that bad. But he got a black eye and a broken cheekbone, and is nursing his hurt pride at home. It was his fault. He knows you never mess with the Camorra’s money.”

“It’s difficult to think that both Savio and Diego do horrible things.”

“You’re part of the scariest family now, Gem. I can’t imagine living in a house with all of them.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said uncertainly.

Toni wrapped her arms around me. “So is Savio a good kisser? With all the practice he’s had, he should be amazing.”

I bit my lip. “He’s very good. I don’t know how he does it, but I can feel his kiss everywhere.” My cheeks heated.

Toni grinned. “That’s how it’s meant to be. Have you practiced like I advised you?”

I groaned. “*No.*” Toni had suggested I practice making a man happy on a banana, but that was too embarrassing to consider.

“Are you still on the ‘I’m never going to do it’ train?”

“Yes.”

“I doubt Savio will be happy about that.”

“Are you on my side or his?”

Toni rolled her eyes. “Yours, always yours, which is why I want you to have an amazing sex life.”



Diego tried to straighten his hair, which was futile. Toni must have tugged at it so hard it was forever frozen in its disarrayed state.

“Let’s take a walk,” Diego said.

“That’s the lamest pick up line you’ve ever used, and I’ve heard them all.”

Diego didn’t crack a smile.

So that was how it was going to be? I followed him, trying to stifle my amusement. Did he really think he could intimidate me? Because I had no doubt that that was his plan.

One look at Diego’s face and I knew he had prepared a speech. Maybe he’d forgotten that I had grown up with Nino and Remo. Scaring me wasn’t exactly easy, especially looking like he did. “Maybe you should pull up your zipper and button your shirt properly, so I can take you seriously.”

With a grimace, he tried to fix his clothes.

When he stopped our stroll, it was so far from the party that the sounds of celebration were only a distant echo and the spot lay in shadows.

Diego shoved his hands into his pockets. “You’re my best friend,” he began.

That wasn’t what I’d expected.

“I’ve always tried to protect Gemma.”

“You don’t need to protect her from me. I won’t hurt her. She’ll be safer than she’s ever been before. The name Falcone will protect her and so will I with every twisted Falcone cell in my fucking body.”

“I’m not worried about anyone else being a danger to her. What I’m worried about is how you treat her.”

“Fuck, I’ve turned into a monk these last two months. If that doesn’t show that I’m serious about Gemma, I don’t know what will.”

Diego huffed out a laugh. “I didn’t think you’d ever go without sex. And I really didn’t think you’d wait for her. I thought you’d find a way to talk her into sleeping with you before the wedding.”

“Thank fuck the wait will be over tonight.”

Diego’s lips curled. “Yeah... I’d rather not think about it.”

“Maybe you have some last-minute tips. Remo wasn’t very helpful.”

“I doubt you need any advice,” Diego muttered, looking increasingly uncomfortable which spurred me on.

“There’s one thing I’ve never done, but you have. If I remember correctly, you popped Toni’s cherry.”

“Shut up,” he said. “I’m not going to talk to you about that. And I don’t want to know a fucking thing about your night with my sister. Just keep it to yourself.” He began walking away, and I followed. I had absolutely no intention of sharing information about my sex life with Gemma with anyone.

When we returned to the party, it had just struck midnight.

“Bed her, bed her!” called the first member of Gemma’s family. Trust the Traditionalists to have a fixed time when to fuck your wife. For once, I was glad for their traditions. I didn’t even have to force my brothers to start the chorus.

I inclined my head toward the man, and soon more people shouted the words, including my brothers. Only Adamo stood with his arms crossed and rolled his eyes. I spotted Gemma next to Toni at our table. Her face was turning increasingly red.

I made my way over to her, trying not to look too eager. I was a grown-ass man and not a teenager before his very first fuck. When I passed Remo, he murmured, “I put a bottle of whiskey in your bedroom.”

I chuckled, especially seeing the frosty look Serafina sent her husband.

Then I reached Gemma. She looked like she was about to take flight. Her mom and Toni quickly hugged her as if she was about to endeavor on a dangerous adventure.

Maybe the rumors about me being an animal in bed had reached their ears. I stifled my amusement. I'd always known my bull tattoo would only add more fuel to the fire. But while I had every intention of pounding Gemma into the bed very soon, tonight wouldn't be like that.

Every girl I'd been with had come with me, and if I had to eat out Gemma all night for that to happen, then I'd gladly do it.

I took her hand and started to lead her toward the house. A crowd followed us, shouting all kinds of suggestions. Gemma's cheeks practically glowed red by the time we reached the French doors.

I turned to the crowd of drunk men. "This is as far as you're allowed to come."

"As long as you make your wife come tonight!" someone shouted in the back.

"Oh, I intend to!" I shot back.

Gemma made a small horrified sound, and I decided to spare her further mortification. I opened the doors for her and after she'd stepped in, I followed her and closed them again.

The shouts of the crowd were muffled now.

Gemma wrung her hands, looking around the room. This was the living area in my wing, but it wasn't time for a tour of the house. I lifted her into my arms, earning a startled gasp. Her eyes flew up to meet mine.

Her dress was beautiful but made carrying Gemma a difficult task, especially up the stairs, but eventually we arrived at my, now *our*, bedroom. I could already feel blood shooting into my dick, just thinking about tonight.

TWENTY-FOUR



Gemma

Savio entered the bedroom with me in his arms, then set me down carefully. Before I could say something, he kissed me fiercely, surprising me.

I pushed against his chest, wanting to make something clear, and he pulled back with a grin. “Tonight, you are mine.”

“If you think I’ll sleep with you only because we’re married now, you’ve lost your mind.”

“It’s your duty and my privilege,” Savio said with a taunting grin, thinking this was a game.

I couldn’t believe him. I knew it was my duty. I knew what my family expected from me, and how ashamed they’d be if they found out I’d denied Savio Falcone my body. But Savio had been a bastard to me and I had absolutely no intention to make this easy on him.

“I don’t care. If you want me, you’ll have to force me because I won’t give you anything.”

Savio tilted his head. “I don’t think you’d fight me.”

“I would,” I said.

“And we both know you wouldn’t stand a chance, Kitty. Your little girl fight moves are no challenge for me.”

His self-assured tone drove me forward, but my wedding dress made moving difficult.

Savio blocked every single of my punches and even a half-ass kick, his grin widening. He jerked me toward him and stole a kiss. I rammed my fist into his stomach, causing him to groan. Before I had time to consider another move, Savio thrust me forward and I fell down on the bed. With the heavy material of my dress, I stood no chance finding my footing.

Savio shoved up my skirt, climbed on top of me and knelt between my legs. I tried to shove him off, but he was too strong for me. He grabbed my wrists and pushed them up over my head. I tried to twist under him to buck him off with my hips. Savio anticipated the move and used my momentum to bring his thighs under mine, shoving my legs farther apart so he could settle between them.

He smiled, but beneath the amusement, there was something darker, something dominant in his expression that had never been there before. He was a man who knew he had every right to claim what was his to claim, and he was eager to do so.

The worst was how my body reacted to the fight with Savio. I was becoming increasingly aroused.

Savio's smile turned daring as he reached between us, his hand sliding down my side to my stomach.

I struggled against his hold. "Don't you dare," I whispered harshly. There was a hint of vulnerability in my voice that annoyed me.

Savio's brown eyes held mine as he lightly stroked the inside of my thigh. He didn't move closer to my center. "Gemma, I know you're fucking wet. I know you want me to touch your pussy. Just say it and I'll show you how it feels to have an orgasm."

"I've had orgasms before," I muttered despite the burst of heat in my cheeks.

Savio's expression turned feral. "When you touched yourself?"

I considered making a story up about having some guy getting me off secretly, but I wasn't suicidal, nor did I want an innocent man to die so I could taunt Savio. He was a Falcone, no matter how much he enjoyed our banter, there was a limit to what he'd tolerate.

“I have capable hands,” I said.

Savio smirked. “I don’t doubt it, but it’s something entirely different if a man licks you or finger-fucks you, Gemma, trust me.”

“Do you even know how to please a woman? Whores always pretend they enjoy it.” He and his brothers, like so many men in our world, had used the services of the whores from their clubs in the past, even I knew that.

“I’ve had enough girls scream my name.”

Jealousy burned through me, and I tried to crush it. Of course, Savio saw. He chuckled, and a new wave of fury erupted in me.

“I’m all yours now, Kitty.”

Was he really?

He kissed my throat then made his way up to my lips. His tongue teased them open, nudged, caressed, stroked the inside of my mouth until everything was spinning and my panties stuck to my center. I didn’t even know it could be like that. My body had never reacted this way before. Soon I felt the proof of Savio’s arousal, and my senses returned. I pulled out of the kiss, breathless and hot.

“I’m not going to sleep with you,” I said again, firmer this time.

It must have finally sunk in, because he frowned. “So you want to make me wait.”

“You’ll have to wait, or you’ll have to take what you want against my will.”

He kissed my cheek. “Ahh, Kitty, you know that’s not my style. I want your pussy to scream for my cock, and it’ll happen. This game you’re playing, I’m a master in it. The wait will be every bit as torturous for you as it’ll be for me, trust me.”

The way I could feel the low vibrato of his voice between my legs, I feared he was right, but I wouldn’t let him get the upper hand, not this time.

“Get off me. I’m tired and want to get ready.”

“Of course,” he said as he straightened his knee, lightly brushing my crotch. I twitched at the spike of pleasure, my eyes widening, my breath halting.

Savio smiled knowingly as he straightened. With flushed cheeks, I took in the bulge in his pants, then quickly tore my gaze away.

I tried to sit up, but the dress prevented that. Sighing, I held out my hands. “Can you help me up?”

“Only if you can help me get this down,” he said with a nod toward his crotch.

“I could kick you between the legs...”

Savio shook his head with a chuckle. He finally took my hands and tugged. I came to my feet, bringing us once again close. Savio’s eyes made me swallow hard.

“I thought you wanted to get ready,” he murmured, making the words sound way dirtier than they were. I wasn’t sure how to stand a chance against him in this battle of wills, because it was completely out of my comfort zone. I had no experience in the game of seduction.

I took a step back from him. Savio was too much to handle for me, but I wasn’t someone who gave up easily.

“Will you at least allow me to get you out of this dress or will you deny me this too?” He was joking. I didn’t miss the darker note in his voice, though.

I’d need his help to get out of the dress anyway. The heavy fabric was closed with hooks and buttons at my waist and over my butt. I nodded.

“Does that mean I’m allowed to undress you?”

“Yes,” I said quietly, even as my heart beat in my throat. The most I’d ever showed a man was my stomach. No one had ever seen me without clothes.

Savio caressed my bare back, making my breath hitch. Then he loosened the hooks and helped me pull down the top. Even facing the other way, I felt exposed. I brought my palms up to cover my breasts when Savio slowly dragged my skirt down until

I could step out. I wasn't sure where he was, but aware of his gaze as he saw me in only white lace panties.

I was torn between the urge to run into the bathroom and turn around to see his expression.

Suddenly, I felt him behind me and he pressed the softest kiss to the nape of my neck. "My God, Gem, you're killing me."

A smile tugged at my mouth at the longing in his voice.

"That makes you happy?"

Biting my lip, I hurried into the bathroom and closed the door. My heart was hammering against my ribcage. Forcing myself to calm down, I took in my surroundings. I'd never had a bathroom for myself, always had to share it with every member of my family. The Falcone mansion probably harbored a dozen bathrooms, all of them as splendid as this with the granite floors and walls, floor-to-ceiling showers and endless vanity counters.

I took a long shower before I removed my makeup and let down my hair. Then I began brushing my teeth.

"Getting ready can't possibly take this long, Gem. I'm coming in."

The toothbrush wedged between my teeth, I grabbed a robe from a hook and put it on. My clothes were still outside.

My fingers around the brush tightened when Savio walked in completely naked and with a boner that drove heat into my cheeks. I stopped brushing and froze.

Savio didn't show the slightest hint of shame. Of course not, he'd been naked in front of so many women, it wasn't anything special.

His eyes flashed with amusement when he noticed my expression. I had seen him naked before, that one time, but this couldn't compare. He was bigger than I thought possible. The bull definitely added to the intimidation factor.

Chuckling, he stepped inside the shower and curled his hand around his erection.

"What are you doing?" I whispered.

"Jerking off since you refuse to take care of it for me."

“I’m sure you have a girl on speed dial who’d gladly help you.”

Savio’s gaze was pure fire. “No other girls, Gem.”

I spit out the toothpaste, wiped my mouth and fled the room.

Ignoring the nightgown that I was supposed to wear tonight, I grabbed a pair of Savio’s sweatpants out of one of the dressers and put on one of my tank tops. That way I’d feel more like myself. Being in a bed with Savio was bad enough.

A few minutes later, Savio came out of the bathroom in sweatpants not unlike the ones I’d put on, his eyes scanning me from head to toe. He walked over to the bench in front of the bed, took the ridiculous piece of silk and held up the flimsy negligee with a cocked eyebrow. “What? No sexy nightgown for me?”

I shrugged. “If you want sexy outfits, you can go to the Sugar Trap and leer at the whores over there.”

Savio’s smile turned darker as he dropped the nightgown on the ground and sauntered over to me with that self-assured swagger that made me furious. “I never said you weren’t sexy.” He stopped beside me, his hand sliding over my hip and lower back, as he leaned down, close to my ear. “To be honest, seeing you in my sweatpants is the fucking sexiest thing I can imagine, so thank you for that.”

I shivered but gave a small shrug. “I didn’t try to be sexy for you.”

“And yet you are,” he murmured. “I’ve never jerked off as quickly as I did with the idea of being the first inside of you.”

Was there anything that made this man blush? Or at least the slightest bit embarrassed? I took a step to the side. “Well, you won’t be tonight.”

“Not tonight, but eventually, Gem. I’ll be the only man that’ll ever be inside you. I’ll be the first everything.”

He was right. Even if I didn’t sleep with him tonight, I would eventually, and not only because Savio was my husband and thus the only man I was supposed to give myself to but also because for as long as I could remember, it had always been him I wanted.



Gemma didn't deny it. She tugged a strand of her hair behind her ear and approached the bed hesitantly. Now that I paid closer attention, I saw how nervous she was. She kept moving her fingers in an attempt to hide their shaking. After a moment in which she looked as if the bed might attack her, she glanced at me.

"It's your bed now too."

She nodded absent-mindedly and climbed under the covers.

I walked to the other side of the bed and slid in beside her. She was tense, sitting upright against the headrest. I mimicked the position. "Do you intend to spend all night like this?"

"What do you suggest?" she asked, which showed how frazzled she was. My Gem was nervous about being in a bed with me.

I cocked one eyebrow.

"I'm serious, Savio," she said quietly. "I know this seems like a game, but... I want a marriage, a partnership. I want to get to know you better. I want us to become a team."

Serious conversations weren't my specialty. I tended to avoid them but Gemma had a point. We were married now. "Nothing's stopping us. We have our whole life."

Fuck, I'd really said it.

"Yeah," Gemma said quietly, then looked around. "This is strange."

The strangest thing about this situation was that outside, the party was in full swing while I was talking to a girl in my bed

almost fully clothed. “I know.”

My eyes trailed over her slender shoulders, the way the outline of her breasts teased me through her shirt. “I don’t know what to do,” Gemma admitted. “Or how to act.”

“How about we start with lying down?”

I stretched out and propped my head up on my arm, then waited for Gemma to do the same. She lay on her side, facing me. “Still strange.”

I reached out and touched her cheek. “How about you come closer?”

Suspicion flickered across her face.

I guessed I deserved that. “Only to cuddle.”

“Cuddle?” she repeated with a small laugh, finally relaxing.

“That’s what Greta calls it.”

Gemma slid over to me and I wrapped my arms around her waist, pulling her closer. She tensed briefly when our fronts pressed against each other, probably expecting my cock to dig a hole into her belly, but I had more self-control than that—at least if I wanted to.

She peered up. “For you, this is probably business as usual, having a girl in your bed.”

Being in a bed with a girl, definitely. But this? “You’re the only girl who’s ever been in my bed.”

“Really?”

“Really. This is my place, and I never felt like having anyone invade it.”

“And now I’m here.”

“You are.” I stroked a curl away from her forehead. I didn’t mind having her here, quite the contrary. Gemma’s presence didn’t feel like an invasion of my privacy. “I want to kiss you.”

Gemma gave a small nod and I took her mouth, dipped inside. Her eyes fluttered shut, and I closed mine too, something I rarely did, but fuck, I only wanted to feel. And Gemma felt perfect in my arms. Her body molded with mine, our legs

scissoring until the heat radiating from her pussy seemed to scorch my thigh.

My palm pressed into her lower back, tempted to move lower, cup those round globes. I wanted to take this further, all the fucking way, but more than that, I wanted to prove to Gemma that I respected her decision. If this was a test, I would not fail it.

When I pulled out of the kiss, Gemma's lips followed my mouth until she caught herself and opened her eyes. In her eyes, I could see desire—her body was practically screaming for more, but if I knew one thing about Gemma, it was that she could be stubborn as fuck, and she'd obviously set her mind on punishing me for my track record with other women.

With an audible swallow, she lowered her leg from mine and brought a couple of inches between us. Her heat lingered and my cock throbbed with every beat of my heart.

“What will our life be like?”

That was something I hadn't really given much thought either. For a long time now, my daily routine had been the same. Workout in the morning, breakfast with someone from the family, then a few visits to restaurants and bars that paid for our protection, seeing how they were doing, making sure they didn't forget who kept them safe. Meetings with my brothers, making sure the Camorra ran like a well-oiled engine. Fight training. Dinner with the family, then partying and finding a fuck for the night. Rinse and repeat. In the last two months, only minus the fucking part, which led to another evening workout to blow off steam and had made me even more ripped.

“I really wish I knew what you were thinking,” Gemma said quietly.

“No, you don't, trust me.”

She mulled over that for a while, allowing me to take in her face. Her skin was flawless, every inch of her beautiful. I really liked her face without makeup when in the past with other girls, their morning face if I had been too hung over to disappear right after sex, had made me want to hurl. “Whom do you trust, Savio?” Her eyes were trying to reach deeper, see beyond the mask I showed to people.

I turned off the light because this was reaching a level of personal I preferred to discuss in the dark. “My brothers, absolutely. Fabiano, of course.” Even Adamo. He’d changed since his year in New York and had made up for some of the shit he’d done.

“Are they the ones you go to when you need to talk?”

I didn’t do the kind of talking Gemma was referring to, not even with my brothers. I sorted things out for myself. Humor and sarcasm had been my weapon against any attempt of my brothers, especially Nino, to talk about some of the things we’d gone through in the past. Eventually, he gave up.

Gemma waited. “That’s all?”

“Kiara, to some degree.”

“Not Diego?”

“To some extent, but it’s a different level of trust than with family.”

For me, trust was a conscious effort. I had to allow someone to earn my trust. I rarely bothered. My brothers and I had almost paid with our life for the one time we trusted someone after we returned to the States after our father had been killed. Friendship was a shaky construct, one that often broke under the weight of a better opportunity.

“Isn’t he family now?”

Her voice was soft, probing, but also drowsy and I hoped she’d fall asleep before she could dig deeper.

“He is. You are.” Yet, how could a simple vow, a wedding, turn people into family. It took more than that. Like trust, it took effort. Fabiano had become family without shared blood. He’d given everything he had to offer and killed and bled for us.

“But not really, not yet,” she whispered. “Will you ever trust me like you trust your brothers?”

I wanted to say yes. I didn’t want to lie to her. The silence hung over us like the humidity in the air before a summer storm.

“You can trust me. You can talk about everything with me.” Her fingertips brushed over my wrist.

“Kitty, don’t you think that’s enough serious talk for our wedding night? I didn’t sign up for a psychological exam.”

Gemma tensed. “You are right. You wanted to get inside me, not allow me to glimpse inside your head.”

Frustration swelled in my chest, but I shoved it down. Soon Gemma’s body softened, her breath evened out.

I slipped out of bed and left the bedroom. The party outside had quieted down, but I stayed clear of the garden, not wanting to encounter one of the guests. Instead, I headed into the kitchen to grab a sweet snack, the only sweet thing I’d be allowed to eat tonight.

I paused when I spotted Remo, leaning against the counter with Nevio on his arm. The kid looked exhausted but was obviously refusing to sleep. The way he hung in my brother’s hold, his chin resting on his shoulder, showed he wouldn’t last much longer. When he was half-asleep, he was a cute kid, but sometimes he managed to freak me out despite his only four years. “Already done?”

My mouth tightened.

Remo raised an eyebrow. “She didn’t let you in?”

Nevio looked between his dad and me.

“I bet that gives you a sick kick.”

“I couldn’t care less if you score or not, Savio.”

I leaned beside him, knowing the longer I stayed, the more Remo would see. Even without sharing my darkest thoughts with him, he always seemed to know what went on. “Do you trust Serafina completely?”

Remo’s dark eyes did their X-ray thing, but I didn’t look away. If there was one person on this planet whom I’d allow to dissect my twisted heart, it was him. “I do,” he said quietly, a dangerous truth for a man like him. Few men in the States were more hated than my brother. Trust was a risk he shouldn’t allow himself.

“How did you allow yourself to trust her?” How *could* you?

“It happened. She saved me when she should have killed me. She forgave me for destroying the life she’d grown up in. She

betrayed her family for me.”

I laughed darkly. “None of these things is going to happen with Gemma, so...”

He narrowed his eyes. “If Gemma wasn’t trustworthy, she wouldn’t be allowed to live among us, among my children, Nino’s sons, Fabiano’s daughter. I’d never risk either of their lives only so you can get a taste of virgin pussy. So you better tell me now that you think she’s deserving of our trust, of *your* trust.”

Leave it to Remo to deliver a threat that made me feel better. “She is trustworthy, don’t worry. Gem has a heart of gold.” Repeating the words her mother had said to me, I knew they were true, which made me feel like an even bigger asshole because she deserved better than me.

“Then what’s the problem?”

I gave him an ironic smile. As if he didn’t know. “Me. The problem is me.”

TWENTY-FIVE



After my talk with Remo, I returned to my wing. Two emotional conversations were the maximum of what I could take. I froze in the dark of the bedroom, hearing whimpers.

Within a second, I was beside Gemma, feeling her shake, imprisoned by a nightmare. I cupped her head. “Gem, wake up.”

She whimpered again, thrashing as if she was fighting to free herself. I knew that sensation, which was why I preferred to fall into bed drunk or exhausted from partying. It seemed to keep the memories at bay.

“Gem,” I said with more force.

She jerked and sucked in her breath. Her hand came up, touching my stubbled cheek. “Savio?” she asked shakily.

“I’m here. You had a nightmare.”

She pressed her face against my throat and began to cry. I wrapped my arms more tightly around her. “I saw them die again. Both of them. Even though I didn’t see how Dad died, my mind replays the images as if I saw... I want it to stop.”

“It’ll get better with time.”

It was my way to allow her to peel away a layer without saying too much. For a moment, Gemma froze, then she nodded.



As usual, I woke before sunrise. I had my arm wrapped around Gemma from behind, my morning rod prodding her firm ass. Groaning, I rolled over, peering down at the tent in the covers. I sat up and got out of bed.

Gemma shifted then turned around. Her hair curled wildly around her head and her eyes were still half-closed. “What are you doing?”

Her voice was an octave deeper after waking up, the fucking sexiest sound in the world. “Getting up. It’s almost six.”

She blinked. “Almost six.” She pushed into a sitting position, looking confused. “Does something happen at six?”

I chuckled. “No, I always get up at six, if possible, to work out.”

She stared. “You do?”

I grabbed gym shorts and pulled down my sweats to change into them.

A pillow landed in my face. “Savio, when will you stop showing me your thing?”

Her cheeks were red and she looked wide-awake.

“Make that a big fat never, Kitty. You are my wife. It’s a hard-earned privilege to see my dick, so you should appreciate it.”

Pulling the shorts over my hard cock proved tricky and required some shoving and shifting. Gemma let out a choked laugh and slid out of bed as well. Suddenly, she looked shy. “Can I join you?”

“Sure.”

I hoped she wouldn’t want to use training to talk. I wasn’t awake enough for that. She smiled and headed into the walk-in closet. When she emerged, she was dressed in a sports bra and tight leggings. I rearranged my cock again, earning rolled eyes from her.

“Come on,” I said. She came toward me then hesitated as if she wasn’t sure how to act. I grabbed her hand, linking our fingers. I didn’t have problems with physical closeness, so I could give her that, at least. We walked down to the first floor in

silence then into my home gym. I'd had a wall between rooms removed to have more space for all the equipment. Bench press, barbells, pull-up bar, and everything else I needed for my weightlifting routine.

"Wow," Gemma breathed, taking in the room. Then her gaze settled on the mirrored wall. "Of course, you'd want to see yourself, Mr. Vanity."

I grinned. "It's not about vanity, it's about form. I need to check on my posture."

She slipped away from me and checked out the weights and kettlebells. Then her eyes darted to the pull-up bar. "How many can you do in a row?"

I shrugged, joining her. "Fifty in a minute."

Gemma shook her head, her eyes gliding down my upper body. I took her hand and pressed it to my abs. Biting her lip, she slid her fingertips over the bumps of my eight-pack. "A six-pack just wasn't enough, was it?" she said, her voice adorably nervous.

I tried to keep my dick under control so Gemma'd be more comfortable with touching. Baby steps. "I didn't aim for one, it happened." Remo's words about trust flitted through my brain again. I bent low and kissed Gemma, a quick kiss just because.

She looked surprised, then a small pleased smile tugged at her mouth. Her fingers lingered on the top of my tattoo before she retracted her hand. I reached out to touch her abs. Gemma had the hints of a gorgeous six-pack, softened by her narrow waist and swung hips, simply beautiful. She grasped my wrist before I could touch her. "The last time you touched me there, you were drunk and rude."

I nodded, remembering distantly. "I was an asshole, Gem."

"Yes, you were."

"We're already agreeing on one important thing. That's a start, right?"

She laughed then she loosened her hold on my wrist and gave a small nod. My fingertips brushed her smooth skin, then discovered the soft ridges of her defined stomach. Gemma's breath quickened when I stroked the sensitive skin under her

bellybutton. She took a step back and focused on the bar. “Can you help me reach it?”

I gripped her hips and hoisted her up so she could grab the bar, then I released her. Her butt was at eye level now and I couldn’t help but imagine how it would be to eat her out like this. It would be a fun challenge to see how long she could hang from the bar while I did.

I took a step back when she began doing pull-ups. Her upper body strength wasn’t as good as her leg strength, but she managed eight strict pull-ups which wasn’t bad for a woman. She dropped to the ground, panting. With a grin, I jumped up and gripped the bar, then started doing muscle-ups. They were more effective than pull-ups but also far more advanced.

“I wish I could do those,” Gemma said.

I landed beside her. “We’ll work on it. You can do it if you stay focused.”

“I love it that we can work out together,” she admitted.

We switched to legs after that, working out in comfortable silence, me enjoying the sight of Gemma doing deadlifts. It was a magnificent view.

I watched her do another deadlift, my mind wandering to how it would be to have her bend over like that and bury my face in her pussy, really eat her out until my face was covered in her juices, make her come good and hard before I’d fuck her.

Gemma narrowed her eyes at me in the mirror then her gaze slipped lower and she dropped the barbell with a clang. My wandering thought had had a visible effect on my groin area. Even my workout shorts couldn’t hide my dick.

Gemma’s face turned red then she straightened with a huff. I shrugged and went over to her. “Come on, Gem,” I said in a low voice. “Is it really so bad that the sight of you bending over gives me a hard-on?”

She pursed her lips, too stubborn to tell the truth.



I'd never admit that it gave me a thrill to know that I turned on Savio like that. Of course, his smirk said he knew exactly what I was thinking. He cupped my face and kissed me possessively. I stood on my tiptoes, my palms pressing against his sweaty, muscled chest.

Savio's kisses were addicting and I was the junkie that couldn't resist its favorite drug. Slowly his lips traveled south, licking and nibbling my throat in a tantalizing way that sent spears of desire through my entire body.

He sucked at my skin until the teasing prickling turned into a dull pain. I gasped from the mix of pain and pleasure. He pulled back with a satisfied grin and my hand flew up to touch the throbbing spot. "Did you give me a hickey?" I whispered in a voice I hardly recognized.

"You are mine, and I like seeing proof of it on your body."

I was torn between shoving him away and pulling him in for another kiss. The decision was taken from me when Nino stepped in, followed by Fabiano. I quickly took a step back from Savio, heat shooting into my head at what they might have seen or heard.

Nino's cold gray eyes flitted from his brother to me and he tilted his head in greeting, "If we're interrupting anything, we can work out somewhere else."

"No," I blurted.

Fabiano's eyes lingered on my throat and I pressed my fingers to the spot. "Good morning, Gemma." His voice was restrained politeness. He was like a brother to Savio, but I knew even less about him than about Nino, Remo, and Adamo—except for the fact that he was Enforcer like my brother and had beaten up Toni's dad.

I gave him a tense smile. He exchanged a look with Savio before he headed for the bench press while Nino began to do muscle-ups. None of them wore shirts, unabashed about their bodies like Savio.

Savio picked up his barbell and did a round of deadlifts, then motioned for me to finish my last round.

Neither Fabiano nor Nino were paying any attention to me, at least not outwardly, focused on their workout, but I still felt under scrutiny. I was an intruder in their tight-knit family. It would take time for me to prove myself, not just to them, but also to Savio.

After our workout, all four of us headed to the kitchen. Savio, Fabiano and Nino talked about a few clubs and their rentability. I was too nervous about my first day in the Falcone mansion to focus on it though. Despite Savio's reassuring hand on my back when we entered the kitchen, I felt on display. The entire family had already taken their seats around the big kitchen table, except for Adamo.

Savio nudged me toward them. Kiara gave me a bright smile, her eyes kind. "I hope you're hungry."

"Starving," I admitted.

"Then have a seat."

Savio sank down and pulled out the chair beside him. The conversation picked up around me, for which I was incredibly grateful. Kiara filled my plate and I ate my scrambled eggs in silence, trying to pretend I didn't notice the occasional curious glance.

"Why's she here?" blurted Nevio after a few minutes of staring at me.

Serafina made a shush noise and gave me an apologetic smile. I stifled laughter. "I'm Savio's wife."

Nevio gave me an uncomprehending look.

"That's how we felt when we found out Savio was considering marriage," Remo said dryly.

I chanced a glance at him, trying to decide if he'd been against the bond, but his expression was the hard mask I knew.

Savio spread his arms. "Hey, I'm a good husband."

I snorted, couldn't help myself, then flushed when everyone looked my way.

Serafina laughed, and soon Kiara and Leona fell in.

"Didn't leave the impression you wanted, hmm?" Serafina asked Savio. Realizing what she was referring to, I cringed. We never talked about sex at home.

"Maybe he's losing his touch," Fabiano suggested.

Savio raised his brows. "Don't worry about my touch. It's satisfactory."

"Leave him be. His blue balls make him irritable," Remo said.

My eyes widened.

Serafina elbowed her husband. "Stop it."

Savio leaned in, squeezing my thigh. "Don't let my brothers rile you up, Gem. You have to get used to their inappropriate humor."

I could see that. It would definitely take some getting used to.

Adamo stumbled into the kitchen, looking sleepy and completely disheveled. The attention focused on him and I relaxed. Savio squeezed my leg again. "I'll give you a tour of the house after breakfast so you get to know your home."

I could have kissed him right then. Sometimes he annoyed me, and it was easy to cling to my anger for what he'd done in the past, but then he did something like this and I wondered if it wouldn't be easier to forgive and forget.



After breakfast, we made our way back to the bedroom where we showered, separately to Savio's disappointment. "Ready for the tour?" Savio asked when I stepped out of the bathroom.

He took my hand. I loved how he always did it without hesitation as if I'd always been at his side. For me, physical closeness with him was something I had to get used to, but he didn't give me time to feel anxious. He motioned down the corridor of the second floor. "My brothers don't usually enter my

wing, with the exemption of the gym below. But if you feel uncomfortable with their presence there, they can turn a room in another wing into a gym.”

I quickly shook my head. “I don’t mind. I was only startled this morning.”

“And embarrassed,” Savio added, brushing his fingertips over the hickey on my throat.

“That too.”

He chuckled. “We’ll see how long you’ll blush so easily.”

Living with him and his shameless brothers, probably not very long. “What’s in the rooms?” I motioned at the four doors branching off.

Savio shrugged. “One of them is for my sneaker collection —”

I interrupted him. “You have an entire room for your sneakers?”

He opened the door to our left. Rows over rows of shelves filled with sneakers lined the walls. I gave him an incredulous look. “You can’t be serious! That’s bigger than the room I had at home.”

“I like sneakers.”

“Do I even want to know what’s in the other rooms?” I said with a huff.

He grinned. “Probably not. So sue me, I like to dress nicely.”

I shook my head again. “So vain.”

He kissed my throat, squeezing my waist. Then he grabbed my hand again and led me downstairs. It was a living room with a white sofa, a huge black TV hanging on the opposite walls and modern dark wooden furniture. Everything was neat and matched. “I didn’t think your place would be this clean. Diego’s room is a hazard zone.”

“Adamo’s too,” Savio said with a grimace. “I prefer it clean.”

I smiled. I was glad that I wouldn’t have to pick up dirty socks after him like I had to do for Diego... and Dad. My heart throbbed painfully, and I had to swallow hard. Savio searched my

eyes, then he pulled me against him, giving me comfort without me asking for it. I cleared my throat. “What about the living room in the main part of the house?”

“It’s where the entire family spends time together, but it can get messy and loud with all the kids and people, so sometimes I prefer to stay here and watch a movie. My family is a crazy loud bunch that can drive even the sanest person to insanity.”

“I love that you have such a big family under one roof. It fills a house with life,” I said. “Do you think they’ll ever accept me?”

Savio peered down at me. “Kiara, Serafina, and Leona will see you as part of their clique in no time. My brothers and Fabiano are harder nuts to crack.”

“Like you,” I said.

Savio squeezed my hip and motioned toward the connecting corridor. “Let’s continue our tour.”

It took us an hour to discover the main house and the premises. The tables and dancefloor of the wedding had already been removed and the garden looked even bigger without them. The unrelenting Las Vegas sun beat down on us as we reached the recreational pool with the cascades. The second pool was one to swim laps for fitness purposes.

“How about we take a dip later?”

“Later?” I echoed.

He ran a hand through his hair. “I know this is bad timing, but my brothers and I have a meeting with the Underbosses because they’re all in the city for the wedding. With the Russians being a pain in our ass, we have a lot to discuss.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I want you to get rid of the Bratva.” My voice wavered.

“We will,” Savio promised. “For what they did, they’ll pay.”

He led me back inside the house where we ran across Kiara, Leona and Serafina in bikinis, leading their kids down to the pool. “Why don’t you join us?” Kiara asked.

I glanced at Savio.

“Don’t look at me. Do what you want.”

I smiled at Kiara. “I need to call home and then change into a swimsuit, then I’ll join you.”

Savio released a groan. “I can’t believe I’ll have to listen to our Underbosses while you’re running around in a bikini. It’s breaking my heart.”

TWENTY-SIX



The moment Savio was gone, I picked up my phone and called home. Diego answered after one ring.

“Hey Gemma,” he said, his worry palpable.

“I’m fine.”

“You are?”

“Yes. You can stop worrying.”

“So Savio wasn’t an ass?”

“No, he wasn’t.”

“So I don’t have to kick his ass at the meeting?”

I rolled my eyes. “How are Mom and Carlotta?”

“Mom’s been emotional all morning with you being gone. The house feels empty.”

I bit my lip. “I miss you too.”

Diego cleared his throat. “Should I get Mom?”

“Yeah,” I said with a smile. Diego was even worse with emotionality than Savio.

A few seconds later, Mom’s voice sounded on the other end. We talked a few minutes, in which I had to assure her several times that I was fine. I felt guilty for leaving her so soon after Dad’s death, but she had insisted I start my own family. That was what she wanted the most for me.

I grabbed a swimsuit—a sexy two-piece, which Toni had bought for me and I’d never worn because it was too revealing. Wrapping a towel around myself, I headed outside. It felt strange walking through the Falcone mansion as if it was my home. It would take time to get used to my new surroundings.

Laughter and screaming reached me from the pool where Alessio and Nevio were chasing each other. Kiara waved. She, like the other girls, was stretched out on lounge chairs. I made my way toward them. Dark hair pulled up into a cute bun atop her head, Greta was perched on Serafina’s chair, browsing through a picture book. Leona held her baby girl in her arms and Kiara watched her youngest son Massimo as he stumbled after Alessio and Nevio.

I sank down on a free lounge chair, keeping the towel around my body.

“Are you okay?” Kiara asked gently.

I nodded.

“I still can’t believe Savio is married,” Leona said with a laugh. I gave her a hesitant smile. Neither did he sometimes.

“He isn’t really the marrying type,” I agreed.

Serafina’s eyes narrowed. “Does that mean he’s made an ass out of himself again? If he pushed you, we’ll kick his ass for you.”

I laughed, relaxing. “Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.” I dropped my towel and stretched out on the sunchair.

“Please tell me he’s still suffering from blue balls,” Serafina said, whistling as she scanned my body.

I flushed.

Kiara did too. At least, I wasn’t the only one who had trouble talking about sex.

“We slept well,” I said.

Serafina clapped. “Good for you.”

Leona giggled. “You’re a bit too invested in Savio’s sex life. You’re getting as creepy as your husband.”

Serafina shrugged. “Savio deserves to suffer a bit. Look at Gemma, he’ll be suffering like crazy having that body right in front of him without getting any.”

Nevio and Alessio jumped into the pool and I jerked upright, worried they’d drown.

“They can swim,” Kiara said with a tender smile, then rushed forward to stop Massimo from following. “You can’t yet, young man.” She kissed his chubby cheek and put water wings on him despite his loud protests. Alessio, too, was wearing them.

Serafina followed my gaze to her son. “He refuses to wear wings. He always wanted to swim without them. He’s stubborn. I can’t take my eyes off him for a second.”

“They are so different for twins,” I said, indicating Greta who’d only given me a quick smile but otherwise seemed lost in her own world.

“They are,” Serafina said softly, stroking her daughter’s head with a soft smile. “She started ballet lessons six months ago. It almost gave Remo a heart attack. He thought she’d become a fighter... like you.”

I considered the quiet girl. “Maybe in a few years. If her brothers and cousins all fight, maybe she’ll want it too.”

Serafina shrugged, but it was obvious that she doubted it.

“How’s Carlotta doing?” Kiara asked.

“She’s recovering quickly. We really hope that she’ll be able to be a normal kid soon. She’s never been allowed around other kids because the risk of getting an infection was too high.”

“Carlotta and Aurora are close in age, they can play once your sister is well enough,” Leona said.

I nodded, touched how they tried to make me feel welcome.

“You took undergraduate courses at UNLV, right?”

Leona gave a nod. “Yeah. I finished my undergrad shortly before this little one popped out of me. And you’ll start in a few weeks, right?”

“I don’t know. I never really wanted to attend college. It was more something to do while Savio decided when we wanted to

marry.” Realizing how pathetic that sounded, I added, “But now I’m not sure what to do. I didn’t even sign up for courses that interest me.”

“Why don’t you do something you enjoy then? It’s not like you’ll ever have a day job,” Kiara said.

“You could become a self-defense instructor for women and children. You know how possessive mafia men are. They’d never allow another man to teach their daughters or wives how to fight, but nobody would be bothered if you did it.”

I blinked at Serafina. Why hadn’t I thought of it?

“You could start with Massimo, Nevio, and Alessio,” Kiara said. “The men have enough on their plate, so they don’t often have time to work with the boys.”

“I wouldn’t mind working out again,” Leona said. “Since I got pregnant with Aurora, I didn’t have time for defense training... or any kind of training really.”

I grinned, loving the idea. Fitness and fighting were my passion.

We spent the next few hours chatting like that until Savio came our way. The moment he spotted me lounging in my bikini, his expression became so hungry that I felt like we were doing something indecent.

“I think we should give the newlyweds a bit of privacy,” Serafina said quickly.

I almost asked the girls to stay because the way Savio was watching me made me feel hot and bothered. Soon we were alone. Savio was still in street clothes but made me feel naked. “You’re staring.”

He shook his head. “I think you’re really trying to kill me, Gem. That bikini is a joke.”

I hid a pleased smile by putting my sunglasses on.

He leaned over me. “Tell you what. I’ll get changed and then we’ll take a dip.” After a quick kiss, he stalked away. I turned on my stomach, trying to decide if swimming was the best idea. I needed every layer of clothing I could get between Savio and me to resist his charm.

A few minutes later, a familiar shadow fell over me.

“Did you know that you have the prettiest dimples...” Savio began.

I didn’t bother to turn around. “I don’t—”

“...above your perfectly shaped ass.”

I snapped my mouth shut. “What are you talk—”

His hot breath ghosted over my lower back. “Right here,” he said in a low voice that sent a pleasant shiver through my body. His mouth touched a spot right above my ass. Shock shot through me, then indignation, and I was about to whirl on him. Then he began to suck the spot and my limbs turned to mush. What was happening? Heat pooled in my belly. Oh my God. What was he doing with his lips?

He released my skin, then dragged his lips along my lower back. “And here.” He latched onto my skin again, sucked and licked. The heat of his body ghosted over my thighs as he leaned over me.

I should tell him off. Throw my drink in his face and smash my knee into his balls, but I couldn’t move. Savio’s mouth was a weapon in more than one way. I’d heard it from more girls than I cared to recount, but this bordered on insanity. How could he render me motionless by touching his cursed lips to my lower back?

I could hardly breathe, was waiting for my lungs to stop working because every other part of me had.

And then finally, Savio released my skin and stretched out on the lounge chair beside mine. He reached out and slowly pushed my sunglasses up so he could see my eyes. His mouth tipped up in a lazy smile. “That good, hmm?”

If my tongue hadn’t still been tied, I would have given a clever comeback. Instead, heat shot into my head. It had been good, so good that I couldn’t think about anything but the fact that he would see how good if he took a closer look at my bikini bottoms.

Savio chuckled. “If this got you this hot and bothered, Gem, just imagine what my mouth would do between your legs?”

I was trying very hard not to, but of course I did. Toni had once mentioned something along the lines until I'd asked her to never mention her activities with my brother again.

Savio's smile widened because he knew. He leaned closer and I held my breath. "I know you're stubborn as fuck, but you're punishing yourself, not just me. We're all alone. You don't even have to say a word. Just close your eyes and I'll take it as permission to part your legs and bury my face in your pussy. No sex, just my tongue, Kitty."

Don't close your eyes, Gemma. Do not dare closing your eyes.

I closed my eyes. I was such a goddamn loser, but the throbbing between my legs was too strong to resist.

"Good decision, Kitty," Savio growled in my ear before the sunchair groaned and I felt his warmth over my thighs once more. He pressed a kiss to my ass, and I almost moaned. Had anticipation ever killed someone?

I could practically feel how smug Savio was, but right then I didn't care. There would be time for regret later, and I *would* regret it, no doubt.

Savio palmed my ass cheeks.

A high-pitched scream rang out. My eyes shot open. A shadow darted past me.

"Ass bomb!"

Nevio catapulted himself from the edge of the pool and did the aforementioned ass bomb. Cold water splashed everywhere. In my face, my cocktail, all over my body. And it doused me with a necessary dose of sanity. I turned around.

Savio, too, was drenched and a look at my face and he knew the moment was over. His eyes latched onto Nevio who was floating in the pool with a wide grin. "That's it, PIA. I'm going to abandon you in the desert!"

In two large steps, he was at the pool and then he dove in.

I quickly got up, gathering my belongings, not my dignity though, because that was gone. Savio had won today, and he

knew it. I wasn't sure how, but I needed to tip the scale in my favor again, if only my body would cooperate.



From the corner of my eye, I saw Gemma running away as if the devil was at her heels. Nevio splashed me again. Serafina rushed toward us. "He escaped."

I managed to grab Nevio and held him fast despite his squirming. "Don't pretend you didn't use the little PIA as a cockblock on purpose."

Serafina rolled her eyes and took her struggling son from me. "Enough, Nevio," she said sharply, and finally he stopped.

I narrowed my eyes at him. He only grinned. I couldn't wait for him to be a teenager so I could ruin his sex life.

She turned around and left me in the pool, not bothering to hide her smug smile. I pushed myself out of the water. "Fuck." I'd almost had Gemma, but now her stubbornness would get in the way again. Sighing, I jogged after her.

She was already in jeans and shirt when I found her, gone the delicious bikini that had deprived my brain of blood.

"Do you think I could start working as a self-defense instructor for girls and kids?"

I paused, thrown off by the topic. "I thought you were going to college to study these feminism courses."

"You know I only signed up for them to annoy you." She bit her lip. "But it's not something that I'd enjoy. I'd rather help

people get comfortable in their bodies and learn to defend themselves.”

“Then do it. What’s stopping you?”

“I thought...”

I raised my eyebrows, moving closer. “You thought?”

“I should get your permission first. You’re my husband and...”

I pulled her against me despite her protests. “If that’s what you want to do, then do it. You don’t need my permission for that.” I smiled. “How about we continue where we left off at the pool?”

She slipped out of my hold, making an innocent face. “I don’t know what you mean.” Before I could grab her again, she left the room. Running again, Kitty?

Did giving in to me scare her that much?

That night I could see Gemma’s stubborn streak in full effect. She didn’t allow me more than a quick kiss once we were in bed.

I chuckled into the darkness. “Gem, you’ll give in soon enough. You know it as well as I do.”

Silence was the answer.



I gave her some space over the next couple of days, trying to give her a sense of safety before I’d try for another seduction attempt.

“There’s a big fight tonight. Why don’t we watch it together in the Arena?” I asked during our daily morning workout. Gemma gave me a look as if I’d given her a Christmas present. “Really?” She threw her arms around me and kissed me enthusiastically. I deepened the kiss at once. Too soon, she pulled away with a smile.

I chuckled. “If I’d known that this was the key to your panties, I would have suggested it sooner.”

She punched my shoulder. “You got a kiss, not more. Toni’s working tonight, so I get to see her too. I haven’t since the

wedding because she had to help her dad in the Arena, thanks to Fabiano beating him up.”

“Next time, he’ll know better than to accidentally give us a smaller percentage than agreed,” I said coldly.

Gemma scanned my face. “Sometimes I forget that you’re a Falcone because you’re so easy going, but you can be really scary.”

I tried to keep my scary side from her. It had its time and place but usually not around my family.

“The Camorra is my life, Gem. My brothers and I won’t allow anyone to mess with it. Roger’s lucky he only got beaten up. I don’t believe it was a fucking accident that he messed up the bookkeeping. He wanted a bigger part of the pie for himself. That’s betrayal and would mean death under normal circumstances.”

“Then why is he alive?” she asked.

“Because Diego has a soft spot for Toni and because I have a soft spot for you, and you’re best friends with Toni. But I won’t turn a blind eye again, so Roger better get his act together.”

Fabiano wasn’t stupid. He knew the truth and so did Remo and Nino, but Roger wouldn’t survive another bookkeeping mistake.

Gemma licked her lips. “It would break Toni’s heart if something happened to her dad.”

“Then she should make sure her dad stays in line, Gem. That’s all I can say. Remember your loyalties.”

She stepped back. “I’m loyal to you and to Toni. I’ve known her all my life. She’s my best friend.”

“And I’m your husband.”

She swallowed. “Toni’s more responsible than her dad. She’ll make sure things go smoothly.”

I kissed her temple.



Around eight in the evening, I waited for Gemma in my living room. The moment she came down the stairs, my heart sped up. She was wearing a tight red skirt and a red crop top. Holy hell.

Slowly I pushed to my feet, not sure if I wanted to take her into public like that.

Gemma tried to act casual but this wasn't her usual style. Until recently, she'd still worn those horrendous dresses. "I have a feeling I'm going to kill someone tonight."

"You threw someone through a window for talking to me, don't you think that was bad enough?"

"He survived, didn't he?"

She huffed.

The moment we entered the Arena, every fucker with eyes in his head checked her out. Only a death glare from me stopped them. The Camorrista spending their evening here gave me polite nods. Like usual, they made up only about a quarter of the customers, the others were the people that really brought us money: gambling addicts.

Toni waved at us from behind the bar. We headed that way and she and Gemma hugged each other over the counter. The bar was crowded and apart from Toni, I could see only one other waitress.

The girls whispered among each other briefly, probably about our still non-existent sex life. Like all girls, Gemma had definitely kept her best friend updated on the progress of our bed activities.

I kept my hand on Gemma's waist to dissuade a guy from looking at her. We took seats at the bar, not my usual spot, but I could tell that Gemma wanted to be close to her friend. Diego joined us shortly after, grimacing when he saw where we were sitting.

He and Toni were in the off part of their on-and-off affair once more. Gemma hugged her brother briefly. Toni gave him a look that suggested she hoped his balls would fall off.

"What's with them?" she whispered.

“After the quickie at our wedding, things cooled off again,” I said.

Gemma sighed, giving Toni a worried look. I clapped Diego’s shoulder. The first fight was over within two minutes, a fucking bore, but the one after reached a level of bloodshed that would have made Remo proud.

I chanced glances at Gemma who looked shocked but unable to look away. I loved that I could take her to fights with me without having to worry that she’d pass out. Fuck, I could even discuss moves with her afterward.

She gave me a distracted smile when she noticed my gaze before she returned her focus to the cage, completely mesmerized. “Can I have a quick word with you?” Diego asked after the second fight.

I nodded and followed him into the back. “What’s the matter?”

“I’d like to deal with the Arena instead of Fabiano in the future.”

I shook my head. “Diego, that’s a fucking bad idea and you know it. Toni’s going to take over from her dad at some point. She already handles part of the business.”

“I can handle it. We’re only fuck buddies. Let me deal with it.”

“Remo’s not going to like it, neither do I. Do you really want to bring yourself into a position where you risk sitting between chairs?”

“I can handle it,” he said again.

“Not if you keep fucking her. That’s not going to work.”

When we returned to the bar, Gemma was serving drinks because Toni had to deal with a customer at a table. The looks the guys at the bar gave her made my blood boil.

I strode over to the bar and sat down, causing them to back off. Gemma gave me a hesitant smile. “Toni asked me to take over for just a moment.”

I nodded. The moment Toni returned, and Gemma came back to my side, I pulled her between my legs and kissed her hard. She

squirmed. “Savio, everyone’s watching.”

That was exactly why I was kissing her like that. I ran my tongue along her mouth then sucked her lower lip gently. “That fucking mouth is mine.” I nibbled at the sensitive skin. “And I want every fucker in the room to know it.”

She leaned back, raising her hand with the engagement ring. “I think this thing is getting the message across.”

“Maybe, but better safe than sorry,” I said. “Don’t tell me you don’t like my ring? It’s a symbol of...”

“Your ownership?” she finished with an angry gleam in her eyes.

“Of my feelings,” I said with a wink.

“And what are they?”

I looked away from her hopeful eyes. What did she want me to say? “Right now, I feel sexually deprived.”

She pulled out of my hold and sat down on the stool beside me. “Well, that won’t change until you can find a better answer to that question.”

TWENTY-SEVEN



Gemma

Savio and I enjoyed the same things, we laughed together. Everything could be good if he didn't keep that invisible wall up. Whenever I tried to have a serious conversation, the smirk, or a joke was his reply. I could tell he was trying in his own idiotic way by making me feel at home, taking me to fights and working out together.

It wasn't a bad foundation for an arranged marriage, but it wasn't something I wanted to settle for.

I could tell that he was getting increasingly irate because of our lack of intimacy, and if I was being honest, it became more difficult to resist him every day. My body, unlike my mind, wasn't in favor of making him pay. I was definitely punishing myself too, how Toni kept pointing out.

Her advice to take matters, and him, into my own hands to improve my position sounded like something that could work in general, only I wasn't sure if I could pull it off.

One night, almost two weeks after our wedding, I decided to try and rattle Savio. He'd showed more restraint than I'd expected from him, and I wanted to see if I could change that.

It was a bad plan, of course.

Savio had just finished brushing his teeth when I entered the bathroom in my robe, ignoring the nervous flutter in my belly. His eyes followed me as I headed toward the shower and shrugged out of the bathrobe.

It was the first time I was naked in front of him and my cheeks throbbed with embarrassment as I stepped into the shower and turned the water on.

The triumphant smile working its way onto my face at the look on Savio's face lasted exactly until he reached for his boxers and shoved them down. Naked, every muscle rippling, and with that insufferable smirk, he came closer, opened the stall and stepped inside.

I stared. He was already growing hard, and I had to resist the urge to feel him, to find out if he was as silky as he looked.

"I'm a big boy, Kitty." He braced himself to both sides of me and the tip of him almost touched my belly. "You think you can rattle me by showering in front of me?"

I swallowed thickly, torn between desire and nerves. I had definitely rattled him, only not in the way I'd anticipated.

Savio reached for me and I froze. His eyes rested on my face as he touched his palm to my waist. Despite the hot water, goose bumps flashed across my skin.

Savio tilted his head with an intense look as he very slowly slid his fingers higher, stroking my ribs lightly.

My tongue felt heavy, like a useless lump in my mouth. I wanted to keep the upper hand in this, but I could feel my composure slipping. Why had I ever thought it was a good idea being naked around Savio?

"Won't you push me away and tell me to stop, Kitty?"

"Don't," I choked out, and his fingers at the underside of my breast halted and then I ruined everything. "Don't call me Kitty. It makes me feel like a stupid little kid."

"Oh Gem, you aren't a fucking kid," he growled as his dark eyes roamed the length of me and then he bowed his head and snatched my nipple between his lips. I gasped, my hand flying up to grip the back of his head. Squeezing my eyes shut, I leaned back against the shower. What was happening?

Every tug of his lips sent a spike of pleasure through my center. Soon arousal pooled between my legs as they grew heavier and heavier. A hard suck made my eyes fly open. Savio cast his gaze up, watching my face while he sucked my nipple.

Even in my dirtiest fantasies about him, and even knowing the rumors about his skills, I couldn't have imagined how amazing his mouth would feel on my breast. Dragging his mouth away with a lazy smirk, he licked a trail to my other nipple before that, too, disappeared between his lips. His hand came up and he began rubbing my breast.

I was panting, could do nothing but focus on breathing and standing upright. Savio pulled away, and I almost whimpered. His expression said he knew of the effect he had on me.

“Have you ever touched your tits?”

I nodded.

He kissed my nipple, then smiled darkly. “And?”

Why was he talking? I wanted his mouth back around my nipple. My core was throbbing like crazy.

“It didn't do anything for me,” I pressed out.

“What a shame,” he drawled then suckled my nipple softly again, keeping his eyes on me. He let my nipple slide out of his mouth. “I suppose then this isn't doing anything for you either and I should stop?”

One day I was going to murder him, but not today, certainly not before this tension in my core was gone.

I shook my head.

“I'm afraid I need you to say it.”

“Don't stop.”

“Stop doing what?” His lips were so close to my nipple, it was driving me completely insane.

“What you did before?”

He shook his head. “Not going to cut it. Say what you want.”

“Keep sucking my nipple,” I gritted out as heat shot into my face.

“Your wish is my command.” He started sucking leisurely again and I closed my eyes, drowning in the sensation. I lost all sense of time until his fingers ghosted down my belly and they brushed the sensitive skin right above my pubic bone. My eyes shot open.

“Do you feel my sucking down here?” he rasped close to my nipple.

His thumb lightly grazed the triangle of trimmed hair and I shuddered. I felt it there and everywhere. He set me aflame in a way I hadn't considered a possibility.

His fingers moved lower, and finally I snapped out of my trance.

“No,” I said, sounding less sure than I wanted as I gripped his wrist. I'd let this go way too far already. When it came to Savio, I had such a hard time resisting.

“Why do you keep this up, Gem? I could make you feel good, better than you've ever felt. What do you want from me?”

I wasn't sure, not right now. Not with his naked body so close, with his hungry gaze branding my skin, with his fingers so close to where I was aching. “I don't want this to be a game for you. I want you to take this marriage as serious as I do. I...” I wanted him to trust me enough to share his darkest thoughts and fears with me, wanted him to love me like I'd loved him for so long, I could hardly remember how it was before.

His eyes softened. “I married you, Gem. That's not a game, I fucking know that, okay? You make me laugh. You are the only girl who ever made me slack-jawed in the gym. You are the only girl I can watch cage fights with. You don't screech or puke when you see blood. You are tough and soft, heaven and hell. You're the full package. That's why I wanted you.”

My lips parted in surprise.

“Only because I like to joke and play around doesn't mean I don't know what kind of responsibility I have now. I do know and it's new for me. As new as all of this is for you. I've never had a relationship. I'm fucking winging it, and I'll mess up over and over again, probably until we're old and wrinkly, or Botoxed and face-lifted in our case.”

I allowed him that joke because his words before had been more than I had expected from him at this point. Standing on my tiptoes, I kissed him.

Maybe it was to get into my panties, probably, but his words were honest, I could see it in his eyes.

For a long time, we only kissed under the spray of water, then I pulled back and whispered shyly. “Can we get into bed?” Savio didn’t need to be told twice. He pushed open the door and grabbed towels for us, helping me dry off.

His eagerness was almost amusing, if I hadn’t been so nervous. He linked our fingers and led me into the bedroom. I lay down on the bed, feeling my heart slam against my ribcage. Savio stretched out beside me.

His eyes dilated with a hunger that sent a thrill through me as he cupped my cheek. His musky scent flooded my nose and sent another wave of moisture down my center. “This is your show, Gem. Whenever you say stop, I’ll stop. I’m a big boy, I can deal if you stop at any point.”

Why did he have to say things like this in moments like this and make me want to kiss him senseless? I curled my fingers around his neck and kissed him with so much enthusiasm that our teeth clanged. I cringed, embarrassed at my lack of skill.

Savio wouldn’t have it. He grinned. “Playing rough already?”

I laughed. Then I tried again, and this time our mouths molded perfectly. Savio propped himself up, leaning over me, never stopping the kiss.

His fingers stroked their way up from my ribcage to my breast again and soon I was a boneless heap, bucking my hips almost desperately. I couldn’t control myself. Savio pulled out of the kiss as his fingers traced down my abs to my triangle once more.

I sucked in a breath and gripped Savio’s bicep, tensing so much I was sure tomorrow I’d be sore as if I’d done a workout.

“Is that a stop?”

I shook my head jerkily.

Savio brushed lower, still not where I ached. His eyes held mine and then he dipped down, parting me, feeling how desperately my body longed for his touch.

He groaned deep in his throat. “You’re so fucking wet, Gem. I knew you’d feel perfect...” His fingertip slid lower, brushed the sensitive insides of my folds. “And damn, you are. What are you doing to me?” He stroked over my heated flesh, gentle but

practiced movements that halted my breath in my chest. My hand on his arm became slack as I let Savio take control over my body, forgotten my resolve not to give him this—not yet. But I couldn't push him away, couldn't deprive myself of the magic the pad of his thumb was wielding between my legs with gentle touches and swipes.

His lips found mine for a languid kiss that stole the remainder of my senses. I was rendered a panting, trembling mess beneath his capable hands as he stroked me. He wasn't even touching my clit, a place I'd always focused all my attention on whenever I'd tried to give myself pleasure. It hadn't been like this, not even close.

Savio's gaze was consuming me, his scent and heat embracing me into a blissful cocoon I never wanted to escape from.

“How is it, Gem?” he growled as his thumb parted my folds once more, but this time, he flicked it over my little nub, his nail grazing me in a way that made my hips buck. For a moment, I was sure my eyes were going to roll back and I was going to pass out from the current of pleasure radiating through me.

Did he really need an answer to that question? He knew exactly what he was doing to me.

The sly curl of his mouth made that clear.

I narrowed my eyes, but his thumb flicked my clit again and I sucked in a sharp breath. His lips closed around my nipple. Sounds fell from my lips I'd never heard before. Gasps and choked moans as I was trying to rein myself in. What if someone overheard us?

“Don't hold back,” Savio demanded. “Nobody can hear us.”

Was he a mind reader now too? I wasn't sure if I believed him. I was gone too far to care, though. Savio resumed his assault of my nipple while his finger swiped faster and faster, spreading my moisture everywhere. One of his fingers slid lower, brushing my opening. My hand shot out, grasping his forearm to stop him because my mouth wasn't functioning to actually say the words.

Savio peered up and for a moment, I was sure he'd ignore my silent command or pretend not to understand it, but he didn't.

Soon I couldn't hold back anymore, too overwhelmed by his touch between my legs and the suction of his mouth on my nipple. I arched off the bed and cried out my release. "Savio, God."

I didn't even care that he watched me like I was the newest blockbuster. His fingers guided me expertly through my release until they stilled and so did I. I stared up at the ceiling, stunned by the force of my orgasm.

"I told you you'd scream my name one day. And as an added bonus, you even called me God," he said with a chuckle as he kissed my lips before hovering over me. His fingers were still between my legs and the look on his face was a mix between insufferable smugness and breathtaking ownership.

The heat in my cheeks intensified. "I did *not* call you God." But I was mortified that I'd uttered the word while in the throes of passion. That was an abuse of the word if there ever was one.

"You uttered my name and God without pause, that's as close as it can get if you ask me." There was a subtle growl to his voice, an undercurrent of possessiveness, that was almost enough to make me ask for another round. I didn't know this wanton thing could be inside of me.

His hand slid out from between my legs, making me shiver. Then he took my hand and pushed it between my legs. I tensed, unsure of his motive and acutely aware of the fact that I was dripping. I'd never been this wet. Savio guided my fingers along my folds, and I was sure I'd pass out from embarrassment any moment, but still I couldn't avert my eyes from his. He lifted my hand from between my legs and to his face. My skin was coated with my juices. I tried to pull away, not able to believe what he was going to do, that he wanted to taste me.

"Relax, Gem," he murmured.

I forced myself to do as he said. He *was* a big boy, he'd know if he wanted to do this.

Then he proceeded to grip each of my fingers and licked them clean, not once taking his eyes off me and letting out a low hum. My core throbbed with every stroke of his tongue, completely mesmerized, mortified and aroused. Just imagining how that

tongue and mouth would feel between my legs almost sent me over the edge again. He pushed my hand between my legs again.

“Gather your juices,” he ordered.

My eyes widened at the command in his voice, but I allowed him to guide my fingers. Then he brought my hand up again. This time he held it before my face. I gave him a questioning look. “Taste yourself, believe me, you’re fucking delicious.”

I parted my lips and let Savio push my index finger into my mouth. It was the first time I tasted myself. It was a heady, slightly sweet flavor.

Savio’s eyes seemed to darken as he watched me. My skin burnt fiercely. This wasn’t something I’d ever considered doing, definitely nothing my strict catholic upbringing would condone.

“We’re going to hell for this,” I whispered thickly when Savio had pulled out my finger again.

“Trust me, if this already gets you a ticket to hell, heaven isn’t a place you want to spend eternity in.”

I laughed. Trust Savio to say something sacrilegious and make me feel good with it.

His mouth pulled into a smile, for once neither arrogant nor teasing before he pressed a kiss to my mouth, moving even closer until his front was molded to my side and I could feel the very apparent proof of his desire for me against my hipbone. His tip slid over my skin, spreading the hint of moisture there that stunned me.

My brows snapped together. Had he come watching me?

“What?” he asked in a low voice.

I darted my eyes down, despite my shyness, and indeed his tip was glistening. “Did you...?”

His own brows pulled together, obviously not following my train of thoughts.

A subtle pulse throbbed in my temple as the words tumbled out of me. “You are wet. Did you...” I lowered my voice. “... come?”

Savio blinked and then his head fell forward, his nose burying in my throat. “Oh Gem. You’re killing me.” And he laughed.

He laughed at me.

Mortification washed away the hazy after-orgasm glow and I jerked away from him, trying to get out of bed. Savio wouldn’t have it.

His arm snuck around my waist, pulling me against him once more and holding on tight. I didn’t look at his face, instead I focused on the way the muscles in his shoulders flexed. Our naked skin touched in several places—his strong thigh against mine, his erection against my waist, his muscled arm against my belly—and it was impossibly wonderful. Even in my mortification, that fact didn’t go unnoticed.

His finger nudged my head up so I’d look at him. I *glared*.

“I keep forgetting how little you know.”

Was that supposed to make me feel better? It didn’t. Toni had talked me through most of the important things, but obviously she’d left out equally important information.

“Stop making fun of me. You know how I grew up.”

Angry tears burned the back of my eyeballs. One day I’d get a grip on my emotionality, but that day wasn’t today.

“Yeah,” he murmured, low and dark, as his eyes traced my face. His fingers brushed across my cheek and I caught the whiff of myself still imprinted on his skin. “Do you know when it really hit me that I needed to have you?”

I couldn’t see why it mattered now. I shook my head.

“When I saw you in your choir uniform after church two years ago.”

I huffed. “I think you mean when you saw me in the Arena in those tight pants.”

A slow smile, still with that dominant edge, curled one corner of his mouth upward. “That’s when I *really* took notice of you, but later in that pleated skirt and that modest blouse and Amish updo, I knew I needed to own you.” He paused. “I needed to *corrupt* my good innocent choir girl in every way I could.”

I blinked and swallowed. Savio ran his nose along my jawline then kissed the corner of my mouth before his possessive gaze hit me like a tsunami and pushed the air straight out of my lungs.

“I didn’t know you had a schoolgirl fetish,” I said, surprised I got a single word out of my tight throat.

Laughter rumbled in his chest. “I don’t. Not until you. But, damn it, Kitty, you make me leak like a fucking schoolboy.” He emphasized the words by nudging his tip against my waist once more, spreading more of that wetness, and reminding me of the reason for our strange conversation.

“And no, I didn’t come,” he rasped against my ear. “Yet. But be my guest if you want to change that. My cock’s all yours to do with as you please.”

I swallowed, my eyes gliding down his body once more. Savio was gorgeous with clothes and without them. There was no denying it. Half of Vegas’ female population could attest to it. It took hard work and sweat to get definition, even more sweat and discipline to work up to the hint of a six-pack. Savio had an eight-pack that wasn’t just hinted at. It rippled down his stomach, earned by hours in the gym and just as many in the cage, led down to that V millions of women dreamed about but never got to see firsthand.

My eyes finally came to rest on that infamous bull tattoo. I still remembered the initial shock and embarrassment I’d felt seeing it. Now, I had to admit I kind of liked it. My gaze dipped even lower, and my mouth ran dry. Toni had briefly talked about freaking out when she saw Diego naked for the first time until I freaked out because she told me something like that. Now I got it.

“Breathe, Gem. He’s not going to bite.”

I tried to laugh, but it sounded a bit like a very embarrassing gurgle.

Savio didn’t push me, calmly rolling onto his back. I began tracing his abs, a safe place, enjoying the hard planes, then slowly moved lower. I followed the outline of the bull’s horns, to its narrowed eyes and provocatively twisted mouth. I curled my hand around his length. He felt good, hard but smooth and impossibly warm.

Savio’s abs flexed, but he didn’t make a sound.

Fight training had taught me to ask for advice if I didn't know what to, so I did. "Can you show me how to touch you the way you like?"



I covered Gemma's hand with mine and showed her how to stroke me. Her cheeks were pink but an expression of intense focus lay on her face. Trust Gemma to want to be the best even in this.

My balls were already throbbing. Fuck, they had been throbbing from the second I'd seen Gemma naked and when I'd finally touched her pussy, I'd been sure I'd shoot my load. I didn't even remember my last premature orgasm.

Watching her beautiful body, seeing her fingers on my cock, I soon began pumping my hips to meet her hands. A goddamn hand job made me unravel, a fucking disgrace, but Gemma drove me completely crazy, without much effort, without much thought.

Her eyes widened when my cock became even harder and I came with a groan, causing a mess on my thighs and stomach because she kept pumping a bit too enthusiastically. Chuckling, I let my head fall back.

I reached for tissues I'd stashed beside the bed to be safe and handed a few to Gemma before I began cleaning my jizz off. Gemma was biting her lip, lost in thought. I'd never bothered wondering what girls were thinking. It had seemed like a waste of time and energy, but with Gemma, I would have given anything to get a glimpse into that pretty head.

Wrapping my arm around her waist, I pulled her against my side. She looked insecure, almost guilty. That traditional bullshit was probably messing with her head again. How could pleasure ever be sin? I ran my fingertip along her temple. “Dollar for your thoughts.”

Gemma pressed into me, depriving me of the chance to see her expression.

“Gem, come on. Say something. This silent treatment makes me feel like I forced you to do something you didn’t want.” I didn’t often feel guilty, and mostly in relation to Gemma, and my sleepless nights definitely weren’t the result of my conscience, but the idea of having pushed Gemma bothered me more than I thought possible. I wanted her to want it, want me.

“You didn’t force me to do anything. I wanted it.”

Thank fuck.

“Then what? Do I have to get sex isn’t sin tattoo across my butt to drive the message home?”

Gemma choked out a laugh, slapping my chest before she began to idly trace my eight-pack once more. “Don’t disfigure your behind.”

“My behind...” I shook my head with a smile before I peered down. “Does that mean you enjoy the sight of it?”

She met my gaze. “Are you really fishing for compliments? You are the only person I could ever imagine getting a tattoo with their own name.”

I grinned. “Don’t change the topic.”

She gave a shrug. “It is nice to look at.”

“I like your ass too, Gem.”

She pursed that kissable mouth. I stroked my fingers along her waist and hip, enjoying how her eyes fluttered shut under the sensation. “I always imagined things to be different...”

“Different how?”

“Being intimate with a man. Mom never talked to me about it but my aunt saw me in my jeans and T-shirt once, and told me that I was asking for men to touch if I dressed like that, and that

men are driven by their urges and wouldn't be able to hold themselves back if I didn't cover myself."

I scoffed. "What a load of bullshit," I growled. I tipped Gem's face up. "No matter how you dress, only an asshole would think you're asking for it. And that men can't hold back after a certain point is complete and utter bullshit, Gemma. There's no point of no return. That's an urban myth that sick fucks use to justify rape. Even if you were lying naked under me, my dick already pressed up to your pretty pussy, I'd be able to stop if you told me so."

Gemma smiled.

"I mean, I'd cry fat tears and my balls would explode, but I'd stop without hesitation. You can trust me at any point."

Gemma wrapped an arm around me, her body softening against mine. "Thank you."

I wasn't exactly sure what for, but I enjoyed the feel of her relaxation.

"Tell me one personal thing about you that no one else knows."

I tensed. My first reaction was to resort to sarcasm. I hadn't bargained for so much talking, especially about emotions, but I wanted things between Gemma and me to work. I really wanted that, and not because I wanted to pop her cherry, not *only* because of that.

I didn't want to dive into the black hole that was my early childhood and it wouldn't really have been something no one knew about.

I thought back to the early days of my life in Las Vegas after we'd claimed back power. Suddenly after years of fighting and running, I'd had a home and the chance to live a life that came as close to normal as being a Falcone allowed, which was still a far cry from everyone else's normal. "When I first became friends with Diego, it was because I loved spending time at your house. It was the first time I witnessed a normal family, one that wasn't fueled by hate, pain, and fear. Don't get me wrong, Remo and Nino did their best to raise Adamo and me. They did everything in their power to protect us, to care for us, but... you know Remo and Nino."

Remo had taken care of my brothers and me since he was fourteen and our father had sent us to boarding school in England to get us out of the way. Dealing with our crazy mother, his sadistic hobbies and us, had simply been too much. “For a while, I really wanted a family like that, a life like that...”

“And now you don’t?”

I hesitated. “I like my family’s brand of crazy and things have changed since Kiara and Serafina are here. At first, I was pissed because I couldn’t act like I was used to, but now I really enjoy it, even the little monsters. I guess I like our version of a normal family.”

“Do you want kids?”

I brushed her ear with my lips. “Don’t you think we should master the first step of having sex before we use it the way God intended?”

“I don’t mean now. I mean someday.”

That was probably a topic we should have broached before we married. “I do, but not in the next ten years. I want Remo’s and Nino’s kids out of the crazy age.”

Gemma laughed. “Does the crazy age ever end?”

“With Nevio probably not,” I muttered. “What about you?”

“I want kids, but like you, I’m not in a hurry, even if it’ll break Mom’s heart. She’s already dreaming about getting her first grandkid next year.”

Relief flooded me. With Gemma’s traditional upbringing, it would have made sense for her to pop out a baby soon. “Then Toni and Diego better get it going because we sure as fuck won’t produce little Gemmas anytime soon.”

She raised her head. “What about little Savios?”

“Too much work.”

Gemma grinned and kissed me.

TWENTY-EIGHT



The day after our first shared intimacy and our talk, I was almost delirious with happiness.

Savio had really allowed us to get closer, and not only on a physical level. It was difficult for him to allow honest emotions; I could see that now. Everything was tinged with humor, sarcasm, or arrogance. It was his armor, his way to cope with a cruel past and a brutal present.

While he and his brothers brought Adamo to the airport so he could return to the hub of the racing scene, I tried my hand at some baking. So far I'd stayed clear of the kitchen because I didn't want to intrude on Kiara's territory, but she'd encouraged me to see it as my own. Maybe she wanted help cooking for so many people. No one else seemed to be able to prepare a decent meal except for her. It was one of the things Nonna had taught me when I was a little girl. I cherished the memories of our baking and cooking adventures.

Wistfulness overcame me as I prepared her famous pistachio cannoli. They took time, but they were worth it in the end. When the dough was in the oven and the pistachio cream in the fridge, I grabbed my phone.

When Mom picked up, she sounded hoarse.

"What's wrong?"

"The flu, nothing to worry about."

Easily said, but she didn't have Nonna as support anymore. She coughed. "Should I come over and help you? Maybe bring you some soup?"

"Your aunt is coming over in the afternoon with chicken broth, but if you could take Carlotta, that would be wonderful. Your sister misses you anyway."

"I'll pick her up."

I waited for the cannoli to be done before I went in search of Kiara and Serafina. The dough needed to cool off anyway before I could fill it with the cream.

Kiara sat on the sofa with her two boys, looking at a picture book.

"Do you know when Savio and his brothers will be back?"

Kiara shook her head. "I think they wanted to head to a casino to speak to the manager after dropping Adamo off, so it could be a while. Why?"

"I promised my mother to pick up Carlotta, and I hoped Savio could drive me there."

"I'm not a very good driver, or I'd offer to drive you. It gives me anxiety."

"I have a license, but I don't have much experience driving." Not to mention that said license wasn't exactly legal and my experience consisted of trying to drive twice while Diego screamed at me not to crash his car.

"Serafina is at ballet with Greta. You could take one of the cars and drive yourself."

"Which of the cars are Savio's?"

"The Bugatti and the Ferrari, and that one Audi."

All of them were sports cars of course. I took the keys to the Bugatti because I found them first in the heap of car keys belonging to the Falcone car park.

Once inside the car, my stomach plummeted. I'd completely forgotten that most European cars were stick shift. After some cursing and fumbling, the Bugatti roared to life, making me jump. It took a few more tries before I figured out to get it to

drive without killing the engine. The next problem arose in front of the gate. I'd parked too close so it couldn't open. That was the moment I gave up on the whole thing. If I couldn't even get the car off the premises, driving through Vegas sounded like an extraordinarily bad idea. Fumbling with the stick once more, I pressed down on the gas. A second too late, I realized the car wasn't in reverse. I shoved my foot down on the brakes. Too late. With a leap, I crashed into the gates.

Heart beating wildly, I got out of the car wide-eyed to inspect the damage. The hood of the car was compressed, smoke rose up and some kind of liquid dripped down, probably cooling liquid. The gates weren't in much better shape than the car. Savio was obsessed with his car. And Remo probably wouldn't be too happy about me destroying his gates either. What a wonderful way to start off with my new family.

Kiara came running down the driveway, looking alarmed. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, but the car isn't."

"Who cares about a car?" She looked into my eyes. "How are your neck and head?"

They hurt a bit. It wasn't anything serious, though. I'd fought long enough to know it was like a hit to the face. "I don't suppose there's any way I can keep this from Savio?" We'd just made progress, I really didn't want to ruin it.

Kiara smiled understandingly. "The moment you touched the gates, an alarm was raised that pops up on their phones. They're already on the way. Nino called me."

My stomach tightening, I checked my phone which was on silent mode. Two missed calls from Savio. *Crap.*

Ten minutes later, a car pulled up. Savio, Remo and Nino got out.

Savio came to the gate, inspecting his car with drawn brows before he looked at me. I waited for the inevitable outburst. Men and their cars were a relationship that I'd never understand.

"With the car in that position, we can't open the gates," Nino said coming up behind Savio. "I'll have to disable the electricity so we don't get zapped when we climb over."

“I thought now that Adamo can’t steal our cars to crash them, my Bugatti was safe. But you, Kitty, keep me on my toes.” Savio reached for the fence and began to climb over before he landed with a low thud on the other side. Shaking his head, he touched my neck. “Are you okay?”

I nodded. “I’m sorry. I wanted to pick up Carlotta and no one was home to drive me, so I thought...”

“You thought it was a good day to crash a three-hundred thousand-dollar car.”

My heart thudded. “That expensive?”

Savio chuckled. “Don’t worry. I wanted a new car anyway.”

“Didn’t you only buy the damn thing six months ago?” Remo asked as he inspected the fence.

“You’re not mad?” I asked.

“No. But we’ll have to do something about your driving skills. I think I need to teach you more than I thought.”

My cheeks heated.

Remo gave him a dark look. “Since we know where your priorities lie, it would be good if your next car was an automatic.”



It took sixty minutes to drag the car away from the gates and open them despite their compressed state. After that, Savio drove me to my mother in Nino’s Tesla, because that one already had child seats in the back.

“I baked cannoli for you,” I said, feeling guilty for my mess up.

“Trying to make up for what you’ve done? Which makes me think you might have planned the whole thing.”

“I didn’t!” I gasped. “And you’re really not angry?”

“Life’s too short to get pissed off about every little thing.”

Crashing his Bugatti was a small thing? I touched his wrist with the speared watch. When I brushed the scars there, he tensed

but didn't pull back. "Thanks. Do you think Remo shares your mantra?"

"Don't worry about him. He doesn't care about material things or money. He'll have the thing repaired and won't mention it again unless he wants to rile you up... so probably at dinner tonight."

We grabbed flowers on the way, which was Savio's idea, and made me really want to kiss him.

Mom looked pale, with a red nose and hollow cheeks. Dad's death had left its marks, and Carlotta's care took a lot of energy as well, but she shared my stubborn streak and rarely accepted help from us.

Her face lit up when Savio handed her the flowers and she gave me a pleased smile. "A gentleman after all."

For some reason, the comment made me blush, which Mom chose to ignore and which Savio answered with a cocky half smile.

Carlotta sat on a blanket on the floor and played with a wooden train that had been Diego's before it was mine. Her head shot up and a big grin split her face. Some color finally filled her cheeks, but she was still a small, thin child. Much smaller than other kids at eighteen months. She pushed herself up, rushing toward me. I picked her up and crushed her to my chest.

"She looks like a little version of you," Savio said with a smile, which filled my belly with familiar butterflies.

"Say hi to Savio," I told her.

"Hi Savio," Carlotta piped, grinning sheepishly.

"Are you sure you'll be fine taking care of her? She needs to take her medicine and if she turns blue, you need to take her to the ER right away and her scar..."

Savio touched my mother's arm. "She'll be taken care of. Nino will notice if something is wrong, and she'll have my nephews and niece for company."

Mom nodded slowly and finally led us to the door. After a kiss to her cheek, I followed Savio to his car with Carlotta in my arms.

Savio helped me put her in the seat then we headed back home.

“You sure nobody will mind?” I whispered.

He gave me a stern look. “Gem, you’re family, so your sister is family too. It’s fine.”

God, I *loved* him. My heart thudded wildly as I considered telling him. Yet, knowing Savio’s reluctance to talk emotions, I swallowed the notion.

Once back in the driveway of the Falcone mansion, Savio lifted Carlotta out of the seat and she clung to him, so I let him carry her inside. He handled her with so much care and gentleness that the anger I’d felt in the past felt like an unnecessary weight I wanted to lose.

The common room was deserted but the French doors were open, so everyone was probably at the pool. “How about we check on the sweets your sister promised me?” Savio suggested.

“Nonna always said sweets are the way to a man’s heart,” I said, remembering her secretive smile whenever she told me.

“Your nonna was a very wise woman.”

In the kitchen, I quickly filled the cannoli with the cream, but Savio and Carlotta were already stealing half of it before I got my hand on it. I swatted his hand away, but his quick reflexes proved difficult to outsmart even in the kitchen.

With Carlotta on his lap, he finally settled at the table and stuffed his face with my cannoli. Carlotta dug in, too, which made me smile even more considering how bad of an eater she’d always been in the past.

“Delicious, Gem. Like all of you.”

My eyes widened and I gave him a warning look. Even if Carlotta had no clue what he meant, I’d kick his ass if he said something like that again.

He took another bite. “I’ll definitely keep you. A woman who can bake like that needs to be my wife.”

“I am your wife.”

“See, I made the right choice.”

I shook my head. The door swung open and Kiara came in with Massimo and Alessio. They were a year and two years older than my sister, but much taller than their age gap suggested. Savio set Carlotta down, but she was too shy to approach the other kids. Savio bent down, took her hand and introduced her.

My heart melted.

Kiara came to me and squeezed my arm. “Things going well between you two?”

I nodded.

“I’m so happy. I always hoped Savio would find a good girl who’d take care of him after everything he and his brothers have been through.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I only smiled. I’d take care of him if he let me. Carlotta spent the night at the mansion so Mom could get a full night of sleep. The Falcones had a spare bed that we put in our bedroom. Carlotta was used to sharing a bed with Mom, though, so she cried until we allowed her to join us. Within minutes she fell asleep and lay curled up between Savio and me.

He gave me a knowing look over her tiny form. “You’re playing dirty. Do I really scare you that much?”

He didn’t scare me, nor did his touch, but my body’s reaction to it, definitely. It was like I was losing control of my body.



Carlotta was a cute kid and she got along well with the other kids. Gemma was beaming all day, impossibly happy that her little sister was doing better. I had to admit I was relieved when we

returned the little girl to Gemma's mom the next day. Sleeping with a toddler in your bed was a challenge and eventually I'd given up and slept on the sofa.

"I still feel so bad that you had to sleep on the sofa," she said after we'd taken Carlotta home. Her guilt over something like that was too adorable.

"You can make it up to me by having a movie night with me. Popcorn and all."

"Really? Like a date?"

"Like a date. I want to stream a few fights that took place in L.A. last night." With Carlotta around, we hadn't been able to watch them live. I could have joined my brothers in the common area, but I didn't want to leave Gemma alone with her sister.

"With the Madman from L.A.?" Gemma asked curiously.

"Fuck, I love that you know these kinds of things and enjoy more than girl things."

That evening we settled on the sofa together and I locked into the Darknet part where we always streamed our fights and races, so people could watch them and place bets.

Gemma came in with a bowl of popcorn that smelled divine. I grabbed a handful and stuffed it into my mouth, groaning at the salted caramel note.

"I made the caramel and added some sea salt."

I pushed another popped kernel into my mouth. "It's perfect. I want this every evening."

"Won't you get bored of it soon?" she said in a strange voice, voicing it in a way that suggested she didn't mean popcorn.

"If something is this good, how can I resist?"

Turning on the stream, I wrapped an arm around Gemma's shoulder and pulled her against my body. She was dressed in sweatpants and a tight Tee, her hair pulled up in a messy bun. "You really went all out for our date." I, too, was wearing sweatpants and a shirt but I couldn't resist teasing her. It was too much fun.

She frowned. “What’s the use of dressing up for movie night?”

“You’re sexy as fuck as you are anyway. No need for fancy clothes or makeup.”

Obviously pleased, she snuggled against me, the popcorn wedged between us.

“I always dreamed that it would be like this. Us being together.”

I had never given it much thought how we’d spend our time outside of the bedroom. I’d been so obsessed that the rest had blended into the background. But this, spending time together because we enjoyed the same things was amazing. I tightened my hold on her and focused on the screen where the first fight began.

“His high kick was badly executed. Not the right angle and no tension,” she said. “It’s like he’s a newbie. If you had done this kick, the other guy would have been on his back.”

She sounded almost proud, which gave me an unexpected sense of satisfaction. I kept sneaking glances at Gemma throughout the fights, relishing in her intense expression and fascination with the brutal sport. Thinking that I’d almost lost her, lost this, to another man, made me so fucking furious at myself. I’d been a major dick.

When the last fight ended, I wasn’t sure how I’d ever gone through watching a fight without her commentary.

“What are you thinking?” Gemma asked.

For some reason, I couldn’t tell her the truth. “That I need to teach you how to drive a stick.”

She sighed. “Are you really not mad?”

I kissed her throat. “Really. But if you want to make it up to me, I won’t say no.”

Gemma tilted her head to give me better access as I nuzzled her neck. “I could bake you something.”

“I’d prefer something else.”

“Savio...”

I chuckled. “It was worth a try.” I stretched out on the sofa, taking Gemma with me. Our bodies pressed against each other, we kissed. My hand squeezed her firm butt before I hooked her leg over my hip. “Are you sure your brothers won’t walk in?”

“Trust me, they won’t. They can guess what we’re up to.”

A blush spread on Gemma’s cheeks. “They think we’re having sex?”

“Probably. Come on, Gem. Is that really so bad?”

Instead of a reply, she kissed me. I wasn’t going to complain. Despite my words, I couldn’t convince Gemma to do more than kissing on the couch. Yet, she couldn’t resist my charm and my fingers once we were in bed. Getting Gemma off with my hand was fucking addicting, even if my body screamed for more, but I wouldn’t push her this time. For once, I’d keep my dick in check.



Gemma gnawed on her lower lip, worried as she sat behind the steering wheel of Nino’s Lotus. It was a car he rarely used because of the kids.

“Are you sure your brother won’t mind?”

I hadn’t asked Nino. He’d taken his Tesla to work today and wouldn’t need his Lotus. “Focus, Kitty.”

Gemma sent me a scowl, then finally started the car. She forgot to put her foot on the clutch and the engine died with a pitiful stutter.

“Don’t say it!” she hissed.

I pushed my seat back to relax, stifling a grin. “Do your thing then.”

She started the car again and put it in first gear. Frowning, she set the car in motion, but disengaged the clutch too fast. The Lotus jerked forward, then died.

“Again,” I said. “Slower this time.”

“Because a Lotus was meant to go slow,” she muttered. Oh, my Gem hated to be bad at something.

“You have to learn to crawl before you can try to walk.”

She narrowed her eyes. This time, she did as I said and the car rolled down the driveway slowly.

“Now press the gas.”

She did, but too hard. The engine roared, begging to be put in second gear. Gemma panicked and killed the engine once more.

Sighing, she shook her head. “Are you sure you want to teach me this? Diego would have started screaming by now.”

“I can be patient if I want to be. I won’t scream. Try again.” I hadn’t inherited our father’s impatience like Remo had.

Two hours later, we returned to the premises after a quick tour through Vegas. Gemma was beaming all over her face when she parked the Lotus in the driveway.

“You did good—”

She threw her arms around me and kissed me. Unbuckling, I leaned over to deepen the kiss. I could spend hours kissing Gemma.

A bang sounded, driving us apart.

Nevio knelt on the hood of the car, pressed his face against the windshield, and hammered with his fists against the glass.

I shoved the door open. “That’s it,” I growled. “I’ll dunk your head in the toilet, PIA!”

Turning to Gemma, I said, “Help me catch the monster.”

We both got out of the car. Nevio slid off the hood, giggling, and darted away.

Gemma sprinted after him, laughing. After watching her butt for a moment, I chased the little monster. Nevio dodged us like a fucking rabbit. Gemma was grinning all over her face as she faced off with my nephew who hid behind a tree.

I could have watched her all day, but Nevio needed to be taught a lesson. He shot to the left to avoid Gemma’s attack and I finally caught the back of his shirt. Jerking him toward me, I curled my arm around his waist and lifted him off the ground. Even head down, he kept struggling.

“Time for payback.”

“Nooooo!”

Gemma stopped beside me, panting. “You’re not going to dunk him in the toilet, right?”

I’d intended to do it, but looking at her face, I realized that wouldn’t earn me any bonus points with her. “I’ll just dump him in the pool.”

Nevio kept screaming as I carried him over to the pool, then held him above the water. Unfortunately, Remo came our way with Greta on his arm. “Do I even want to know what’s going on here?”

“Probably not,” I said, still holding Nevio. “The kid is being a PIA again.”

Remo set Greta down and motioned for me to hand Nevio to him. With a sigh, I handed the kid to him. He put Nevio down and squatted before him. “When I tell you to stop, you stop.”

Nevio glanced at Greta, obviously hoping for her support. I snatched her up before she could help him. “How about you show us a few ballet moves, dollface?”

Gemma smiled as she followed Greta and me toward the house. Remo was still talking to Nevio. Most of the time, he was the only one the boy listened to.

I put Greta down. She looked shy.

“Come on, Greta. Show Gemma what you can do.”

Greta got into that ballet position and did a small curtsy.

Gemma pressed against me, kissing my cheek. “You are so cute with her.” Then she applauded. “I wish I could do ballet, but I’m too clumsy for it.”

Greta beamed before rushing over to me and hugging my leg in embarrassment.

Gemma was anything but clumsy. Her fight moves were graceful, and far more entertaining than ballet. I stroked Greta’s head and grinned at Gemma. “So, being cute with kids is the way to your heart?”

“You mean to my panties,” she said under her breath.

“That, too.”

Greta strolled to a butterfly and watched it in rapt attention.

Gemma didn't roll her eyes like she usually did. "Why is sex so important to you?"

Greta was far enough away, but I kept my voice low anyway. I cupped Gemma's head. "Because it's an amazing feeling, like a high without drugs. And to be honest, I can hardly think about anything, but being inside of you."

Gemma swallowed. "For me, sex is baring myself to you in more than one way. It seems like such a personal thing to allow you inside of me. I can't even imagine. I've been trying to imagine how it'll be to allow you this close..." She shook her head, and I didn't know what to say. "It'll be a special moment for me, and I want it to be for you as well."

"It'll be *our* first time, Gem. Of course, it'll be special for me." Maybe I should have said more, but emotional declarations were the bane of my existence. I almost longed for Nevio to barge in on us again.



A couple of days later, we sat on the couch again after watching a ridiculously bad horror movie. Those sofa dates had become my favorite.

Gemma caressed the back of my neck in a very distracting way. I slid my hand down to her waist then thigh. She cast her eyes up and I almost groaned at the desire in her expression. Grabbing her by the waist, I hoisted her on my lap. She grabbed my shoulders and kissed me, a hesitant, probing kiss at first then almost desperate. I pulled her even closer, my need for her taking center stage. "What do you want, Gem?" I said between kisses.

"Upstairs," she whispered.

I grabbed the firm globes of her ass to steady her as I rose from the sofa. Gemma wrapped her legs around me at once, her arms clinging to my neck. I carried her upstairs and into our bedroom. When my legs hit the bed, I pulled out of the kiss and carefully lowered Gemma to the mattress. I followed immediately, molding our bodies. The heat of her pussy seemed to singe my cock even through the fabric of our clothes.

I took my time discovering every inch of her beautiful mouth, my hands sliding below her sweater, stroking along her stomach up to her breasts. Gemma arched up against my touch with a soft moan.

Kissing and touching, I undressed Gemma until she lay before me naked, stealing my breath just like the first time. I kissed a path down her stomach, dipping my tongue into her belly button until she bucked up her hips and tried to shove me away. With a grin, I trailed my lips lower, brushing a kiss across the trimmed triangle.

Gemma tensed, her palm coming to rest on my head. The tantalizing scent of her arousal flooded my nose, calling to my dick like a Siren's song.

She tensed when my face got closer to her adorable pussy. "Relax, Gem. This will be amazing."

She stayed tense, and then I knew the problem. Half of the things I wanted to do to her were probably regarded as sin by the Traditionalists, but I'd be damned if I didn't do them all anyway. "I'm your husband, Gem. Nothing that we do is bad, you got it?"

She relaxed slightly. Still such a good girl, my Gem. How long would it take for me to lick, fuck and finger that out of her?

I kissed her pussy lips. She sucked in her breath. The muscles in her thighs quivered in anticipation and that little button was already glistening. I leaned closer until my mouth was almost touching her and she stopped breathing. The first swipe of my tongue along her heated flesh made me groan and her gasp. I took my time, bringing Gemma close, only to pull back and nibble at her thigh. Her moans were growing louder as she forgot everything around her.

I parted her even farther with my shoulders and dipped my tongue into her pussy. My cock throbbed against my sweats, imagining how it would be to finally be inside of her. Soon Gemma began to quiver uncontrollably. This time I didn't pull back. Instead, I sucked her clit into my mouth and she exploded under me.

I kept sucking gently until she stilled. Pressing another kiss to her pussy, I kissed my way back up to her mouth, settling on top of her with a cocky smile.

Gemma was flushed. Her eyes registered my smile, but she didn't roll her eyes like she usually would have done at my cockiness. She stroked my back through my clothes. This had been about her, so I hadn't bothered undressing. Her fingers curled around my neck and the longing in her expression intensified.

Fuck. I knew what she wanted. Suddenly I felt fucking nervous. I'd never been nervous before sex, not even my first time. Yet, seeing Gemma's expression and realizing how much this moment meant to her, my own pulse sped up. Gemma had waited for this moment, for me, for so many years, I wanted this to be perfect for her. "What do you want, Gem?" I rasped, even though I could see it in her expression. I wanted her to say it. This was her choice. Not because she was finally allowed to have sex in marriage or because someone had given their okay. This was supposed to be what she desired. "It's okay to say what you want, Gem."

Ignoring my own need and the throbbing in my balls, I waited for Gemma, for my wife, to say what she wanted, even as her cheeks turned a darker shade of red.

TWENTY-NINE



Gemma swallowed, her eyes begging me to take the decision off her hands. I kissed her cheek, and even as it killed me, I began to roll off her.

Her fingers dug into my back, clinging to me. “Make me yours.”

My heartbeat sped up at once. I kissed her mouth, trying to get a grip on myself. “Do you take the pill?”

She gave a small nod.

I pushed myself up and got out of my T-shirt before I lay down on Gemma again. Kissing her, I slid a hand between us and gently parted her folds with a finger. She was wet and swollen from her orgasm. I teased her opening with my fingers, light swipes mimicking what my tongue did in her mouth before I dipped a finger in. I groaned into her mouth at the feel of her walls clamping down on me.

Soon Gemma began shifting her hips, meeting every thrust of my finger, as the heel of my hand pressed down on her clit. Her eyes were half-closed, lust-filled, and the pressure of her thigh against my dick almost drove me insane, but I kept pumping her gently until she was close. Before she could come, I pulled out my finger.

Confusion flickered across her face.

I rolled off her and began to open my pants then reached for her hands so she'd help me. If she only lay there, she'd get more

nervous. Soon we'd freed me of my remaining clothes. Nerves filled Gemma's eyes. I didn't give her much time to worry, however.

I settled between her legs, but I didn't go for the end goal right away. Gemma was braced for the pain, tense and anxious under me despite the orgasm I'd given her, and I wanted her to relax again.

I kissed her without hurry, my cock pressed against the inside of her thigh. Like I'd done before, I reached between us and began to fuck her with my finger until she was close again. Keeping my eyes on her beautiful face, I added a second finger. It was a much tighter fit. She held her breath, trying to get used to the stretch. I slid my fingers in and out slowly, drunk on the feel of her. She was so fucking wet, it drove me completely insane. I started rubbing her clit with my thumb while I pumped into her. My tongue mimicked what my cock would soon be doing to her pretty pussy causing Gemma to moan into my mouth. I pulled back slightly and removed my fingers from her pussy before reaching for my cock. I dipped two fingers into her once more before I nudged her with my tip.

Gemma held my gaze, her lips parted. No hesitation or doubt lingered in her expression. I started to ease into her as slowly as I could. Gemma clung to my back. I kissed her lips again then shifted even deeper. Soon she became impossibly tight. I changed the angle and with a harder push, settled myself all the way inside of her. Gemma winced, her breath pressing out in a sharp exhale.

Fuck, she felt perfect around me. I must have died and gone straight to heaven. I rained kisses down on her eyelids and tense mouth. "I've waited so fucking long for this, for you, Gem, but it's so worth it. You are perfect."

She clung to me, breathing quickly. When she cast her eyes up, they were glistening, and I tensed. "Gem?"

She gave me a shaky smile and the vise around my heart loosened. "I'm just happy."

This was the first time I made a girl cry during sex. Afterward, that was a given. Not sure what to say, least of all something that wouldn't ruin the moment, I cupped her head and started to thrust, gently, excruciatingly slow.

“How is it?”

“Okay.”

I narrowed my eyes. She didn't sound okay. “The truth, Gem.”

“It hurts,” she said and at the look on my face, she added, “But I don't care. I've waited so long for this, for you to be finally mine.”

“Oh, Gem, I've always only been yours, and this moment is fucking special, got it?” I kissed her, discovering that dangerous mouth, sucking at those plump lips. All the girls before her had meant nothing. Gemma was the real deal. These last couple of weeks of being married to her and enjoying my time with her had shown that. For a moment, I wanted to utter three words I'd never said before then I got a grip. I smiled teasingly. “We have to do something about that hurting like hell part.”

I withdrew, earning a sharp intake of breath. Then I started trailing kisses down Gemma's gorgeous body as I moved lower until I settled between her thighs. Traces of blood coated her pussy lips. That wasn't something I'd taken into consideration, but fuck if that would stop me from devouring her. Remembering Remo's words about whiskey and blood, I almost lost it, but then I pulled myself together. Bursting into laughter in a moment like this would have sent the wrong message. The moment my tongue dipped into Gemma, she loosened and let out a drawn-out moan.

“Better?” I asked between nibbles and licks.

“God, yes. So much better. Don't stop,” she said.

“I won't,” I murmured then shifted her leg so I could fuck her with my tongue. “Soon you'll be mewling for my cock in your pussy, Gem.” I slid my tongue in and out. “You'll come while I fuck your brains out.”



Before Savio I didn't even know that it was possible to be fucked by a tongue, and maybe it was Savio's special talent.

"You'll come so"—he sucked my clit—"hard around my cock."

His teeth grazed me, and I exploded despite the twinge in my body, my legs clenching around him, my hips rocking desperately as I came in his mouth. He pulled back when my body was still throbbing with the last flickers of passion and settled on top of me.

Just like before, he held my gaze as he slid into me, and just like before, he was gentle and slow. Unlike last time, there wasn't only pain. Deep inside of me, a fire began to grow and with every thrust, Savio seemed to kindle it. I felt it so much deeper than the pleasure when he licked or fingered me, deep in my core and it seemed to spread into every inch of me.

I dug my heels into the bed, lifting my hips to meet his thrusts.

Savio gripped the back of my thigh, guiding my movements. "How is it now, Gem?" He accentuated his question with a deep thrust that hit a special spot inside of me. I loved how he took care of me.

My lips fell open in a moan. "Good," I said. So good and getting better with every stroke.

One corner of his mouth tipped up in that infamous smirk. I rolled my eyes and Savio quickly reached between us, pressing against my clit as his tip nudged the same spot again, and I screamed out my release. Stars burst in my vision as I came around Savio.

He slammed harder into me until pain battled with pleasure, and I was left to clutch his back. Then with a feral growl, he released deep inside of me. I could feel it and somehow, this made me shudder in pleasure again.

Savio's mouth slid over mine, uncoordinated kisses and ragged breaths. He stilled on top of me and kissed the tip of my nose.

I didn't say anything, too overwhelmed by what we'd done. It had been wonderful. For so long, losing my virginity had hung over my head like a Sword of Damocles, now it had finally happened.

"I told you you'd come hard with my dick inside of you. Next time I'll aim for another exclamation of God though."

I rolled my eyes. "You're an idiot."

Savio shook his head. "Didn't you learn to respect your husband?"

"What are you going to do? Give me another orgasm?" I asked with a giggle.

"What happened to my blushing choir girl?" he growled.

"You corrupted her."

"I did, didn't I?" He nuzzled my throat then lightly nipped my nipple. I gasped as my inner muscles clenched around Savio's cock.

He exhaled sharply.

"Do you miss her?"

Savio chuckled. "I'm working so hard to fuck her out of you. No, I don't miss her, Gem."

He pulled out of me and I winced at the sore sensation that caused. Savio scanned my face then looked down his body. A fine sheen of blood covered his cock.

Heat rose into my cheeks. Yet, at the same time, it felt like a monumental step in my life. Savio pulled me against him. I wondered if this would change things between us, worried that Savio would lose interest now that he'd gotten what he'd wanted

for so long but I didn't allow myself to linger on the thought. Exhaustion quickly claimed my body and I fell asleep.



Sex must have knocked me out because when I woke, it was almost nine. I was alone in bed, but the shower ran in the bathroom. Savio must have worked out already. I slid out of bed, blushing at the stain on the sheets. I rushed into the bathroom, still naked. I hadn't bothered getting dressed last night. Savio smirked when he opened the shower. "Want to shower with me?"

I slipped in, letting out a sigh as the warm water carried away some of the soreness. Savio touched my waist as he pressed me into the tile wall, his expression even more possessive than usual. His kiss set me aflame within seconds. Savio's fingers slipped between my legs, stroking me until I panted against him once more. Every caress spoke of his lust for me, so I didn't protest when he hoisted me up. Wedged between the wall and his strong body, he pressed against me. Stifling a wince at the painful pressure, I clung to him. My body was definitely not in favor of this position. He shifted the angle and my weight drove my body down onto his erection until I dug my nails into his shoulder, trying to slow the descent.

Savio pulled away and scanned my face. His expression tightened. Shaking his head, he slid his hands under my butt and slowly pushed me up so he could pull out of me. He kissed my ear. "Not yet, hm?"

Embarrassment heated my face. "You can continue..."

"I can, but I won't. If you don't like something, you have to tell me. I'm not a mind reader, Kitty. You just say no and then we'll postpone whatever we've been up to. There's a good kind of pain and a bad kind of pain, and this is the latter."

He set me down then brushed my wet hair from my face. "I want you to enjoy everything."

"Okay." In our circles, women learned to please their husbands. Men were supposed to enjoy it first, and if the woman enjoyed it occasionally as well, that was an added bonus but not a requirement.

Savio got down on his knee, startling me. “Let me see if I hurt you.” He lifted one of my legs and parted me.

“You didn’t—” I moaned when he slid his tongue along my sore flesh.

“Does this hurt?”

I shook my head.

He sucked lightly. “And this?”

“No.”

He kissed, sucked, and nibbled until I couldn’t reply anymore and only the wall at my back and my thigh on Savio’s shoulder kept me upright. I came with a violent shudder. Savio pushed to his feet for a fierce kiss, giving me a taste of myself. “I’d like to try again,” I whispered.

Savio turned off the shower and pulled me out. He wrapped a towel around me then smiled at my confusion. “We’ll try again, Gem. I want you too much to pass up the chance to sink myself into your pussy again, but not up against the shower.” He gripped my hips and hoisted me up on the vanity counter. “Like this. That way your weight won’t bear down, and we can go slow.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck, bringing our naked bodies flush together. This time, when Savio pushed in, the pain was only a dull stretching sensation. Soon I rocked my hips against him, losing myself in the sensations.



Savio went ahead to the kitchen while I took another quick shower after he’d come inside of me again. When I entered the kitchen ten minutes later, most of the Falcone clan was there. Only Nino and Alessio were missing. Savio stood beside Kiara who was making pancakes, probably stealing half of the sweet rounds before they hit the plate.

I blushed immediately when everyone looked at me, sure they could see what Savio and I had done. Remo raised an eyebrow at Savio, who only smiled in that cocky way. My cheeks throbbed fiercely as I mumbled a quick good morning and hurried to Savio’s side. He wrapped an arm around my waist then pressed a kiss to my throat.

“You’re cute when you’re embarrassed.”

I cringed. “What did you tell them?”

“Nothing.”

I tossed him a glare. “Is that why they’re looking at me like that?”

“They gathered things themselves. I neither confirmed nor denied their assumptions, but your reaction and blush when you came into the kitchen was all the proof they needed.”

“Oh no,” I said miserably. “I can’t ever face them again.”

Amusement shone in Savio’s eyes. He wasn’t wired to feel embarrassment and I wished I were the same way. “Come on, Gem. They knew we were going to fuck at some point.”

“Don’t use that word,” I pressed out, slanting a worried look at Kiara who pretended to be busy with the pancakes.

“That we did the nasty then.”

Kiara’s mouth twitched.

I wanted the ground to swallow me. Shoving Savio, I muttered. “You’re impossible.”

He chuckled, kissing my ear. “That’s what you love about me, admit it.”

Done. The word was only a thought, yet I might as well have said it. I tensed and Savio, too. He pulled back, suddenly not playful.

“While your awkward attempt at young love is a sickeningly entertaining sight to behold, you’re distracting Kiara from making me breakfast, so how about you get a fucking grip?” Remo said from his spot at the kitchen table. Nevio giggled. Serafina gave both her men a stern look, which had no effect.

Savio drew back from me and gave his brother the finger. “I’ve had to watch your display of twisted affection with Fina for years now, so how about *you* get a fucking grip?”

I moved to Kiara’s side, glad to have my back on the spectacle. She gave me a soft smile. “Don’t mind them. It’s their way to show their love for each other.”

I nodded. It wasn't Remo's words that had me flustered, however, but my almost love declaration, which had given Savio a look of near-panic. "Do you need my help?"

As if she could sense my need to do something to distract myself, Kiara handed me the spatula. "Maybe you could take over for a while then I can make sure that Massimo doesn't eat his crayons." With a grateful smile, I took her spot at the stove while she went over to her younger son in his highchair.

Eventually, Savio wrapped his arm around my waist from behind. I peered up at his face. The playful smile was back, but I remembered his previous seriousness. Why had he reacted that way? Was he worried I'd expect him to say it back if I told him I loved him? Of course, I did, but only if he did, indeed, love me.

He snatched up another pancake from the pan, miraculously without burning his fingers. I tried to hit him with the spatula but clanged it against the counter when he jerked his hand back. "I'm always a step ahead of you, Kitty."

Only when it came to the physical side. When it came to the emotional part of our relationship, I was definitely a step ahead, and had always been.

THIRTY



I wasn't sure why I'd freaked in the kitchen. The three words had crossed my mind before, but a declaration in front of my family definitely wasn't going to happen.

Gemma hadn't uttered the words yet either, nor had she tried to urge them out of me, for which I was entirely grateful. It just didn't feel right yet... or maybe I was a fucking coward.

At least, our sex life was slowly picking up its pace. I still had to go slow, but I didn't mind. The only thing that bothered me was that Gemma's mouth stayed clear of my dick. She hadn't once attempted anything in the four times we'd had sex.

Deciding to push her a tiny bit, I wrapped my arms around her from behind during our fight training.

"How about a little wager? If you win, I'll go down on you and if I win, you go down on me?"

"That sounds like you're winning either way," she muttered.

I laughed, stunned by her words. "You think me going down on you is me winning?"

Her cheeks heated and she focused back down on wrapping her hand. I chuckled and tightened my hold around her waist. "You are right. Your pussy is the most delicious treat I've ever had."

A small shiver took hold of her body. "You know as well as I do that I can't win against you."

“Then how about you win if you land a direct hit to my face and I win if I have you on the ground?”

She pursed her lips.

“Come on, Kitty, be brave. Don’t tell me you’re scared of taking my cock in your mouth?”

She jerked out of my hold with a huff. “I’m *not*.”

Oh, she was. Question was if her traditional upbringing was the root of the problem or her inexperience. Probably both.

Gemma raised her fists. “I’m not,” she insisted again.

I shrugged with a grin. “Then let’s begin.”

She attacked at once. Gemma was quick and almost snuck past my defenses. After a few quick punches against my forearms and sides, she tried a kick to my knees. I toyed with her for a while, riling her up. Soon Gemma’s hair curled wildly around her sweaty face and frustration shone in her eyes.

“I told you I can’t win against you,” she seethed.

She couldn’t. I kicked out her legs. She landed on her back with a gasp.

“I win,” I growled, bending over her. She glared, which made me smile only wider. I took a step back and leaned against the cage, motioning at my groin. “Be my guest.”

Gemma got to her knees then moved closer as if she were facing a tribunal and not my dick. Her eyes held so much hesitation when they flickered to my fucking groin that my horniness went straight out the window. I wanted nothing more than to come in her mouth, but not if she wasn’t ready for it. I’d never been with girls who weren’t a hundred percent into it.

With a growl, I hoisted her to her feet and claimed her mouth for a kiss before I pushed her back against the cage. “Hold on to the fucking cage, Gem.”

She linked her fingers in the holes of the mesh, frowning. I hooked my fingers in the waistband of her boxing shorts. Her eyes widened, darting to the door of the dojo. “Trust me, none of my brothers will set foot inside when they know I’m here with you.” I pulled her shorts and panties down.

“You won.” Confusion rang in her voice as she stood half bared in front of me. My mouth watered at the sight of her pussy as always.

I got down on my knees in front of her. “I know and as the winner, I can decide which prize I’d rather have and I want your pussy.” I gripped her ass cheeks hard, causing her to gasp in surprise. “Hold on tightly. Soon your legs will give way.”

“Even you don’t have reason to be this smug,” she said.

I peered up, finding her watching me, her fingers entangled in the mesh, her teeth digging into her lower lip.

One corner of my mouth turned up and she quickly closed her eyes and tilted her head up. Still too shy to watch me.

“Nah, that’s not going to do it, Kitty. You are going to watch me lick that pussy like a good girl.”

“Savio,” she gritted out, her eyes still closed tightly.

I tightened my fingers around her thighs, growling. “We play this by my rules. I won and you’re going to watch me eat out your pussy or I’ll have to fuck your mouth after all.” It was an empty threat. I wanted Gemma salivating for my dick, and that obviously wasn’t going to happen today.

Her eyes shot open. She obviously believed I was being serious. We really had to work on that. My assholery of the past was obviously still overshadowing the present.

“Good,” I said in a low voice then focused my attention back to that glistening little button screaming for some loving.

I took a deep breath.

“What are you doing?”

I chuckled. “Don’t sound so shocked, Kitty. I’m going to do some very nasty things to you that will drive the rest of the choir girl right out of you.”

She was about to say something, but I swiped my tongue over her clit, silencing her. “So fucking sweet.”

I started licking her, long, lazy licks with the entire length of my tongue as I held her gaze. Her face was bright red, but she never once looked away, and not just because of my earlier

words. Even if good girl Gem would never admit it, she loved watching me lick her pussy. I could see it in her lust-filled gaze.

I sucked her clit while I fucked her with two fingers, and finally, Gemma's legs became slack. I pulled back. "I told you so."

She glared but didn't say anything. "Hold on," I ordered, then hoisted her thighs up on my shoulders, opening her up for me before I dove back in. She moaned, rocking her hips. I loved how she didn't try to mute her moans. She let me hear just how much she loved me licking her. I licked her harder and faster, diving in deeply with every stroke. She began to quiver and gasp, her body becoming tight as a bowstring a moment before she cried out. Her hips rocked desperately in my hold and I smirked against her heated flesh.

She tried to lower her legs when she stopped shaking, but I held on.

"Oh no, Gem. Hold still, now let me have my reward. This is the best part," I growled, and as expected, she shivered and more of her lust trickled out. I lapped at her lightly, staying clear of her oversensitive button. Soon the tension left her limbs and she began shifting her hips again, her lips parted.

I watched her closely, not wanting to bring her too close. Inexperienced as she still was, she might come before I could pull back.

With a last lingering kiss, I withdrew and gave her my most arrogant grin. She didn't even react, too dazed by what just happened. I could see the questions in her eyes, maybe why I'd stopped.

I wiped my chin as I straightened. Gemma lowered her arms but kept leaning against the cage. "So do I have reason to be smug?"

"You do," she admitted breathlessly. I kissed her. Gemma was always honest, that's what I'd always appreciated about her.

"Do you want more?" I asked.

With hooded eyes, she nodded. I shoved down my shorts and lifted Gemma higher, her back against the cage. Then I lowered her slowly on my hard cock, never taking my eyes off her face to

see if this position was okay for her now. It was still a tight fit and I had to go slow, but no sign of pain showed on her face. “God, Savio,” she pressed out when I was buried all the way inside of her.

I grinned cockily, and her lips tightened. “I didn’t call you God.”

I silenced her with my first deep thrust, driving her back against the cage. Gemma’s head fell back. “No,” I growled. “You’re going to watch while I fuck you.”

She met my gaze. She’d never admit it, but she was turned on by my dominant side. Soon I established a faster rhythm. I shifted my legs to get in a better position, my fingers digging into Gemma’s ass cheeks as I pounded into her with deep, hard thrusts that filled the gym with the rattling of the cage.

When we both came, I sank to the floor with Gemma on my lap. She hung limply in my hold. “This is what I call a good workout,” I said.

Gemma laughed. “I’m just glad nobody came in.”

“Even if my brothers came by, they’d know this wasn’t the sound of fighting.”

Gemma groaned, pressing her face against my throat. I stroked her back. “How’s the cage burn?”

“I’ll be bruised tomorrow.”

“That’s the desired result of fight training.”



Back home, we settled on the sofa for another movie night. This time Adamo’s qualification race for the biggest race of the year. My brother was driving like a madman as usual.

I could tell that Gemma was mulling on something.

“Why do you have such a problem with showing real emotions? Like what you feel for me.”

Fuck. I kept my eyes on the screen. Emotions were a liability. My past had proven that over and over again. “I show you what I feel for you. Twice today.”

Gemma reached for the remote and turned down the volume. “That’s not what I mean.”

“Come on, Gem, don’t ruin this evening with emotional bullshit. I married you, what else do you want?” I took the remote from her hand and turned the volume up again.

Gem faced the TV with an expression of stone. “You make it sound as if you gave me a huge gift by marrying me, as if I should be grateful that you deigned to end your man-whoring ways for me. You never put any kind of effort into this.” She lifted the finger with the engagement ring. “If this is your way to show how much you care for me, then you’re an idiot.”

She pushed to her feet and stalked away. Groaning, I slumped back against the cushions. That’s why I’d never bothered with relationships. Watching Gemma disappear upstairs, I couldn’t stay on the sofa though. When other girls had run off hurt, I’d not given a shit, but with Gem, things were different, not only because we were married.

I got up and followed her upstairs, where I found her on her side of the bed. The shaking of her shoulders was a good indicator of what she was doing. Feeling like the biggest asshole, I moved inside and slid into bed behind her. Gemma could be a tough fighter, but her core was mushy soft. Wrapping my arms around her from behind, I kissed her neck. “Don’t cry, Gem. I hate seeing your tears. They feel like a punch in my heart.”

She didn’t say anything, only stared stubbornly ahead.

“Our father didn’t show emotion. He probably didn’t have them, just like Nino. Only my brother isn’t a sadistic psychopath... well, to the people he cares about.” I paused. Taking a trip down memory lane was something I avoided at all costs. “Remo and Nino were never the touchy-feely kind of kids, but I was a horrible cuddler and too sensitive for the type of surroundings I was born into. A bit like Adamo, only that I got rid of that annoying trait very quickly.” Gemma had stopped crying and was all ears now. “Problem was my father would have rather killed me than shown any kind of affection, and my mother did try to kill me...Remo and Nino had their own demons to battle and once we were in boarding school surrounded by strangers and potential enemies, I learned quickly to hide my emotions from them. They reported back to our father and

probably other parts of our traitorous family. Later when my brothers and I were on the run, hiding my emotions behind sarcasm and humor was a good way to help Remo. He wasn't supposed to worry about me. He had enough on his plate, so I used my sarcasm as my armor. That way, he could focus on what was really important: winning our territory back. It's become second nature, Gem, using sarcasm and jokes to get out of emotional situations. It doesn't mean I don't have emotions. It just means I'm crappy at showing them."

"Yes, you are." She turned around in my hold, facing me with her puffy face. I kissed the red tip of her nose like I'd done before she was really mine. "So you have emotions for me?"

I dragged her closer. "Yes, I have emotions for you. Plenty of them."

"I have emotions for you, too," she said teasingly.

I kissed her. "One day, I'll get my act together, I promise."

"Everyone's scared of something."

"Like you of my dick."

She narrowed her eyes, then she shook her head with a laugh. "All right."

I stroked her cheek. "Don't take this the wrong way and I know it isn't the perfect moment to bridge the subject, but why do you avoid giving me head?"

"I'm not scared," she said stubbornly.

I cocked one eyebrow. "Who's lying about their emotions now?"

"I'm not!" She sat up with a cute growl, scowling at me. "You're baiting me so I'll do it, right?"

"Never," I said.

She reached for my sweats and I helped her pull them down. My dick sprang free, already waiting for his special treatment. Gemma moved a bit closer, and I almost laughed at the look of concentration on her face. "Shut up," she muttered.

"I didn't say anything."

Gemma stared at my tattoo as she lowered her head. “I’m not sure if I like it. Being watched by that bull freaks me out.”

“He and I love seeing you so close to my cock.”

Gemma rolled her eyes.

“If you’re scared, you don’t—” Her lips closed around my tip and my words died in a groan. Seeing Gemma’s pouty lips around my dick was almost enough to make me come. Gemma’s inexperience quickly showed when her teeth got in the way as she tried to suck me. I held back, not wanting to make her insecure by giving instructions, but soon things became a bit too toothy.

I hissed when Gemma’s teeth scratched me again and gently pressed her neck to get her in a different angle.

“Don’t chew on it. I’m not averse to some rough play, but my dick’s not a bone.”

Gemma wrenched her head back, face reddening. Before I could grab her, she jumped out of bed.

I almost laughed until I saw the tears in her eyes. I leaped out of bed and wrapped my arm around her waist from behind. She twisted in my hold and tried to shove me away. I only tightened my hold.

“Are you crying because you suck at sucking?” I teased her. It was the fucking wrong thing to do.

She kicked back against my shin, but I didn’t let go of her.

“I hate that the girls you’ve been with knew how to give you head, how to please you and I’m a loser who can’t get it right.”

Fuck, was she serious? I almost laughed again but stifled the sound. “Gemma,” I said. “You’ve never had a cock in your mouth, thank the fucking gods. Can I tell you a secret?”

She shrugged.

“You were a fucking horrible kisser.” She hadn’t really been. She hadn’t blown my mind, but right now I needed to stop her freak out because I had a feeling it would determine the number of future blowjobs.

Her eyes widened.

“Because my tongue was the first in your mouth and look at you now. Your kisses make my fucking head spin.”

A twitch of her lip. “And you know what? I don’t give a fuck if you’re a horrible kisser or head giver, because it means you didn’t get the chance to practice before me. Because it means I’m your first everything.”

She rolled her eyes and relaxed in my hold. “Okay,” she said. “But I still don’t like the idea of being compared to all your previous lovers and not being at the top.”

“I didn’t know you were that competitive outside of the cage,” I said. “And trust me, since I’m with you, I haven’t thought about any of the women of my past.” It was the fucking truth. Even before Gemma had been mine, I’d fantasized about her half the time I was with another girl.

“I’m not really, but I hate that so many girls have done this with you.”

Knowing that she’d wanted all of her firsts to belong to me from the very start made my chest swell with a sort of possessiveness I hadn’t been capable of before her. I kissed her pouty lips, fucking intoxicated by her taste and almost high on the knowledge that nobody knew how delicious she was, except for me.

I trailed my lips up to her ear. “How about we practice every day?”

A choked laugh burst out of her. “That’s what you’d like...”

“That’s what I’d fucking love,” I murmured, kissing her ear. We returned to the bed, and I wrapped my palm around my cock, squeezing it a few times until pre-cum leaked out. Then I smiled challengingly.

“How does it taste?” she asked curiously, motioning to the droplets on my tip.

“How would I know?”

“Were you never curious?”

I knew some guys tasted their own cum; I had never seen the appeal.

“My tastes always veered more toward the sweet,” I said as I slid my hand into her sweats and then two fingers between Gemma’s pussy lips before bringing them to my mouth and tasting her. “Why don’t you give it a try?” I nodded toward my cock glistening with my lust for her.

A blush staining her cheeks, she leaned down and experimentally licked up my cum. I groaned deep in my chest, my balls vibrating.

Gemma smacked her lips together then shrugged. “Doesn’t taste like much.”

I slid my hand into her hair, growing impatient, having her lips so close to my cock. “Ever had a lollipop?” I rasped.

She raised her eyebrows, but she got my hint. She began licking my tip as if it was a cherry popsicle. My breathing deepened as I watched her pink tongue dart out circling, tasting, discovering, and then finally she closed her mouth around the head and sucked.

My balls pulsed in rhythm with the hollowing of her cheeks.

Occasionally her teeth still scraped my cock but only briefly and it added to my pleasure. It took considerable effort not to fuck her mouth like I wanted to. She had trouble as it was staying in sync with my slight upward thrusts, but fuck, none of that mattered, because the sight of Gemma’s gorgeous mouth sucking my cock was the hottest thing I could imagine.

Soon I was at my tipping point.

“Swallow for me, Kitty,” I growled.

I loosened my hold on her neck to give her the chance to pull back if she wanted, even if it was the last thing *I* wanted. Gemma kept sucking, her fingers tightening around my base. “Fuck.”

My hips moved faster, seeking her hot mouth, my tip brushing the back of her throat and then my balls clenched and cum spurted out of my cock. I couldn’t stop looking at Gemma’s lips around my dick. I held onto her neck as I slid almost all the way out only to push back in. Gemma swallowed around me, not meeting my eyes. Slowly I pulled out of her and she swallowed

again, her cheeks bright red. “Gem,” I rasped when I had my voice back.

I reached down, gripped her by the hips and hoisted her on my stomach so she straddled me. Nudging her chin up, I searched her eyes. “What’s the matter? Don’t like the taste?” Many girls didn’t, which was why some of them either refused to swallow in general or only when I used a condom.

But her expression didn’t reflect disgust. She looked guilty and ashamed. Sitting up, I cupped her cheek. “Don’t tell me this is some traditional shit, Gem.”

Gemma could be tough as steel, but inside, she was soft as warm butter. I brushed a kiss over her ear, realizing that bashing her upbringing and with it, her nonna and dad wouldn’t make her feel better. “I eat your pussy all the time, and I love it. I lap up your juices. Fuck, I practically devour you, and I don’t feel a fucking sliver of guilt or shame over it, so if you think sucking my cock is sin or some kind of other bullshit then stop. If you ask me, giving each other pleasure can’t be sin.” Then I paused. “And if this is about you not liking sucking my dick, then we’ll figure something out. Is it the sin thing?”

“Yeah,” she admitted.

“Thank the fucking Lord,” I pressed out.

She rolled her eyes with a small laugh then she became serious once more. “I just worried that it would make you respect me less.”

I scoffed. “You sucking me dry won’t make me respect you less, trust me. Or do you respect me less when I lick your pussy?”

“That’s different, you’re a man.”

I pulled her face close. “I respect you more than any other woman, and that won’t change, Gem. You can kick ass, bake like a top chef and now all that’s missing is you giving me head like a fucking goddess and I’ll build you an altar and worship you.”

“You’re such an idiot!” she gasped out, but she leaned into me and softened. “How was I?”

I pulled back. “Now you want praise or honest criticism?”

“Honesty.”

“I’d give you a solid B-minus.”

Her eyes widened in indignation. “B-*minus*?”

“We’ll practice until you’re a straight A-plus, don’t worry.”

She punched my arm. “You’re too full of yourself.”

I leaned back, taking her with me. “You need to ride me into shape.” Lifting my hips, I dug my still hard cock into her butt cheeks.

I helped Gemma out of her clothes then showed her just how much I respected her by eating her out before she finally settled on top of me. She looked magnificent straddling my hips. I ran my hands up her abs before I cupped her breasts. For a moment, she stared down at the bull that had a prime view of her beautiful pussy then she began moving her hips, slowly at first, figuring out the best way to give herself pleasure as I lay still and enjoyed the view.

Finally, she settled into a slow, sensual ride that felt like paradise. She met my eyes, biting her lip under my unwavering attention. I started to thrust up into her and grabbed her ass to keep her steady. Gemma had no trouble keeping up with the faster pace. Her stomach flexed with every twist of her hips and the sight alone was enough to bring me to my knees. That woman was perfection, and I’d show her that I knew exactly how much of a lucky bastard I was for having her as my girl.

THIRTY-ONE



Gemma

I couldn't find my engagement ring anywhere. Usually, I left it on the nightstand with my wedding ring because I couldn't sleep with jewelry, but now it was gone. It wasn't as if I loved it for its beauty. Its design had been an affront to my eyes from the first moment I saw it, but it had an emotional value. Mainly I still got angry when I saw it because it didn't really reflect a declaration of love from Savio, but I'd gotten used to it. We'd been married for almost two months now, so I felt naked without it on my finger.

I was crawling on all fours, checking under the bed when a whistle sounded.

"That ass owns my heart."

I tossed a glare over my shoulder. "That ass could use your help..." Savio didn't wait for me to finish. He was behind me, grinding against me, within a blink. He nibbled on my neck while I giggled. "Savio, that's not what I meant. I need to find my engagement ring. It must have rolled off the nightstand. Help me find it!"

"That's no fun," he growled, and I gave in. After a quickie on the ground, I scanned the floor again. "What if I lost it?"

"That would break my heart," Savio said with fake severity.

I sighed, feeling bad. "I left it on the nightstand last night, I'm sure."

"Don't worry. It'll turn up when you least expect it."

“Or it’ll end in the vacuum and be forever lost.”

“Admit it, you wouldn’t be sad to see it gone.”

“It’s my engagement ring.”

Savio shrugged, his head propped up on his crossed arms like he owned the world.



I’d searched the rest of our wing, the kitchen and the common area by the next day, but the ring remained gone. After a week, I actually considered asking Savio if he could ask the goldsmith to recreate the expensive atrocity.

When I came down into our living room that evening for our weekly night of watching fights, I froze on the last step. Savio had dressed up in a black tuxedo that accentuated his broad shoulders and narrow hips, white dress shirt and bowtie. I was in my usual evening attire, low cut sweats, and a tight T-shirt. “Did I miss something important?” I asked worriedly. What if we were invited to some sort of Camorra gala and I had forgotten? Savio probably found it funny to give me a heart attack like that.

“Do you know what today is?”

I blinked, trying to remember. It wasn’t our wedding anniversary, and not the anniversary of our engagement either. No birthday either.

Savio’s cocky smile widened. “Nothing?” He came closer slowly. “Tomorrow we’ll be married for six weeks. That’s not what I mean, of course.”

I rolled my eyes, still trying to figure this out.

“Eight years ago...”

My brows snapped together.

“A little girl fell for me.”

“How do you know—?”

“That I met you exactly eight years ago? Or that you fell for me?”

He stopped in front of me. With me on the first step we were almost at eye level. “I remember because that was the first time I felt like I’d really arrived in Las Vegas. It felt like a permanent home, not like something that could be ripped from our hands at any given time, which was why I really tried to become friends with Diego.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, still not sure what this had to do with him wearing a tux.

“And I knew you fell for me because it was written all over your face that day, and ever since.”

“All right, Mr. Vanity, if you’re dressed up like that to celebrate your own awesomeness, I’ll go back upstairs and soak in the tub for a bit. You’re—” Savio pulled out a satin box from his back pocket and sank down on his knee. He opened the box, revealing my engagement ring—only not quite. Instead of the obnoxious SF initials that marked me as Savio’s possession, now the letters S and G hugged the huge diamond in the middle. *Savio and Gemma*. “Seeing you search the house for the ring was a wonderful show, but you couldn’t find it because I had it all along.”

My throat tightened already and the familiar prickling at the back of my eyes announced an ugly crying session.

“I took it because I wanted to alter it so it reflected what it meant to me. That we belong together and are a great team.” The first tear slid out.

Savio became serious. “Today, I’m doing what I should have done two years ago. Gemma Bazzoli, will you become my wife?”

I let out a small choked sound. “I am your wife.”

He waited. “But I never asked for your hand like a girl like yourself deserves. So Gemma, tell me, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

“Yes,” I pressed out, my vision becoming blurry. Savio stood and slid the ring on my finger. Wrapping an arm around me, he pulled me against him. “I love you, Gemma Falcone.”

I swallowed, trying to form words.

Savio kissed my wet cheek. “Now you have to say *I know*.”

I slapped his shoulder, laughing through my tears. He grinned, but a hint of vulnerability showed in his eyes. I grabbed his head and gave him a sloppy, wet kiss. “I love you so much.”

Savio tightened his arms around me and lifted me off the step.

“I hope you didn’t book a surprise dinner in an expensive restaurant. It’ll take hours to make myself presentable.”

Savio shook his head. “You look perfect just the way you are, and neither of us enjoys a stuck-up dinner. I thought popcorn, chips, and cage fights were the right way to celebrate this day.”

“Perfect,” I agreed. Then glanced at his clothes. “A tux seems like a strange choice for a comfy evening on the couch.”

Savio’s answering smirk set me aflame. He put me down on the couch then took a few steps back. Reclining against the cushions, I watched him warily.

He shrugged off his jacket, showing off the white dress shirt hugging his muscled chest. After a moment of letting me appreciate the sight, he grabbed the sides of the dress pants and ripped them off with a devilish grin. My eyes widened as he proceeded to do the same to his shirt until he was left in boxers.

“You wouldn’t believe what kind of treasures can be found in strip clubs.”

I burst into laughter. Savio *would* earn a ton of money as a stripper. Not that he needed it. “Only you would choose a stripper tux to propose!”

He sauntered over to me and bent down for a lingering kiss. “That’s why you married me.”

“That’s why I love you.”

He kissed me fiercely. “Fuck, Gem, I’m so glad that you never gave up on me and keep tolerating my dickheadedness, because I’m never going to let you go now that you’re mine.”

“Don’t worry. I’m staying, now that you’re *mine*.”

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